

**AN INTRINSIC EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY: INSTRUCTORS' AND
GRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT QUALITY FACTORS WITHIN A SELECTED HYBRID
PROGRAM AT A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY**

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**An Intrinsic Exploratory Case Study: Instructors' and Graduate Students'
Perceptions of Community Engagement Quality Factors within a Selected
Hybrid Course at a Private University**

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Abstract

An Intrinsic Exploratory Case Study: Instructors' and Graduate Students' Perceptions of Community Engagement Quality Factors within a Selected Hybrid Program at a Private University

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This mixed methods exploratory single case study examined instructors' and graduate students' perceptions of the factors that support high quality student engagement in hybrid learning communities in selected doctoral courses at a private university. The purpose of this study was to analyze the graduate student and instructor perceptions of the factors that support high quality student engagement in hybrid learning communities so that a framework for high quality student engagement could be developed. The literature review was designed to review the faculty and student perceptions of the online learning constructs within the engagement theory. These constructs are connected to the quality components of online learning, and the perceptions reflect both student and instructor perceptions of quality. The study showed that instructors and students within the hybrid-learning environment positively perceived the components connected to a quality fully online learning environment. Moreover, the study showed that team building to create a cohesive positive cohort was paramount for students' perceptions of their program. Lastly, the study showed that the role of the instructor was at times constrained in the course due to the

pre-loaded content and the role of the student required more ownership to engage the content.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The night has begun to overtake the living room as the soft glow of a computer screen illuminates the corner. After a long day of work, a quick dinner and an all too brief chat with his children, an aging man finds himself sitting amongst pages of printed-paper in front of his keyboard. Logging on to a website, he is transported to his virtual campus, two hundred miles away from the university's physical locale. His space lacks the tree laden main campus quad, the coffee shops filled with students meeting professors to discuss their latest paper, or the cafeteria strewn with friends gathered to share a meal and commiserate. Instead his online campus offers the necessities for academic success (e.g., links to the library, financial aid, the bursars, the writing lab, etc.) and his classroom is accessible by just a click of the mouse.

The staccato tapping of his keyboard is the music of his nights. Typing away in a virtual discussion board the man is becoming familiar with the names in the room. Harry and Max live overseas while Joan is in the town over. A few other classmates are sprinkled in different corners of the state but several are on the physical university campus. They are faceless but familiar, each defined by their postings in lieu of their appearance. The discourse is primarily academic and rarely sprinkled with humor. The instructor, a superintendent of a public school district, chimes in occasionally but often leaves them to debate amongst themselves. The week's readings offer insights to this week's lesson on classroom management techniques. Jesse, a classmate,, discovered and posted a YouTube video created by Teachers College showing how to incorporate the theory into practice. The video is

brief, but helpful, and after watching it, he references it in his next response. As he finishes his postings for the night, he clicks his desk light off and sleeps his computer. He is a twenty-first century learner.

Enrollments in online courses at the higher education level are growing. Nearly one third of all higher education students are taking at least one online course (Allen & Seamus, 2013). Additionally, a U.S. Department of Education report, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2012*, projects that there will be a thirty-four percent increase in students earning Master's degrees by 2021-22 (Hussar, & Bailey, 2013). As 44% of schools offering face-to-face Master's degree programs also offer their programs online, the number of graduate students taking online course work will continue to increase (Allen & Seamus, 2005). The body of developed research on the design and instruction within online courses is considerable and ongoing. As more students and courses are brought either partially or fully online with new and emerging learning tools, instructors need consistent access to effective professional development in order to update their instructional practices to maintain an enriching online learning environment (Fish & Gill, 2009).

A *Next Generation University* report found that campuses have moved to online and hybrid courses both to save on cost and to improve the academic rigor of their classes. Fully online and hybrid courses allow instructors to individualize student feedback, the learning experience, and through improved course design, to better gain mastery of a subject area. Although online enrollments are increasing, perceptions of the quality of online learning remain mixed. This is especially true

amongst academic leaders and instructors at universities and colleges across the U.S. A quarter of the twenty eight hundred academic leaders polled perceived the learning outcomes for online courses to be inferior to face-to-face instruction (Allen & Seamus, 2013). Moreover, academic leaders perceive face-to-face instruction to have slightly higher levels of student-to-student interactions and student-to-faculty interactions (Allen & Seamus, 2011). Allen and Seamus (2013) report, “even among those institutions with full online programs, less than a majority (43.9% in 2011 and 38.4% in 2012) of chief academic officers say their faculty fully accepts online education” (p. 27). Although the negative perceptions of the online learning environments have slightly decreased with the proliferation of the field, it is apparent that these perceptual barriers still exist. As the online learning environment grows, researchers have examined the perceptions of online learning quality and ways in which to improve it. However, much of the research in this area has been focused primarily on fully online instruction. Fully online courses are taught exclusively out of the traditional face-to-face setting through the Internet, whereas hybrid courses combine online instruction with face-to-face instruction. For the purposes of this study, hybrid courses will be defined as having at least 70% of class instruction taking part online and no more than 30% of class teaching being conducted through face-to-face class instruction. A gap in the literature appeared when reviewing the perceptions that contribute to a quality hybrid-learning environment. As hybrid learning becomes ubiquitous, it is imperative to understand the perceptions of the components within the hybrid environment to negate the barriers to acceptance that fully online learning faces.

This chapter provides the justification for studying student and instructor perceptions of quality in hybrid courses within a private northeastern university. The rationale for this single case study was developed from the problem statement that reflected the gap in knowledge around effective engagement practices within hybrid learning, as well as the purpose and significance of conducting this study and the research questions framing the study. Lastly, the lens through which the study was explored was developed within the theoretical framework section.

Problem Statement

Throughout the e-learning community there is a lack of research on students' and instructors' perceptions about factors that create a high quality engaged hybrid-learning community within graduate courses. Hybrid learning has proliferated throughout higher education, as both undergraduate and graduate courses have been blended with online components. However, research on student and instructor perceptions regarding this transformation of course delivery has not emerged in the literature as most of the research is focused on fully online course delivery. Studies of perceptions allow for researchers to gauge the efficiency of techniques and tools while also gauging the divergence in opinion amongst participants.

A mid-sized private, northeastern university began offering a hybrid Doctor of Education program four years ago. Since the initial cohort of students the program has expanded to four locations and has accepted over a hundred doctoral students. The original plan of study was altered several times based on program director and student feedback, but a thorough programmatic review was not completed on the delivery of the content in a hybrid setting. To better understand how effective and

engaging learning environments are created within graduate hybrid courses, research was needed on student and instructor perceptions of the hybrid program. The single exploratory case study design allowed for a multi-perspectival analysis of both students and instructors resulting in a framework built upon both perspectives (Tillis, 1997).

Research on perceptions of quality within fully online learning environments is extensive and indicates a divergence of opinion between student and instructor perceptions of instructional engagement (Vesely, Bloom & Sherlock, 2007). Additionally, student perceptions of isolation continue while a measured desire for face-to-face interaction persists within the fully online course environment (Mulienburg & Berge, 2005). As hybrid environments create physical spaces for students to interact, the courses could negate the negative student perceptions generated within fully online environments. The problem being explored in this study was the lack of understanding on how students and instructors view the hybrid-learning environment. Do the same perceptions within fully online environments persist? As the online component in hybrid courses make up at least seventy percent of the course within this single case study, it was necessary to understand how both students and instructors view the medium in this environment.

Research shows that creating an engaged, online community within a fully online course positively affects a student's perception of the course (Yukseltov, 2010). However, there was a lack of research on whether these engaged online community components transfer to the hybrid-learning environment. To create the perceptions of an online community within a fully online course, course management

systems offer various tools for students to interact continuously throughout the course. Furthermore, prior research on fully online courses has shown that online courses should be instructionally designed to create ongoing dialogues amongst the students on the topic of study as a component of community building. However, these components were designed for fully online courses as opposed to hybrid courses where physical interactions exist. An aim in this research study was to determine how instructors and students within the Doctor of Education hybrid environment perceive the set of best practices within the hybrid learning environment. The hybrid Doctor of Education program was constructed around a cohort model with face-to-face elements; these components are designed to build community within the program. Therefore, the research seeks to articulate how this community constructs within the program to affect the online portion of the course. Moreover, are these same instructional techniques and online tools required to build online communities in a hybrid environment?

Over the last five years, a private northeastern university grew their doctoral hybrid program from a single location to five locations spanning the country. The doctoral program was housed within a college that has ten fully online graduate programs. Although the private northeastern university and the college offering the doctoral program has established itself as a leader within fully online learning by winning the Sloan-C Award for Excellence, the doctoral program was one of the college's first forays into hybrid offerings. To date the program has been assessed using course evaluations that were developed for the fully online programs.

Additionally, the Doctor of Education program has not studied what factors support high quality student engagement in their hybrid learning communities.

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this single case study was to obtain the graduate students' and instructors' perceptions of the factors that produce a high quality hybrid learning environment within a private, northeastern university in order to create a framework for best practices. Therefore, the objective of this research study was to determine how students and instructors within the private university view the factors that support high quality in hybrid environments. By determining instructor and graduate student perceptions, an understanding of how to create a blended learning environment that was enriching for both students and instructors was conceived.

The research was designed to develop a conceptual framework for high quality student engagement in hybrid learning communities based on the perceptions as measured from the hybrid program at the private university. Measuring students' and instructors' perceptions showed factors influencing students' perceptions of the design, instruction and interactive tools within their hybrid courses. The perceived quality of the online tools, the instructional methods and the student perceptions of a professor's role within their hybrid courses added to an effective design and instructional practices for the hybrid courses. Additionally, the interconnectivity of these perceptions contributed to a framework for high quality student engagement in hybrid learning communities. This framework can be implemented throughout the private northeastern university's Doctor of Education program in order to create an engaged high quality hybrid-learning environment. Moreover, the results of this study

added to the growing research in instruction and design of hybrid learning environments.

Research Questions

Guiding the framework of this study were research questions designed to focus on instructors' and students' perceptions of online community engagement quality factors within hybrid courses. The central question was followed by sub questions on the factors previously demonstrated to measure quality in fully online courses.

Central Question: How do graduate students and instructors perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction and in class meetings in building an engaged hybrid community?

Sub-questions (Quantitative)

1. How do graduate students perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and in class meetings in building online community engagement within selected hybrid courses?
2. How do instructors perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and in class meetings in building online community engagement within selected hybrid courses?
3. How do the perceptions between graduate students' and instructors' compare?

Sub-questions (Qualitative)

1. How do graduate students describe or perceive the role of the instructor in the online community?

- a. What components of an online learning hybrid course environment do graduate students recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?
2. How do instructors describe or perceive the role of graduate students in the online community?
 - a. What components of online learning hybrid course environment do instructors recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?

By answering these questions, the discovery of how instructors and students perceive the quality of online course components in a hybrid environment was ultimately explored.

Theoretical Framework

The assessment of quality in hybrid learning environments was derived through theories addressing the way in which students learn and engage within the online learning environment. Situated learning stressed the idea of absorbing knowledge as an outcome of community engagement. The activities and interactions within the community resulted in learning. Therefore, learning was the result of the situation and context a learner was engaged in and interacted with. In other words, learning was a function of the activity within a community. Jean Lave, the architect of situated learning, argued that situated learning “is motivated by the growing use value of participation, and by the newcomers’ desires to become full practitioners” (Lave & Wenger, 1990, p.122). Within the online learning environment, instructional

designers have created many tools to replicate an interactive group community setting. The online tools included wikis, discussion boards, and voice threads to name a few. These interactive tools allowed students to engage one another in an academic “conversational” setting.

Building on the notion of human interaction to foster a learning environment in online settings was engagement theory. Kearsley and Shneiderman’s (1999) teaching and learning theory redefined engagement in the online learning environment. Previously, engagement within the online learning environment was measured on the tools created and the interactivity of the learner. This was measured by mouse clicks within the learning modular. Kearsley and Schneiderman’s (1999) engagement theory emphasized engagement in terms of human interaction. Their argument between the differences between engagement and interactivity reflected the shift in thinking about the use of computers in education as communication tools rather than some form of media delivery devices. Furthermore, engagement theory placed a great deal of emphasis on providing an authentic (i.e., meaningful) setting for learning, something not present in previous models” (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999). Central to the notion of engagement theory was the notion that individuals learn through human interaction mostly in the form of group work activities rather than isolated computer interaction.

Kearsley and Schneiderman’s (1999) engagement theory derived three principles that create the bases for a quality online learning experience. The three principles are that learning activities occur in a group context, are project based and have an authentic focus. The first principle was considered the “relate” component,

in that it emphasized the importance of classmate interaction amongst one another. Interaction amongst peers forced students to verbalize problems, facilitate solutions and work amongst an array of multiple perspectives and backgrounds (Kearsley and Schneiderman, 1999). In online learning literature, the relate concept is often associated with the importance of community building.

The second principle is the “create” component. By having the instructor create purposeful learning activities, students are more likely to engage in the learning activity. The instructor constructs the domain of the project and allows the students to create their project within the scope of the domain perimeters. This allows a student to create a sense of control of their learning experience (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1999). In the online learning literature, this was often associated with problem-based learning that can be generated through the online learning environment.

The last principle is the “donate” component that encourages authentic assessment. This principle emphasizes the importance of allowing students to create assessments that are relatable to their current work environment. When a student can relate to an assessment, because it overlaps into their current school or work environment, the student’s level of motivation and satisfaction rises as they perceive the assessment as useful to their lives (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1999). By authenticating the learning experience, students donate their academic skills into project based learning activities that can contribute to their work environment. This component is geared towards adult learners with careers. The sample population for

this study was adult learners with jobs; therefore the “donate” component was incorporated within the study.

For the purposes of this research, engagement theory acted as the foundation for which the assessment of quality will be conducted. The figure below (Figure 1) depicts the three components of engagement theory with their connection to six components of the Quality Online Learning Tool (QOLT) that was used to measure student and instructor perceptions of quality within the hybrid course. As the graphic shows, the components of relate, create and donate were each measured by two QOLT components. This double measurement of each engagement component resulted in the construction of a framework for high quality student engagement.

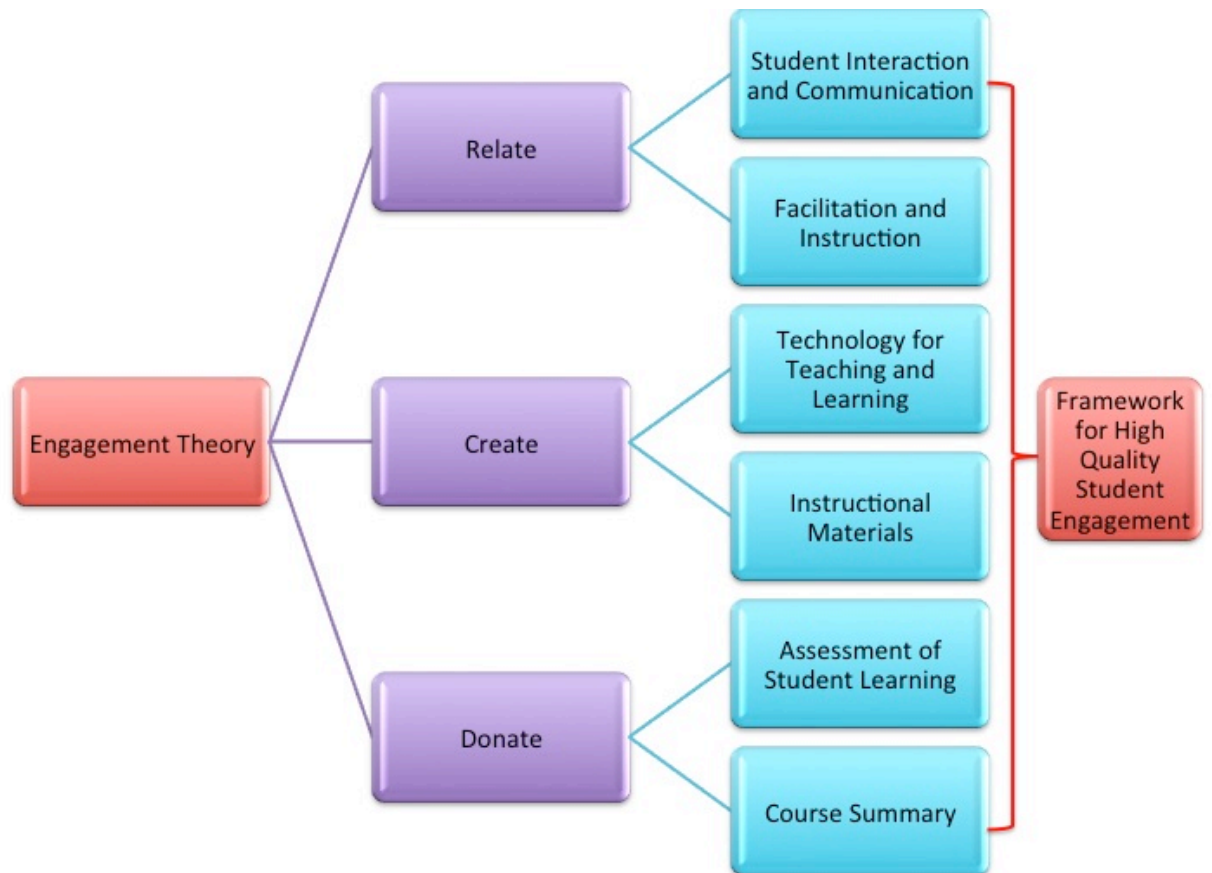


Figure 1: How the principles of engagement theory link to the components of the QOLT survey instrument to create a framework for high quality student engagement.

By cross-linking the principles of engagement theory with the components of the QOLT survey, a framework for high quality student engagement was partially derived from the survey results. As Kearsley and Schneiderman (1999) stated, “technology provides an electronic learning milieu that fosters the kind of creativity and communication needed to nourish engagement (p. 5). By understanding the perceptions of these various levels of engagement, an understanding of how to construct an effective hybrid-learning environment was conceived.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was rooted within notions of social constructivism. Social constructionists observed learning as a participatory activity that pulls from the social dimensions and interactivity of others around them (Kong & Pearson, 2002). Learners constructed knowledge through engagement, feedback and interaction in both public and social contexts (Henning, 2004). In the online learning environment this participatory culture was created through online community building. Essential elements in online community building included a sense of belonging, connectedness and a shared sense of values (Rovai, 2002).

The human interaction of engagement theory was the bases for Gordon Pask's (1976) conversation theory. The principles around Conversation Theory were that students learn and understand concepts more fully when they are able to converse on the topic. Through conversation, a construction of knowledge can be built through agreement and inquiry. By engaging one another in a method called "teach back" students were able to explore the lesson objectives while probing further into the materials (Pask, 1976). Pask (1976) elaborated how his conversation theory did not subject learners to one learning style but rather allowed them to choose their learning preferences and then further build on their knowledge base through conversation. As Pask (1976) argued, the student is able to follow different paths and obtain various demonstrations before testing his own understanding of topics. By first learning and then engaging with others on a topic, a greater understanding of a topic occurs (Pask, 1976).

The conceptual framework was derived from the definition of engaged learning. Kearsley and Schneiderman (1999) defined engaged learning as “all student activities involving active cognitive processes such as creating, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making and evaluation. In addition, students are intrinsically motivated to learn due to the meaningful nature of the learning environment and activities” (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1999, p. 1). The definition interrelated to both the concepts of engagement theory and conversation theory is rooted within social constructivism. The principles of engagement theory (create, relate and donate) were within the cognitive meaningful processes of the definition whereas the principles of conversation theory were inherent within creating motivation to learn through the learning environment. The three streams of literature derived from the definition of engaged learning were online learning communities, perceptions of instruction and participation in the online environment.

Engaged learning incorporated the three principles of the engagement theory to justify two of the three streams of literature. Through the creation of online learning communities and the perceptions of the instruction within the course, students were able to engage in the cognitive processes of engaged learning. Additionally, online learning communities and the perceptions of the instruction authenticates the learning experience through problem-based assessment that related to their current positions.

The third stream of literature was linked to the motivation to engage within the definition of engaged learning. Creating motivation through a meaningful learning environment was linked to the principles of conversation theory. Through

participation with one another, students were able to derive greater understanding of a topic and be active participants in the learning process.

The conceptual framework graphic below (Figure 2) was constructed to reflect how the definition of engaged learning interconnects with three streams of literature. Additionally, the primary sources for each stream were included.

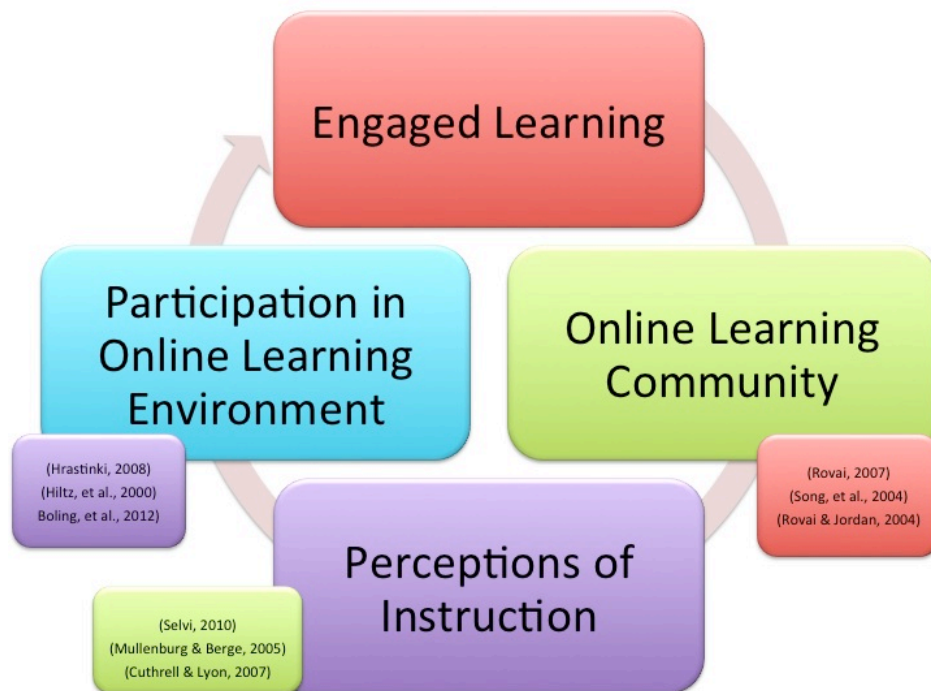


Figure 2: How the definition of engaged learning interconnects the three streams of literature.

The definition of engaged learning intertwines with three streams of literature that are reviewed in chapter two. The notions of engaged learning guide this research study as the researcher sought to unearth the perceived quality of the online learning

environment within hybrid courses that was inherently linked to the engagement of the learner.

Context

This study was conducted within a private northeastern university. As the researcher was familiar with the site as an employee, instructor and student precautions within the study were taken to prevent bias. These precautions are outlined in the third chapter. However, the researchers familiarity with the course structure and components lent itself to an understanding of certain background knowledge of the context in which this research was undertaken.

The Doctor of Education program being studied was populated with students looking to obtain an advance degree in education. The program was designed to create educational leaders. Therefore, the programs learning outcomes included developing leadership skills and scholarly competencies (Program Outcomes, nd). The program requirements included 21 graduate credits in research courses, 18 graduate credits in core courses and 15 graduate credits in electives (Program Requirements, nd). The students being surveyed for this assessment were either in a research or core courses.

The private northeastern university housing the courses offered in the hybrid level doctoral program has their online component hosted through the BBLearn course management system. The BBLearn system was web accessible and places each course in their unique shell. Within the shell, students could access their syllabi, course content (typically broken down by the week in the term) and interact with each other and the instructor through a series of web based applications. These applications

included, but were not limited to, discussion boards, email and Collaborate classrooms. Each application was accessible through the shell and can be employed at the instructor's discretion. The application within the BBLearn system assists with the interactions amongst students and instructors.

The courses were designed on a ten-week term basis. Each week the students have access to a new weeks' modular. This modular housed, readings, video, presentations or other instructional materials depending on the course shell. Each course had a virtual discussion board that was typically used on a weekly period. The students were provided a discussion board question to prompt the conversation. The discussion board was part of the students' grade. An additional technical tool was BBCollaborate. BBCollaborate sessions are synchronous learning environments that instructors may host for the course. The platform allows instructors to upload presentation slides and speak to the class. Other tools in the system include blogs, wikis and email. The use of technical tools in the course was up to the instructors' discretion.

Definitions

Distance Learning – “Education that takes place via electronic media linking instructors and students who are not together in a classroom” (Merriam-Webster, nd).

Online learning – A course offered one hundred percent through the World Wide Web with no on-campus components (Allen & Seamus, 2013).

Blended Learning – For the purposes of this study, hybrid and blended learning will be used interchangeable.

Engaged Learning - “All student activities involve active cognitive processes such as creating, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making and evaluation. In addition, students are intrinsically motivated to learn due to the meaningful nature of the learning environment and activities” (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1999).

Hybrid Learning- A course with 39-71% of its instruction online (Allen & Seamus, 2013). This study will use the ratio of 70% of its instruction online.

Course Management System – A set of online tools (such as wikis, blogs, discussion boards, etc.) and content that combined create an online course. Both an instructor and an instructional designer manage the system. (Technopedia, nd)

Assumptions

The researcher and readers need to assume that that students and instructors participating in this study answered each question to the best of their ability.

Additionally, the research and reader need to assume that the participants answered each question honestly throughout the process.

Furthermore, certain assumptions have been made based on the research of fully online coursework that shaped the study. For example, the research study relied on the assumption that both instructors and students perceived the role of community as a component to building a quality course as somewhat important based on the literature of perceptions within fully online courses. Additionally, the researcher assumed that different online course tools and instructional methods effect student perceptions of online learning in hybrid courses. This assumption was based upon the effect of online course tools and differing instructional methods in fully online courses formed by the review of the literature and personal experience.

Limitations

The population being assessed during the research limited the study. By limiting the survey to doctoral education students, a higher level of cognitive thinking was inherent. Therefore, their reflections do not directly relate to students with less cognitive skills.

Additionally the study's limitations were influenced by the researcher's assumption that students associate the quality of their learning experience with the factors outlined in the QOLT survey instrument. To limit the impact of this assumption, qualitative methods of inquiry were incorporated within the study.

The limitations of this study were affected by the deliberate assumption that the engagement will affect the perceptions of quality. This assumption, based on previous research from fully online course studies, was a driving principle within the study. Lastly, the use of instructors within the courses being examined proved to be a limitation while collecting data. This limitation was overcome by opening the survey to all instructors that taught hybrid courses within the private northeastern university.

Lastly, the survey put forth within this research study assumed the components that made up the quality factors of online learning and teaching. Although these components were based on previous research, the survey is limited in assuming all the online learning and teaching quality factors results can be considered best practices.

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study are caused by the scope and time period in which the study was conducted. For the purposes of this study, the participants were

limited to doctoral students participating in a hybrid program. This smaller sample size did not allow for any comparison testing based on majors or degree level. Additionally, the time period for this study did not lend itself to sampling perceptual shifts over time, as the study was conducted after one graduate term.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to determine how students and instructors perceive components that create a high quality engaged hybrid-learning communities in selected graduate courses within a private university. By measuring the perceptions of students and faculty, a framework for high quality student engagement was created. The research study was based on the principles of engagement theory to justify the measurement of quality within hybrid learning environments. The definition of engaged learning was incorporated into the conceptual framework to justify the three streams of literature that are explored in the following chapter. Ultimately, the research study sought to determine how reviewing student and instructor perceptions effectively create engaged learning environments within hybrid learning environments.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to create a framework for high quality student engagement. As such, the review of the literature was conceived to both enhance the reader's understanding of the principles of engagement, as outlined in the engagement theory, and highlight the gaps in the literature within the engaged learning framework to support the justification for this study. By grounding the definition of engaged learning as the base of the conceptual framework, the examination of perceptions derived the positive and negative perceptions that participants report within the fully online learning environment. The three streams forming the literature review are online learning communities, participation in online learning environments and perceptions of online learning instruction. As hybrid learning emerges as a learning platform, an understanding of the perceived barriers within poor online learning can negate poor perceptions from emerging in the hybrid environment and add to the framework for high quality student engagement.

A literature map (Figure 3) was conceived to outline the connections amongst the three streams of literature and the principles of engagement theory and subsequent definition of engaged learning. The first literature stream, perceptions of online learning instruction, reviews the learning theories driving instruction and the subsequent student and instructor perceived barriers that emerge from these theories in the online learning environment. This stream is entwined with the “donate” principle of engagement theory since instructors can authenticate assessments and environments for students. The second stream focuses on the construction of community in the online system and the perceptual differences of students and faculty

of the drivers of community development. This stream is associated with the “create” principle of engagement theory. The third stream reviews the literature on the importance of participation on learning outcomes and the demographic and design components that effect students’ participation. This stream is associated with the “relate” principle of engagement theory.

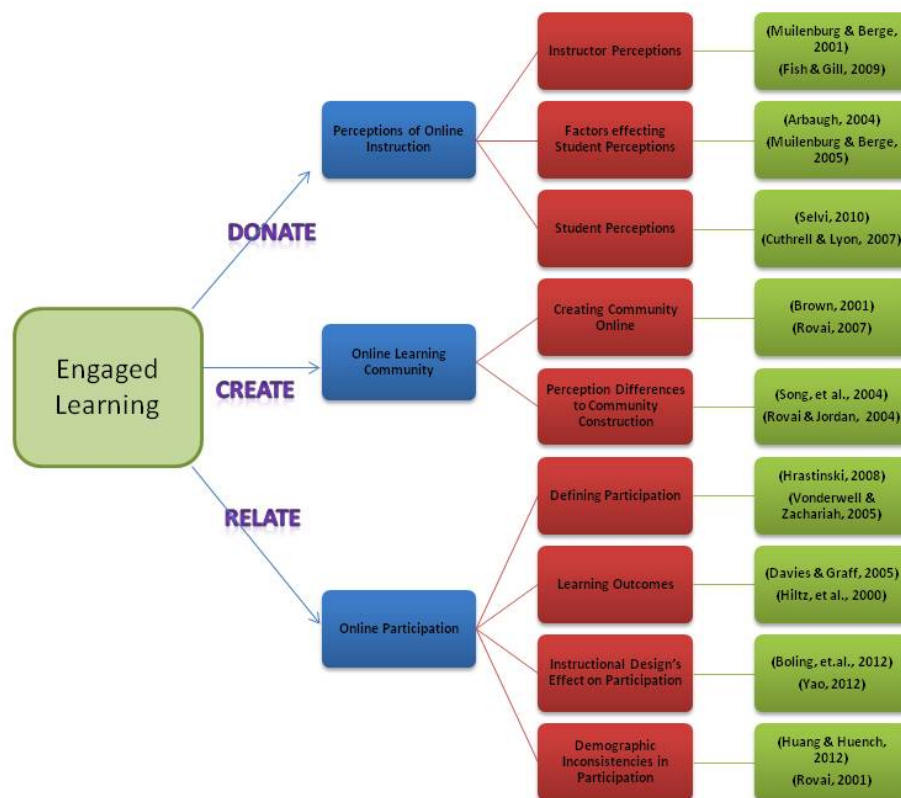


Figure 3: How the literature maps to the principles of engagement theory and the definition of engaged learning.

Guiding the framework of this literature review was the central research question of how do graduate students' and instructors' perceptions compare in relation to factors that support high quality student engagement in hybrid learning communities in selected graduate courses at a private university.

Since this question sought to answer additional questions within the online learning communities relating to participation in online environments and perceptions of both students and faculty in regards to instruction. Each theme was developed to review the current literature of the topics within online learning. This chapter further explores the gaps in the existing literature and the pervasive issues that emerged within the online learning environment. By focusing on research studies and pedagogical theories, this chapter finally explores the underpinnings of online learning, construction and instruction that may be negated through hybrid learning.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is rooted within notions of social constructivism. Social constructionists observe learning as a participatory activity that pulls from the social dimensions and interactivity of others around them (Kong & Pearson, 2002). Learners construct knowledge through engagement, feedback and interaction in both public and social contexts (Henning, 2004). In the online learning environment this participatory culture is created through online community building. Essential elements in online community building include a sense of belonging, connectedness and a shared sense of values (Rovai, 2002). The three principles of engagement theory are that learning activities occur in a group context, are project based and have an authentic focus. The conceptual framework (Figure 2) is constructed to reflect the

constructs of engagement theory as it ties to the definition of engaged learning. Derived from engagement theory, engaged learning is the construction of a quality online learning environment through the implementation of the principles of engaged theory. Kearsley and Schneiderman (1999) define engaged learning as “all student activities involve active cognitive processes such as creating, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making and evaluation. In addition, students are intrinsically motivated to learn due to the meaningful nature of the learning environment and activities” (p. 1). What follows is a review of the literature on each aspect of the conceptual framework (Figure 2).

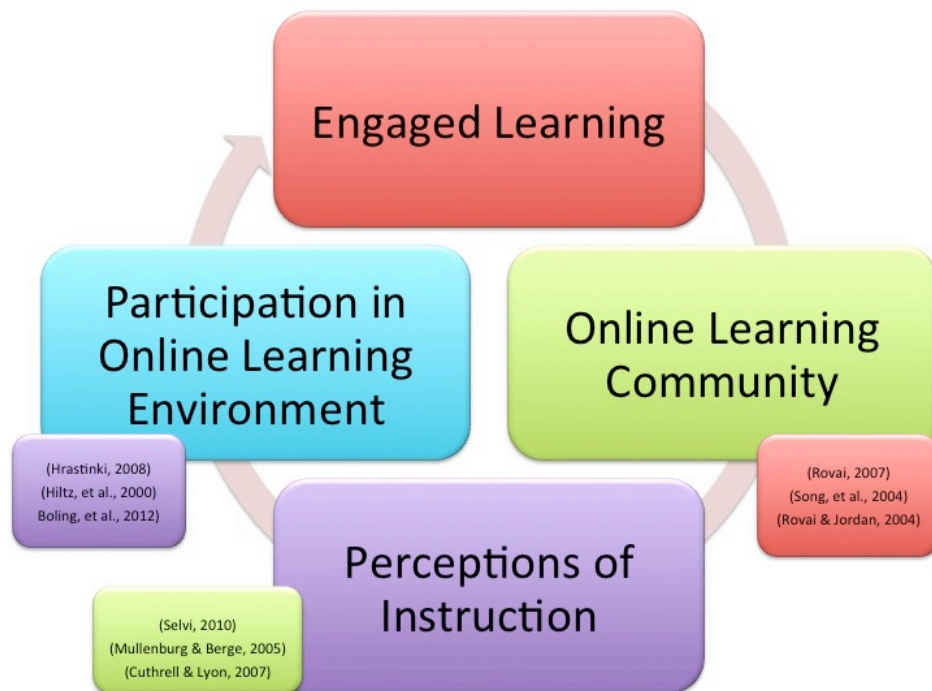


Figure 2: How the definition of engaged learning interconnects the three streams of literature.

Each of the literature streams helps define the notion of engaged learning as it relates to engagement theory. As the constructs of engagement theory were designed to reflect optimal online learning environments, linking each stream to the constructs implies that the literature review is based on the tenets of quality online learning.

Stream One: Perceptions of Online Learning Instruction

Social learning theory for online instruction builds on the constructs of context, culture and learner characteristics (Hill, Song & West, 2009). The context, in which the learner is placed in small or large groups, can promote or deter social interaction while the culture of the environment, through the facilitation of feedback and modeling, also affects perception (Boling and Beatty, 2010). Lastly, the learner characteristics in regards to learning style, autonomy, perceived value, and motivation can also influence a students' perception of instruction in the online learning (Xie, Durrington & Yen, 2011). A gap in knowledge exists as to how these perceptions and frameworks are altered within hybrid learning environment. However, by reviewing the researched perceptions of interactions within the online environment, a broader frame of reference can be conceived on student and instructor perceptions.

Components Influencing Faculty Perceptions of Instruction Perceptions of online learning have been evolving as the medium becomes more prominent and understood throughout the higher education community. Over the course of the last eight years, online student enrollment has increased by 383% (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In the Sloan-C Assessment of Learning Outcomes Report (2011) they reported that 51.1% found learning outcomes to be the same as their on-campus counterparts, however this leaves 48.9% of the respondents believing that learning

outcomes were not comparable. This negative perception of learning outcomes in online environments is reflective of other research findings on instructor perceptions and can be traced to a few components that influence these perceptions.

Fish and Gill (2009) surveyed 87 faculty members from a public university in a US Southwestern state. They found more nuances to the instructor perceptions of online learning. The researchers surveyed the faculty on their background, training in online teaching, student learning outcomes delivery of academic tasks and their perceived advantages and disadvantages to the online medium. The results showed that online instructors had both previous training and experience (79%) had a positive experience being an online instructor (82%). Most viewed their role as a facilitator. However, the instructors without online teaching experience did not feel comfortable teaching online (56%) and did not believe that online learning was equivalent to on-campus learning outcomes (79%). Overwhelmingly, sixty percent of non-online instructors do not agree that online instruction is beneficial to most students (Fish & Gill, 2009).

The research indicates that instructors without prior exposure to online instruction do not believe it to be an adequate substitute to on-campus instruction. Additionally, the researchers found that these instructors were not trained on the adult learning needs that predominates the online population. Although online instructors in the study feel they are advocates for online learning (81%), the medium needs to continue to garner academic support from non-online members with focused conversations about this emerging medium (Fish & Gill, 2009).

Lloyd, Byrne & McCoy (2012) conducted a quantitative research study to identify perceived barriers to online teaching by employing a new survey instrument developed through research studies. The purpose of the exploratory study was to identify the types of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence faculty involvement with the online environment as well as the faculty's perceptions of online instruction. Lastly, they sought to identify methods to increase faculty participation in online instruction. Unlike previous research on faculty perceptions, Lloyd, Byrne & McCoy's (2012) study created an original survey instrument to decipher perceptions in various faculty demographic groups.

The 37-item questionnaire was based on Muilenburg and Berge's (2001, 2005) research that created a framework of the barriers to online education. The study conceptually linked the 22 barriers by exploratory principle components factor analysis with varimax rotation. These barriers were interpersonal barriers, institutional policy barriers, training and technology barriers and cost/benefit barriers.

The results of the survey verify the conceptual framework of perceived barriers to online learning conceived in the Muilenburg and Berge's (2001, 2005) research, thereby offering further support to their constructs. Similar to Fish and Gill's (2007) research, any previous experience with online education was found to greatly decrease their perceived barriers towards online education compared with faculty who had never taught online. Additionally, older faculty (45-60) rated institutional barriers greater than their younger counterparts. As the academic ranking increased, so did their perceptions of barriers in online teaching in regards to increased workload, time commitment, inadequate time for student

assignment/grading and inadequate compensation. Unlike earlier studies, the results indicated that male faculty had a greater comfort level towards online teaching than female faculty. Across all demographics, time commitment to online teaching was the most frequently cited and highly rated barrier. Therefore, the researchers concluded that institutional policies need to be adapted to reflect the time commitments associated with online teaching.

The research showed significant insight to the multi-layered adverse perceptions of different faculty members in regards to online teaching. Ultimately, the study reflected that learning theories or pedagogical constructs were not deterrents to online instructing. This is significant as it shows a lack of instructional reservations for the medium and more personal barriers that will lessen as more experience is gained towards the method. Instructors provide a sense of community with facilitating discussions and providing feedback (Desai, Hart, Richards, 2008). In theory, their lack of hesitation towards instruction provides a positive foundation for implementing hybrid learning models that take away some of their negative perceptions about online learning. Although the instructor perceptions are more flexible, student perceptions proved to be more rigid and complicated.

Factors Effecting Student Perceptions Online instruction for students can be challenging, as online formats have an inherent level of self-directed learning. Studies have shown that students stay more motivated in online environments when the content is relevant to their lives and the course is technically fluent (Kim & Frick, 2011). Below is an examination of variables that influence students' perceptions of online learning instruction.

Arbaugh's (2004) qualitative case study measured the perceptual changes of MBA online students throughout the MBA academic program. The research study measured 54 online classes (hybrid and online) over the duration of the MBA program by administering a Likert scale survey. The significant results of the study indicated that student perceptions of online learning quality and effectiveness increased significantly between the first and second terms and the ease of use with the online format continually increased throughout the program. These conclusions indicate the significance of the first term experience in a student's perception of online learning. Once students master the software components of online learning, their perceptions of quality and effectiveness grow. The limitations of the study were its relatively small sample size. Furthermore, the population had varying degrees of online experience within each course. Therefore, when designing perception studies, utilizing first term students can greatly affect results.

Perceived barriers also declined significantly in an analysis of perceived barriers conducted on a larger population. Mullenburg and Berge's (2005) exploratory factor analysis study analyzed the perceived student barriers to online learning. In this study, 1,056 survey responses were reviewed with 67.7% of respondents stating they were comfortable and confident learning online. A lack of social interaction was the most significant barrier to online learning. A cluster of three other factors (administrative/instructor issues, support for studies, learner motivation) were also highly rated barriers to online learning. Students who felt that they learned better online (or perceived they would learn better online) indicated fewer barriers to online learning than those who did not feel (or perceived they would not) would learn

better online. There was a strong association between effectiveness of online learning and social interaction. Additionally, there was a strong association between online learning enjoyment and social interaction. Both associations indicated that the lack of perceived social interactions negatively influenced students' perceptions of online learning. This perceived barrier was also the highest mean barrier to taking another online courses with learning motivation being the second perceived barrier. Ultimately, the perceived barriers to online learning were significantly fewer after a student completed one online course. Thus initial perceptions to online learning still skew towards an isolated independent learning experience.

Young and Bruce's (2011) quantitative research study sought to explore correlations between community and engagement across different academic disciplines. The 23-item Likert scale survey with demographic items was distributed to 1,410 online students in 47 courses (30 graduate, 17 undergraduate). In this study, 37% of the online student population responded (518) with a high number of nursing and education major submissions yielding greater female student input (75.3%). Students regarded instructor responses and feedback as contributing factors to community engagement. However, students viewed their commitment to working with classmates equally as a contributing factor. Through an analysis of variances, students in Education and Health Sciences yielded stronger feelings of community and engagement then those in Business, Arts and Sciences (lowest level) and Agriculture. Young and Bruce (2011) concluded that the discrepancies across academic disciplines could be an effect of traditional pedagogical differences (lecturing v. creative dialogue) and inadequate professional development online

training. Therefore, verifying and measuring the instructors experience will be vital within this study so as to not negatively skew the results.

Student and Instructor Perceptions of Online Instruction After accounting for the variables that negatively affect perceptions of online learning instruction, an analysis of student and instructor perceptions on the medium of online learning instruction was examined through a review of the literature. This was conceived to determine how students view the role of instructors online and how instructors view their role.

Selvi's (2010) mixed-methods phenomenology study explored the intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors for students in e-learning environments. Six e-learning groups of 15 PhD students were studied. Two instructors modeled two different pedagogical methods within the course. The first instructor gave voice and text messages to the class and made visual contact with the students through a virtual class platform. The second instructor was present in virtual classrooms but only as an acting mentor through text messages. The second instructor gave feedback, provided extra information and asked questions of the class. The results indicated that 30.8% of participants found the learning-teaching process to be inherently important. The primary three factors within the learning teaching process were the freedom of the learning-teaching setting, feedback, and sharing and resolution of learning problems. The second leading response towards motivation was the "roles of the instructor" in the online environment. The three primary factors increasing motivation were the two-instructor system with different roles, the facilitation of students learning collaboratively and the counseling of students' studies. These are all extrinsic factors.

Students responded that to increase motivation in the future, improvements to the infrastructure and discussion board modeling/creation should be made. Deliverability was a driving characteristic to motivate students. The role of the instructor by creating a warm, flexible and friendly environment was the most important factor in motivating students based on the responses of the second instructor's role in the course. This falls in line with the construct of culture within the social learning theory. The importance of facilitating interaction and building an online culture was highlighted and recognized by the students' perceptions of the course.

Ward, Peters and Shelley (2010) measured the perceptions of quality of online learning synchronous experiences. Instructors reported difficulties with technical issues and preparation for the synchronous components. Overall, they felt that the synchronous format was effective and were relatively pleased with the interactions amongst students and between themselves and the students within the platform. Students gave positive ratings to the synchronous format. In comparison with face-to-face format there was not a statistically significant distinction in the students perception of quality. However, students did perceive asynchronous instruction in comparison to synchronous and face-to-face instruction to be inferior by a statistically significant margin. Therefore, hybrid learning was perceived to be of higher quality in this particular study. However, the study failed to elaborate on the community and participation aspects that resulted in a higher perceived quality of learning.

The negative aspects of student perceptions by newer online instructors were reflected when reviewing initial perceptions of students in the online environment. Naughton, Smeed and Roder's (2011) grounded theory qualitative research study

explored the initial student approaches to the e-learning environment. The study highlighted how students did not conceptualize how knowledge could be gained through dialogue or how the exchange of knowledge could be carried out through the online discussion board. Additionally, students' reactions to the role of the instructor as a tutor and not a delineator of knowledge highlighted the perceived and inherent difference within online learning. Furthermore, the study indicated the instructor's initial response to setting up an e-learning course was to mirror that of their in-class setting -- thereby not relying on the student ownership aspect of electronic learning.

Cutthrell and Lyon's (2007) qualitative case study reviewed the learning preferences of 32 graduate students enrolled in two graduate online education curriculum development courses. Each online graduate student was asked to rate the seven instructional strategies (interactive PPT, group discussion, audio files, read and respond, read and teach, interactive video lecture) from most preferred to least preferred and compose reflections on their choices. The responses indicated that students preferred independent instructional methods (interactive PPT and read and respond) to group (read and teach) or technological (video and audio) modes of delivery. The reflections for independent instructional methods included a sense of ownership for work and ease of delivery. The researchers concluded that comfort and convenience were compelling factors in student preference. Although this disassociates from the concepts of student learning theory and the importance of engagement, it does underscore the differing participation needs of online graduate students. This independent participation need is significant and points to implications for hybrid online learning courses or communities.

Stream Two: Online Learning Community Environments

Construction of an online learning community to augment the learning process is a central component within social learning theory (Hill, Song, West, 2009). Palloff and Pratt's (2007) review of community building, identified eight elements that constituted community; people, shared purpose, guidelines, technology, collaborative learning, social presence and reflective practices. They argued that participation, although a key element in community building was not enough to sustain a community. As wider acceptance of the advantages of engagement through community building in the online learning environment has come about, instructional designs of these courses are based upon theories of learning-as-participation (Hong, 2009).

This section will reexamine the current practices in constructing a community and review the perceptual differences within the driver of community building. By first examining how community is built online and then reviewing the barriers to online community building, perceived gaps in the online community constructs can be determined. Additionally, the potential for how hybrid learning could augment these perceived gaps would be discussed.

Creating Community Online A major contributor to online learning communities initially conceptualized the environment through exploratory methods. Brown (2001) conducted a qualitative grounded theory study on the process of a community-building paradigm for online learning. The study used purposeful sampling to study a homogeneous sampling of experienced online learners to create a model through interviews and observation. After Brown created a conceptual model

of community she then sampled the model on a heterogeneous sampling of students. The community-building paradigm theory that emerged emphasized the importance of creating a safe, open, clear classroom with positive timely instruction and feedback. Through axial coding Brown identified three levels of communication; the first level was friendly banter, the second level was conferment that was achieved through long in-depth discussion threads, and the third level was camaraderie achieved after long-term interactions with classmates. Brown concluded that the levels of community achieved were based on the levels of engagement, not just participation. These levels were based on a degree of social presence and identity. Although Brown provides fifteen points for building a community, the limitation of Brown theory is the lack of specific modeling techniques for creating community. Brown's theoretical community-building process serves as a reference for determining the depth of community exchanges being created within the courses being studied. This foundational study laid a framework for other researchers who were sought to create action based research studies on creating community.

McDowell and McElrath (2008) presented a community building pedagogical strategy for implementing Brown's (2001) three states of community building (making friends, community conferment, and camaraderie). Their model focused on building community within graduate online environments and found course chat interactions, interactive introductions and illustrating theoretical frameworks with student stories to be vital pedagogical components. Within the model, the course chat was a separate forum where students ask and answer questions about the course. The interactive introductions were generated through basic introductory statements (name,

address, etc.) coupled with an icebreaker (3 Truths and a Lie). Lastly, the student stories were a pedagogical method of drawing out key concepts and creating discussion questions based on the concepts. Although the research lacked student feedback on perceived quality of learning, the model depicted the shift in instructional design as learning through participation. The community model also showed that social presence, not just participation was a key aspect of online community building. The notion of having to create icebreakers and introductory statements to build identity is an online component that could hold less gravity in hybrid environments where students are able to interact face-to-face.

Rovai (2007) through the exploration of current research, sought to explore the design and facilitation of asynchronous computer conferencing that can facilitate community within the online learning platform. His model revolved around two foundational constructs, design and facilitation. The design of online learning environments explored the research of framing online discussion boards to generate discussion and build community. Rovai (2007) asserted that this is constructed by creating clear expectations, allowing for socio-emotional responses to discussion threads to build identity within the boards, creating space for task oriented (such as group work) discussions, and motivating students to participate by tying it to course evaluations. The instructor facilitation of online discussion is created through developing a social presence that emphasizes student-to student interaction, recognizes the different cultural and gender specific patterns in online discussions, and encourages the participation of underperforming students.

Rovai's (2007) framework is underpinned by his assertion that establishing a constructivist atmosphere with well-defined expectations and an established environment of social equity and motivation will effectively construct an online learning environment of shared knowledge and community. Although much of the research is foundational, the contribution is to more current studies that implement updated technology practices; generational perception studies and shifting faculty and institutional perceptions would strengthen and add to his framework design.

An example of this shift in pedagogical practice was explored at the University of New England in Australia. When redesigning curriculum, researchers designed their courses around learning as a participating framework. As the School of Education was tasked with developing their online program to meet changing certification standards, the instructors at the institution took the opportunity to redesign their courses using Hong's theory of knowledge creation. Hong (2009) saw "knowledge as a collective social product" and their redesign and focus for their courses centered on engagement of the learners (Green et al., 2010). By refocusing their courses, they structured their assessments and classes to emphasize collaborative tangible learning artifacts. The redesign focused on team building exercises and assessments as well as instructor modeling. The redesign stressed the shift in instructor's role from merely a conveyor of information to one of facilitator and mentor. This alteration in pedagogy called for a higher-order cognitive skill set (Hardy & Bower, 2004). The successful implementation of this redesign emphasized the community model constructed by the theorists. Creating a dynamic online

environment with interactions and defined outcomes, a community online can be conceived.

Perception Differences to Community Construction Through knowledge creation, learners and instructors are changing previous classroom models of knowledge obtainment (such as a traditional lecture based system) to participation-based frameworks (such as collaborative group activities). This type of learning environment shifts the teacher's role from instructor to facilitator of learning (Berge, 1995). However, this shift in an instructor's role as facilitator is not reflective in current studies.

Vesely, Bloom and Sherlock's (2007) qualitative research design examined the elements needed to build online community. The case study reviewed the perceptions of instructors (14) and students (48) in fourteen online courses. The distributed survey incorporated Brown's (2001) framework for building an online community through a series of statements participants were to rank in order of importance. The results indicated that both instructors (100%) and students (85%) perceived that being a part of an online community "assists students in performing well and learning course material" (p. 239). Significant perceptual differences occurred when ranking the most relevant factors for building community. Students ranked "instructor modeling" first and "interaction and dialogue" fourth. Instructors ranked "interaction and dialogue" first and "instructor modeling" fourth. This perceptual difference indicates a disparity in perceptions of online learning and building a community. Instructors perceived students as the drivers to the online

experience and students the opposite. The study reflects the differing perceptions of community building for a purely online course.

Furthermore, Shackelford and Maxwell's (2012) quantitative non-experimental descriptive research design measured what type of interactions between learners and instructors were most predictive of constructing community. A 32-item survey based on the seven learner-instructor models supported from the literature was distributed to 1,589 graduate students enrolled in online courses at a comprehensive university. The survey generated 381 usable surveys (24% response rate) that were analyzed by using descriptive statistics with the Classroom Community Scale. The results showed that there was a correlation between learner-instructor interactions and the students' community perceptions. The five learner-instructor behaviors that contributed to community were instructor modeling, support and engagement, facilitating discussions, multiple communication modes and required participation. Response time from the instructor was not shown to measurably affect community. The study corroborated the perception analysis of Veseley et. al. (2007) on student perception of the importance of instruction modeling within online courses. The study focused the type of learning-instructor behaviors online learners perceives to be important such as modeling, engagement and facilitation in the learning community.

Although students do not perceive the role of the instructor as a facilitator within the online environment, they do recognize the importance of online learning communities. A recent study out of Rutgers University surveyed online degree completers to analyze what their favorite elements and least favorite elements of online learning were. Overwhelmingly, the respondents indicated that social

interactions with their classmates as well as real-world assignments that required communicating and interacting with the community they were studying were their favorite elements of online instruction, whereas the rote memorization was their least favorite (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). Through participation, self-identification and course design, as well as elements of community building, students were able to embrace online learning as a medium for education.

Vonderwell's (2003) qualitative case study interviewed twenty-two students on their experiences within an online course environment. The study indicated mixed reaction to the asynchronous learning environment. Whereas certain students enjoyed the reflective aspect of the discussion, others were displeased by the lack of immediate feedback. However, students reported that they felt a lack of a community, especially in regard to their relationship with the instructor within the online learning environment. The students reported not knowing their instructor's personality and preferences as they would in an on-campus course. Since hybrid environments create face-to-face interactions, how this perception is altered is measured in the study.

Song, Singleton, Hill and Koh's (2004) mixed methods research study measured student perceptions of useful and challenging characteristics in the online learning environment. Students, regardless of their comfort level with online learning, felt that the design of the course was paramount to the success of the experience. Other useful characteristics in online learning were comfort with technology, motivation and time management. Through interviews, Song et. al (2004) found that students liked the reflective nature of the discussion board tool but felt that the

discussion boards should be instructor driven so as to facilitate communication and build community. Students reported that the lack of community, difficulty understanding instructional goals and technical problems were challenging characteristics of online learning. As instructional goals are a component of course design, students' perceptions of the attributes of course design (that was reported as the most useful characteristic) are skewed. The lack of community falls in line with Vonderwell's (2003) qualitative study as one his barriers to online learning. Song's et. al (2004) interviews revealed that students felt that community building could be facilitated by the instructor through one or two face-to-face meetings before or during the course. As this is a component of hybrid courses, this finding is measured through the research study.

Rovai and Jordan (2004) conducted a casual comparative study to determine how the sense of community differed within online, hybrid and face-to-face learning environments. A total of sixty-eight graduate students from face-to-face (24), online (21) and hybrid (23) volunteered to participate. A factor analysis was conducted on twenty self-reporting items using a Likert scale. The study showed that the hybrid course offered students a more positive learning experience as it combined the flexibility of online learning with the social participation of face-to-face learning environments. The online learning environments results showed a dynamic range of responses not found in the other environments. Rovai and Jordan (2004) concluded that this was on par with strong negative feelings that some online students feel due to the isolating features of the online learning environment and their learning preferences. Additionally, the fully online learning students commented negatively

about their professor's engagement within the course stating, "Some of your responses to other students appeared sharp and frank. So instead of calling you, I just depended on my own wit and received help from my colleagues" (p10). These misunderstandings were not prevalent in the other environments. Although these findings are limited due to the small sample size, it does depict how hybrid formats can create better interactions within the learning environment. The negative perceptions of online learning communities continue to be a lack of self-identity within the online class.

Stream Three: Purpose Driven Online Learning Participation

The importance of participation in classroom environments has been well documented in the literature (Tinto, 1987). Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a theory of attrition based on the non-traditional student most receptive to distance education. Their study and subsequent theory found that these students valued academic integration over social integration. Social learning theory depicts learning as a process of engagement and interactivity (Henning 2004). This interactivity in online learning environments is both within peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor interactions. Senge (2005) stated, "all learning integrates thinking and doing. All learning is about how we interact in the world and the types of capacities that develop from our interactions" (p. 51). By creating connections online, a higher level of understanding and practice can be achieved (Bonk, 2009). Active participation within online learning environments is correlated to retention (Betts, 2008), learning outcomes (Hiltz, Coppola, Rotter, Turoff, & Benbunan-Fich, 2000) and positive course experiences (Yukseltoev, 2010). The literature also reveals barriers to

participation within the online learning environment. This section will first identify a definition of participation in online learning, before examining the correlation between such participation and learning outcomes. Then the section will review the design models influencing participation as well as reviewing the studied barriers in participation. It is conceivable that hybrid learning provides a partial solution to the obstacles these issues create.

Defining Participation in Online Environments As further research on participation in an online learning environment is explored, varied definitions and measurements of online participation are defined. Hrastinski (2008) sought to classify participation into six categories; participation as accessing e-learning environments, participation as writing, participation as quality writing, participation as writing and reading, participation as actual and perceived writing, and participation as taking part and joining in a dialogue. Within this framework, participation as taking part and joining in a dialogue as well as participation as quality writing and writing are the dominant concepts researchers are utilizing to research participation.

Table 1: Concepts of Online Learner Participation

Level	No. of Papers	Percent of Papers
1 Participation as accessing e-learning environments	1	3
2 Participation as writing	10	28
3 Participation as quality writing	9	25
4 Participation as writing and reading	2	6
5 Participation as actual and perceived	2	6

writing		
6 Participation as taking part and joining in a dialogue	12	33
Total	36	100

(Hrastinski, 2008)

Hrastinski distinguished participation as writing and participation as quality writing on the bases of research studies that distinguished between substantive and non-substantive comments. Whereas the research conducted on participation as writing focused on the quantifiable length and frequency of the writing within the online learning environment. Based on Hrastinski's findings the concept of participation, as taking part and joining in a dialogue, is emerging as the pre-eminent definition. This is identified with an on-going group dialogue that can be generated within group work or discussion boards.

Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005) defined participation as taking part and joining in a dialogue for their study of graduate students. Their study looked at the participation of graduate students taking an online course. When developing discussion based questions and analyzing the results, Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005) concluded that the dialogue within the discussion boards helped facilitate a better learning environment. Combined with Hrastinski (2008) definition that "participation involves everything we do and feel when being part of engaging experiences," participation will be defined as taking part and joining in a dialogue through various online platforms and participants. This definition will allow for

analyzing the correlation between such participation and learning outcomes detailed in the next section.

Participation and Learning Outcomes The effects of participation in online learning outcomes was first explored through comparison with traditional learning environments. Hiltz et al. (2000) conducted a qualitative research study to determine the effects of participation in regards to learning outcomes. The study, conducted at the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) over the course of three years and 26 courses, found that students learned as good as or better than on-campus classes when they were actively involved with one another in a group learning experience. However, when online students in an individual setting received posted material and sent back individual work with no group or instructor engagement, the learning outcomes were poorer than in traditional classrooms (Hiltz et al., 2000). The comparison study developed an understanding of the measurable impact of engagement within an online learning environment.

The importance and types of engagement within online learning was further realized through a massive case study within the State University of New York (SUNY) system. Fredericksen, Picket, Shea, Pelz, and Swan (2000) measured the variables effecting learning effectiveness within the online learning environment. Over fourteen hundred online learners within the SUNY system participated. It concluded that the components effecting learning effectiveness were interactions with the teachers, levels of participation, and interactions with classmates. Students who had high levels of interaction with teachers, participation and interaction with classmates also reported perceived learning satisfaction. The perceived learning by

students was measured as learning effectiveness, however this study did not measure the amount or quality of interactions and participation that resulted in a shift in student perceptions.

Similarly, the research conducted by Davies and Graff (2005) explored the relationship of online interaction and performance outcomes (grades) of 122 undergraduates in an online setting. The study measured participation on the bases of access or hits in the course. Therefore, the number of times a student accessed a discussion board or group page was tallied and then measured against their grade. Although the findings did not find a direct correlation to interaction and better scores, it did find that students who failed in a course were participating less frequently. This is an important finding as often research focuses on quantity equaling quality, however if quantity can not be correlated to learning scores then they can not be directly associated with quality of online learning.

Morris, Finnegan, and Sz-Shyan (2005) quantitative study more decisively measured the level of participation that correlated to student success. The study was based on 354 online learners in thirteen undergraduate general education courses at the University of Georgia. The number of discussion posts viewed, the number of content pages viewed and the seconds viewing discussions were variables that correlated to a student's final grade in the course. Thus, online participation affected learning outcomes not just by the number of posts by a student, but also by their participation in other components (content pages other students posting) of the course. Additionally, there was a statistically significant difference in the level of

participation between withdrawers and completers as well as between successful completers and non-successful completers.

Other researchers pulling from past research on engagement of traditional learners further explored participation correlation with retention of online learners. Betts (2009) emphasized the importance of instructor participation with online students in regards to involving students within their courses and learning objectives. She stated that because of the physical differences inherent to online environments, “administrators and faculty must understand the importance of integrating effective communication strategies into online program development, course design, and instruction to engage, connect and retain students” (Betts, 2009). Hence, these various studies point to personal communication in multiple outlets, from professor interaction in the discussion board to assignment feedback is integral to creating a sense of community engagement.

Many of these research studies measured participation in regards to quantity of participation verses quality of participation. Graff and Davies (2005) found that the “methodology in this study sought to measure interaction in terms of quantity (the number of ‘blackboard’ hits) rather than the quality of interaction and group discussion, and it is possible that the quality of online participation in terms of the types of interaction would be most important (p. 662). By measuring the quality of interaction within a course studies could have explored how students perform when they are engaged through elevating instructor feedback and enriching peer-to-peer interaction.

Instructional Design's Effect on Participation The instructional design component can influence participation in its design and implementation within a course. The course requirements, construction of discussion board groups and number of participants can all have an effect on the quality of participation in the online environment (Young & Richardson, 2012)

Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem and Stevens (2012) qualitative research study sought to explore the elements that created an effective online learning environment through interviews with online students and instructors. The exploratory case study examined the online course elements that both hindered and supported the participants' online learning.

The researchers interviewed ten adult online students in various degree programs and six online instructors through convenience sampling. The researchers found that fully text-based content proved least effective within online learning environments. A lack of interactivity in courses led to students feeling isolated and disconnected from the content and instructor. Instructors reported a lack of awareness on how to implement Web 2.0 technologies to foster more connective activities within their courses. Students felt that contrived interaction through group work hindered their learning due to constraints in time and varying levels of academic commitment. Therefore, students sought interactivity within their online courses but not through constructed means. The CAM effectiveness in online learning environments was explored through interviews with students and the creator of an award winning online program. The researcher's admiration for the program was reflected in their positive tone when describing the program's attributes. The program

constructed real-world learning activities, lecture series using Web 2.0 technologies, and faculty training to develop an interactive program. The analysis depicted students' positive learning experiences with the design and overall program. However, the researcher failed to explore if the programs contrived group activity negatively affected a students' positive experiences within the program as it did with students in other degree programs. This lack of comparative perspectives reflects a slight bias when reporting and interviewing the participants of this particular program.

The research did not show significant insight into instructional methodology to create interactive learning environments a possible reflection of the small sample size used for the study. The study provided new knowledge on the negative student perceptions of constructed group work within online environments useful to both instructors and instructional designers. Additionally, the study began to link the importance of creating authentic learning assignments and discussions as a means to increase engagement.

Yao (2012) conducted a mixed-methods case study of hybrid graduate education students to measure their perceptions of the online discussion format in regards to small and whole group discussions. A Likert survey instrument was used to measure 60 students' perceptions of small-group, whole group, access to other groups and instructor involvement in the groups as well as open-ended reflective questions and demographic information. The 42 responses indicated that students valued the ease of tracking posts in small groups and hoped the instructor would make regular comments in discussion threads. Students valued the diversity of opinion in whole-

group discussion indicating that they did not prefer either discussion format. After disaggregating the data, the female population proved to welcome instructor feedback at a statistically significant higher rate than their male peers. The limitations of this survey are the small sample size and the deficiency of data on the number of discussion board postings within the course. This research is significant as it views the perceptions of hybrid learners using different discussion groupings. The research survey fails to incorporate the students' perceptions of community, course design and learning outcomes within their course and therefore does not measure other social learning components to online instruction.

Demographic Discrepancies to Participation As research into the effects of participation in online learning environments were being formulated, other research began exploring the demographic discrepancies to participation in the online environment. Yukselturk's (2010) mixed-method case study explored the relationship between students' participation level in an online forum with their demographic and intellectual abilities. Additionally, he examined student views of their low level interactions on the discussion forum. There were 196 students that were evaluated from the online Information Technologies Certificate Program. The quantitative analysis results indicated that three factors (gender, hours of internet use and achievement) showed a correlation with their levels of participation in the course. The ratio of active females participation was higher (45.3% v. 28.6%) than male students. Additionally, high achieving students were more likely to participate in the boards than their low achieving counterparts. The reasons for low participation included scheduling conflicts, falling behind in course topics and not having enough

interactivities within the thread. The research study is significant as it reiterates the importance of discussion board guidelines and underlining demographical considerations in discussion threads. However, the researcher does not associate quality with quantity in regards to participation.

Huang and Huanch's (2012) quantitative correlational study examined the relationship between students' learning styles and their type (active or passive) of participation and performance in a hybrid-learning environment. Two hundred and twenty-four students learning styles were assessed through an ILS questionnaire. Student participation was tracked through the e-learning system based on written and viewed postings. Study findings found that participation was a mediating construct of e-learning performance. Students characterized as "sensory" learners participated more frequently and therefore performed better than "intuitive" learners. "Intuitive" learners, based on their low level of active participation, may need course/design adjustments to benefit from the e-learning model. Prior knowledge of the subject matter was not a moderator in the relationship between active participation and learning performance. Study limitations included the one subject matter course scope of the study. The study was inconclusive with other learning styles. Additionally, gender was used as a controlled variable, but showed a positive correlation to performance and passive participation and therefore may be a mitigating factor, as in the Yukselturk (2010) research, in performance and participation based on the subjects learning style. The study is significant because it illuminates the limitations to learning with in a purely online learning.

Rovai's (2001) mixed-methods observational case study investigated community establishment, gender communication patterns and their impact on community within the online learning environment. Twenty graduate online education learners were surveyed using the sense of classroom community index (SCCI) along with the messages posted in the discussion threads. Lastly their statistical data was pulled from the course management system (CMS). Results indicated a moderate positive relationship between classroom community and the number of postings. Class discussion threads averaged 226 messages per week. This high volume of postings was attributed to assigned board postings and indicated the increased level of participation. Female voices within threads were viewed as more supportive than the assertive stance of the male students. Females viewed online learning experience more positively than the male students (88.57% to 64.29%). These gender variances indicated perceptual differences within online learning. The limits of this study include the small sample size. This study is significant due to the relationship it establishes between community and discussion. Similar to Yukselturk (2010) it emphasized a need to require discussion format as well highlighted gender disparities and participation in the thread.

Machado's (2011) review of 1,373 discussion boards and 109 blog posts of a hybrid course found no statistically significant difference amongst the number of postings amongst male and female students. Although males posted a statistically higher rate of contemporaneous posts, both genders contributed statistically similar amounts of contemporaneous, retrospective and anticipatory postings. Therefore, Machado's research made the distinction that although females prefer online learning

formats more than men, it does not result in a higher participation rate.

The engagement of online learners helps facilitate a sense of community while making the learners participators in their learning experience. By defining, reviewing and analyzing participation in online learning environments, an understanding of the gaps hybrid learning can fulfill is understood. Through participation in discussion boards, a community online can be generated, however gender, experience with online learning and facilitation of the discussion all effect this online dialogue. The effects of participation based on creating authentic learning questions are starting to be explored. However, further research on effects of authentic learning (the “relate” component of engagement theory) as a cornerstone of participation is deficient in research within hybrid learning environments. The discussion also allows students in theory to develop a self-identity within the course, thus when they do not participate, they are more likely to feel isolated and stop out of the course. Therefore, hybrid learning can conceivably augment the barriers of self-identification, experience and facilitation of online participation by augmenting the virtual conversations and relationships with in person communication.

Summary

This review of the literature examined the barriers to online learning that have emerged through the literature. The literature reviewed misconceptions of perceived roles within the online learning environment. Instructors provide a sense of community through feedback and facilitation of conversations (Desai, Hart, Richards, 2008). Instructors perceive their role as a role of facilitator in the online environment, whereas students still view the instructor as the director of the course and

conversation. Furthermore, as instructional designers move towards creating environments based on learning theories of engagement, students are still hindered by technology access, experience online and lack of self-identity and casual interaction. The review of the literature revealed gaps within the construction and importance of an online community in a hybrid format (Arbaugh, 2004). Ultimately, some of these issues could be negated through hybrid learning, as students are able to develop in-person relationships relatively early in the course and carry them into the online environment.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The following chapter reviews the research design and rationale for the research study. The purpose of this study was to determine how to create a blended learning environment that was enriching for both students and instructors. Moreover, the study looked to gauge how students and instructors perceived the online learning environment within a hybrid-learning environment. The following research questions were designed to measure the perceptions of the online component of hybrid environments through the lens of the components of engagement theory.

Central Question: How do graduate students and instructors perceive the importance of online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction and in class meetings in building an engaged hybrid community?

Sub-questions (Quantitative)

1. How do graduate students perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and in class meetings in building online community engagement within selected hybrid courses?
2. What do instructors perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and in class meetings in building online community engagement within selected hybrid courses?
3. How do the perceptions between graduate students' and instructors' compare?

Sub-questions (Qualitative)

1. How do graduate students describe or perceive the role of the instructor in the online community?
 - a. What components of an online learning hybrid course environment do graduate students recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?
2. How do instructors describe or perceive the role of graduate students in the online community?
 - a. What components of online learning hybrid course environment do instructors recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?

The chapter begins with a rationale for the research methodology and design in answering the above research questions. The chapter continues with an explanation of the site and population for the study and resume with an in-depth analysis of the methods and time line for the study. Lastly, the ethical considerations are reviewed. The research design was intended to give insight on both student and instructor perceptions of the online learning components in hybrid courses. As the hybrid-learning field expands, it was crucial to determine the most effective means for the design, in terms of authentic learning experiences and instruction of the online learning components. Grounding the research in the social constructionist paradigm, a mixed methods research design was outlined in order to give a comprehensive approach to concepts of learning perceptions that are further explored. Mixed

methods research design collects both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the research problem (Creswell, 2003). The tools for the mixed methods study; interviews, reflective journals, surveys and data analyses are described and justified within the context of the study.

Research Design and Rationale

A mixed method intrinsic exploratory single case study design approach was implemented in order to effectively analyze student and instructor perceptions of the online learning environment within hybrid courses. Miles (1994) defined a case as a “phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p 25). Therefore, case studies revolve around a bounded system. Singular case studies focus on a single case rather than the repetition of study over multiple case-designs (Tellis, 1997). In the context of this study, a private northeastern university’s Doctor of Education hybrid program acted as the singular case for the study. By focusing on a private northeastern university’s Doctor of Education program, an analysis of students’ and instructors’ perceptions of the quality in online learning was conducted. Perceptions were studied through the lens of community building, participation and design practices. Furthermore, the case study approach created an environment in which the researcher could, based on the data collected, put forward suggested process improvements.

The research design and methodology for this study was grounded in the social constructionist worldview. According to Creswell (2007) “social constructionists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (p 27). They approach research as a means to develop a

richer understanding of contextual occurrences. Social constructionists developed research designs to delve into participants understanding and views of their experiences (Creswell, 2007). The case study model, where an in-depth analysis of a case occurs, lent itself naturally to a social constructionist paradigm.

Case studies research experiences are within a bounded real-life context (Yin, 2008). The case acts as a noun in that it is an entity (Stake 2006). The hybrid-learning environments in the Doctor of Education program are the case for this study. For the purposes of this study, Merriam's definition of a case study was used. Merriam's definition expands on Mile's definition above to include an analysis of the bounded system. Merriam (2009) defines a case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p43). Moreover, case studies strive for a holistic understanding of the interrelated activities of participants in the context of their environment (Tellis, 1997). Thus, this study explored the participants' perceptions of their interactivity with one another as well as within the hybrid-learning environment.

By implementing a mixed methods research design, the study conducted an in-depth analysis of the Doctor of Education program. Case studies are not limited to a particular research methodology (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, an assortment of research techniques (surveys, reflective journals, etc.) was implemented to create an in-depth analysis of the Doctor of Education program.

Site and Population

To measure student and instructor perceptions of learning in an online environment, the research study evaluated, as its target population, a private northeastern university's Doctor of Education program. By using doctoral students,

the study was populated by academically proven students. This allowed the researcher to focus more on perceived learning and less on the students' ability to learn.

Furthermore, instructors in a private northeastern university's Doctor of Education program had extensive experience in both fully online learning environments as well as hybrid learning environments. The population selection negated the negative online learning perceptions associated with first term distance learning experiences, such as technology adaptation.

It should be noted that the private northeastern university's Doctor of Education program had experienced rapid expansion over the last four years. In the Fall 2013-2014 academic term, the program was offered in a blended format in five locations with at least fifteen students within each cohort. This showed significant growth over the two site locations that ran in the Fall 2010-2011 academic year, the beginning of the program.

Students in the private northeastern university's Doctor of Education program were demographically diverse but academically similar. The doctoral students have all earned a Master degree and have extensive professional experiences in their respective fields. As doctoral students, they are exposed to academic research and are expected to analyze and write at an academic level. Since students are unable to maintain their graduate student status within this institution if their GPA falls below a 3.0, and the population is beyond their first term of attendance, these students have proven themselves academically at the doctoral level. Demographically, the students range in location, age, ethnicity, race and gender. Therefore, by using this diverse

group of academically accomplished students, a focused study on how these students interpret learning online in the hybrid environment was effectively analyzed.

The doctoral student population being researched was in a private northeastern university's Doctor of Education program. Six cohorts of students in the Doctor of Education program were studied. Each cohort had an enrollment of 9-19 students; a representative sample of over 80 graduate level blended learning students. Three of the six cohorts began the program in the Fall 2013-2014 term; therefore they were in the same course with different instructors at the point of the research study. Additionally, by having three of the six cohorts taking a different course, the researcher insures that the results are not based on certain inherent course inclinations.

As mentioned previously, this private northeastern university's Doctor of Education program expanded to five hybrid locations. The locations included four sites in the northeast and one site on the west coast. All programs implemented the Blackboard Learn course management system for the online component to their hybrid courses. The Blackboard Learn system was equipped with communicative tools such as discussion boards, voice threads and collaborative platforms for synchronous presentations. The courses were designed to have a weekly or biweekly discussion board. The discussions were implemented to engage students in the weekly readings by asking them to answer discussion board prompts. The students were asked to post a response on the discussion board and respond to at least two of their classmates' responses. Students were graded on their responses to classmates and threaded discussions accounted for about thirty percent of a student's grade

depending on the course. Instructors took different approaches to their participation within the board, as some instructors choose to respond to each posting, while other instructors choose not to respond to individual students but rather to post a weekly recap. As the research review indicated, these discussion boards have shown to build a community within fully online courses. However, perceptions as to whom (students or instructors) should facilitate these community boards differ. The study explored what perceptions regarding the effect and facility of these boards prevail within the hybrid environment.

Researcher Role. As a program manager, adjunct instructor, graduate and current doctoral student, the researcher was familiar with both the study sites, instructors and student population. As social constructionists seek to understand the complexities in the world around them, they would, therefore, most often conduct research in areas in which they work. Creswell (2008) states, “researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (p. 21). Therefore, the social constructionist recognizes their inherent assumptions within the research and uses that foundational knowledge to shape the research design and interpret the researches findings.

As a student within the program being studied, the researcher developed opinions about the components that create high quality hybrid courses over time. These inherent biases towards certain practices would potentially skew the data results if proper precautions were not taken. The research study followed the “Ethical Issues Checklist” when conducting the data from both the professors and student

participants. The checklist consists of 9 items. Merriam (2009) promoted the following 10 items to create an ethical study.

1. Explaining purpose of the inquiry and methods to be used
2. Promises and reciprocity
3. Risk assessment
4. Confidentiality
5. Informed Consent
6. Data access and ownership
7. Interviewer mental health
8. Advice (counselor for process)
9. Data Collection Boundaries
10. Ethical versus legal conduct.

By using those ten items as a framework and order to overcome researcher bias, the following procedures were implemented for the design, implementation and analysis of results.

1. The research study implemented a quantitative survey developed by other practitioners in the field of distance education. By implementing a pre-designed survey, the instrument did not reflect the researcher's bias towards certain quality components within hybrid courses.
2. The qualitative instruments consisted of grand tour questions, example and experience questions. By incorporating these types of descriptive

questions in the qualitative design the researcher was providing the participants an open forum to discuss their experience within the environment (Spradley, 1979). This method allowed the researcher to be guided by the participant and not have the participant be guided by the researcher's bias.

3. A third party interviewer was used for both the instructor and graduate student interviews. This interviewer recorded the interview and then upload the recording to a web based independent transcription service. The transcript was then returned without identifiers ensuring the anonymity of the participants.
4. The collection of the reflective data from the student participants in the Doctor of Education program was done electronically. The students voluntarily joined the qualitative measurement and had the option to opt out of the quantitative survey if they so choose. The study protected the anonymity of the student participants that negates any ethical issues in data collection (Creswell, 2003).
5. The analysis of the qualitative data was done using NVivo qualitative research analysis software. The NVivo software measured how often terms are referenced across all participants and extracts then from the data set. The information was then grouped by common characteristics in order to generate themes for qualitative analysis (NVivo, n.d.).
Therefore, NVivo software allowed the researcher to negate any bias

associated with being a student within the program during the qualitative analysis process.

Approvals were obtained at various levels for the research project. In order to gain approvals, the Dean of the School of Education signed a site permission letter (Appendix D) to conduct the research and the Program Directors for each site within the program were fully informed of the plan and research design (Appendix E). As gatekeepers, it was important to maintain both a consistent line of communication and openness, both encouraging and soliciting feedback.

Research Methods

A mixed methods research design approach was implemented using both qualitative and quantitative design approaches to answer the research questions and to create a valid and reliable study. Creswell's (2008) definition of mixed methods design was used in this study. As stated mixed methods research designs "are procedures for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study, and for analyzing and reporting this data based on a priority and sequence of the information" (p.642). In this research design, the quantitative data provided the context of the study, while the qualitative data tested the relationships found in the quantitative data. Therefore, the study was an explanatory mixed methods approach.

The mixed methods design approach-employed interviews, reflective journals, surveys and quantitative data analyses to address the research questions. Below is a description of each instrument that was used in the study.

Qualitative Methods

Description of Methods The first method of qualitative research was interviews. An interview is a method of one-to-one interaction where the interviewer asks the interviewee questions. The interview invitations were sent to the instructors of each participating course after the term had concluded. As instructors were not assigned until the term before courses begin, a definitive number of the instructors to be interviewed was not derived prior to the beginning of the study. During the study, it was determined that six instructors would be invited to interview. Permissions for the interview was obtained through the site permission letter prior to the start of the course. A third party interviewer was utilized for the instructor interviews. Given the researchers role within the program, utilizing a third party interviewer decreased the inherent bias within the study and provided a level of anonymity for the participating instructors. The interview was recorded and the transcript was then uploaded to an independent transcription service called Casting Words. The transcript was returned without identifiers ensuring the anonymity of the participants.

The second method of qualitative analysis was student reflective journal. The reflective journal is a writing tool used to drawl deeper qualitative reflection on the learning process. (Jasper, 2005). Volunteers from the pool of students in the Doctor of Education program were recruited to participate in the reflective journaling process. An email was sent to each cohort asking for volunteers to participate in the reflective journaling process two weeks after the start of term. The prompts for the reflective journals were posted and the students were able to comment to the prompts privately.

Each student was able to access their information and responses. No student was able to access any other student's information in the system.

At the completion of their reflection at week ten, they were asked if they would be willing to participate in a semi-structured interview to expand upon their answers. The same third party interviewer that conducted the instructor interviews interviewed the two student volunteers. The recoding of the interviews was then be uploaded to an independent transcription service.

Instrumentation The instruments for both qualitative methods were framed by the qualitative research questions. The qualitative research questions were designed to measure student and instructor perceptions of their role and the other's role within the hybrid-learning environment. Additionally, the qualitative research questions were designed to add to student and instructors perceptions of quality components that add to the hybrid learning experience.

The interview questions for the instructor and students consisted of seven questions as outlined in Appendix A and Appendix B. The questions were developed through a series of steps based around interview methodology. As the research was focused on high-quality student and instructor engagement, three components (instructional tools, methodology and engagement) were identified as domains for the interviews (Spradley, 1979). The interview questions were then constructed around the three domains using tour, example and experience questions to allow the interviewee opportunities to elaborate on their experiences. Each interview began with the participants providing the interviewer with examples of engagement practices within their course and then narrow to the specifics that create an engaged

learning environment. The questions were designed to answer the qualitative research questions while also gleaning insight into the overall experience with the hybrid format of either the instructor or students. The concurrent principle was being used to alternate between descriptive and structural questions (Spradley, 1979). Each of the instructor interviews was recorded with permissions being obtained prior to the interview. The conversations with all participants were conducted over the phone. The interviews were conducted with the instructor after grades were submitted and with the students after their course had officially closed.

The reflective journaling process was conducted in though a designed WordPress site. WordPress is a web-based site that served as the host for the reflective journal. During the first week of the term, the WordPress site was created with a unique web address for the reflective journal that was not made public, thereby not making it searchable through a search engine. Each student volunteer was able to create his or her own unique Wordpress userid and password.

Wordpress was chosen as the host for the reflective journals based on the researchers familiarity with the system and security settings. The researcher had sole proprietary access to the students' reflective journals and verified that the content was not searchable or publishable on the web. Additionally, to secure students identity, the students' logon credentials did not include their names or other identifiers but were a format of their choosing. This confidentiality process was done to protect the students' anonymity in the process and subsequently each participant was assured of his or her anonymity throughout the process (Kvale, 2007).

The reflective journals were based on prompts posted on the site in week five, seven and ten of the course. Prior to each week's prompt posting the students were emailed a reminder to participate. By design, these questions touched on the qualitative research questions (Appendix C). During the fifth week of term, students were asked about the community within the course. In the seventh week of term, the students were asked about the learning tools within their course. At the conclusion of week ten, the students reflected upon their online learning experience in the course.

Data Analysis Procedures In order to effectively and accurately analyze the data, the interviews were all recorded and transcribed through the Casting Word and NVivo software system. The NVivo software system allowed the researcher to input the multiple data sources (interviews, journals, etc.) for analysis. The software provided the researcher with phrases and words that were used repeatedly throughout the qualitative inquiry by participants. This analysis was useful when coding the data and analyzing the results for emerging themes. It also provided the researchers with an organizational structure to house the multiple data sets. Creswell's (2012) graphical representation of a case study coding was implemented to analyze the multiple interviews and reflective journals. A diagram of similarities and differences was extracted from both data sets by creating a two-step analysis. The first stem was the process of extracting overlapping references into a patterned chart. Natural generalizations emerged from these patterns and were grouped into categories. Once the categories were set with the data distributed within them, the researcher added reflective notes to further add to the analysis (Creswell, 2012). The patterned chart allowed the researcher to disaggregate categories from the patterns and uncover

themes that overlap amongst the respondents (Merriam, 2009). The meaning interpretation derived from the interviews and reflective journals was then used to support the data assembled from the survey results (Kvale, 2007).

Quantitative Method

Description of Methods The third method within the study was a survey. Surveys are a method of data collection where a designed questionnaire is distributed to a population for completion. The survey was distributed to every student in the selected sections at the end of their course. The survey was also distributed to instructors within the department that have taught hybrid courses for completion. After distribution of the survey through an initial email, the students then had three email reminders to complete the survey in the following week. The survey included Likert scale ratings as well as comment boxes for additional comments and was geared towards answering the quantitative comparison research questions.

Instrumentation The Collaborative Academic Technology and LMS Services Team (2012) developed the Quality Online Learning and Teaching (QOLT) assessment for both students and instructors to complete to assist in the development of more effective hybrid and fully online courses. Within this study, the Quality Online Learning and Teaching assessment tool developed at California State University was distributed to all the students and instructors within this case study. The instrument consisted of 52 items and covered topics on community, interaction and facilitation. The nine components in the QOLT assessment were cross-referenced with the three streams of the engagement theory to show how the instrument was a reflection of the theoretical framework within the study. This was

also completed to establish the instrument as an effective tool to analyze the quality of online learning (CATALST, 2012). The nine components of the QOLT survey reflected the best practices for fully online learning found within the literature review. In terms of interactions, technology, instructional materials, learner support systems and course reflection the QOLT survey sought to measure if these practices were being implemented within the course and were perceived as important by both the instructor and student. Therefore, the QOLT survey instrument measured whether these perceived best practices were within the hybrid courses and valued by students and instructors in the hybrid learning environment being studied.

A designer of the QOLT survey was contacted and permission was granted for the use of the QOLT instrument for this research study. The designer of the survey stated, “in terms of validity, we have relied on content and face validity, having revised the instrument multiple times through feedback from many faculty and student participants, as well as instructional designers, directors of academic technology, and faculty developers” (personal communication, 2013). Therefore, the validity of the instrument was based on the research and continual analysis of the instrument.

The instrument was designed based on the research of effective practices for teaching and learning and was pilot tested in the California State University system during the fall 2011-2012 academic year (CATALST, 2012). Permissions for the use of the assessment tools was obtained prior to its use within the study.

The instrument was recreated in the Qualtrics system. Prior to beginning the survey students were prompted to indicate their gender, age and location in which

they were enrolled for the winter term. The instructor survey did not have demographic information. This allowed the researcher to aggregate the student data during the analysis process.

Data Analysis Procedures Once the data was collected through the survey instrument, the use of descriptive statistics provided more detailed student profile information. The analysis reported the frequency of Likert scale responses within the survey. Correlation calculations were used to determine if there are demographic discrepancies on how students perceive their online learning experiences. The analysis of different cohorts indicated if a particular group utilized certain component(s) within hybrid-learning (Wright, 1979).

The comprehensive mixed methods approach was designed to generate themes within the data in order to form a framework for high quality online engagement practices.

Stages of Data Collection

The private northeastern university operates on the quarter system with four 10-week terms a year. The data collection process was conducted during the winter term of the 2013-2014 academic year. The term ran from the second week of January to the last week in March. By implementing the study in the winter term, students who began the program in the fall 2013-2014 academic year had one term to assimilate to online course management system and the rigor of doctoral work. The study included first and second year cohorts in the various locations.

Prior the beginning of the term, site permission was obtained from the Dean of the School of Education (Appendix D). An email communication stream was then created to effectively inform key stakeholders of the study and invite participants. During the first week of term the Site Directors of the Doctor of Education program were emailed outlining the purpose of my study, the methods that were employed, and how I protected the privacy and confidentiality of participants. This message was followed by an email to the instructors that introduced the researcher and the purpose of the study being implemented (Appendix G). In the second week of term, the researcher sent out a call for volunteers amongst the cohorts to participate in reflective journaling (Appendix F). During the final weeks of the term, students were invited to participate in the QOLT survey (Appendix H). The initial email to the instructors to participate in the QOLT survey (Appendix I) was modified and sent to additional participants (Appendix J). The modified version emphasized the removal of demographic information and the time requirements.

The winter term was from January 6 to March 16. The perceptions of the students within the hybrid-learning environment were measured during the term through the reflective journals. The students were prompted to contribute to the reflective journal during week's five, seven and ten. During the final week of term, the QOLT survey was distributed to both the instructors and students. During the preceding week, after the QOLT survey was distributed three reminder emails to complete the survey was distributed. As the instructor response rate was minimal, the pool of instructors was expanded from the course instructors to the department instructors who have taught hybrid doctoral courses. The population that was

contacted therefore went from six to sixteen. After grades were completed for the course, the instructor interviews took place. The interviews took place during the week of March 26 to April 10. The analysis of the data was conducted in April and May.

Ethical Considerations

Through the use of a systematic approach for research collection and analysis as well as the implementation of ethical measures and systems throughout the process, a fair principled study was created. Since the study surveyed and interviewed students and professors, both student and academic policies and laws were followed. Additionally, the researcher's role as advisor, faculty supporter and member of the institution was addressed through a system of disclosures when contacting participants. As online learning research is a budding field, the researcher implemented the ethical skepticism approach as a moral baseline, which is undefined at this time.

Both students and faculty have federal and university policies that allow them certain levels of privacy and independence. Students are protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). This law allows for the privacy of a student's academic performance and "ensure students' personal information is properly safeguarded and is used only for legitimate purposes and only when absolutely necessary" (USDE, nd). Therefore, students within the study were not identified by name and their individual performance was not to be reported. Additionally, instructors have a certain level of academic freedom within their courses as outlined in the Academic Policies of the institution. This freedom allows

them the freedom to engage in academic discourse within their courses. However, this policy does stop short of disallowing the observation of instruction within a course.

Although both students and faculty have policies and laws protecting their basic rights, the researcher also created a voluntary participation study. After the directors of the program were informed of the study (Appendix E), the faculty was made aware of the study prior to the course beginning (Appendix G). Faculty and university administration were given the option to contact the researcher for clarification, questions or concerns. A level of respect towards the faculty's academic freedom and beneficence was shown through the anonymity of the process. Lastly, this process of active feedback further created the moral compass for the study.

Since the researcher was a member of the institution and a student of the study being studied, the concept of coercion was central. Students did not feel obligated or pressured to take part in the research study for fear of academic isolation. By explaining that this was a voluntary exercise and participation was not mandatory or directly measured to their student accounts, the level of student anxiety decreased. Additionally, the students were guaranteed that their instructors would not see the final analysis until well after grades have been submitted for the term.

By creating a level of effective communication, including conducting a full debriefing for the university administration and instructors after the data was analyzed; an ethical research study was conducted.

Summary

The research design was crafted to effectively answer the research questions for this study. Grounded in a social constructionist worldview, the research was designed through the lens of the components of social learning theory. Each of the mixed methods was designed to measure students' and instructors' perceptions of the community, facilitation and overall quality of their experience. By implementing both qualitative and quantitative data collection, a deeper understanding of these perceptions in terms of the research questions was extrapolated.

In order to minimize fears of encroachment toward academic freedom within the courses being studied, a continual flow of communication and input was implemented with key stakeholders during the research process. The research in both approach and design was focused on the learning perceptions of graduate students and instructors within the hybrid environment.

Chapter 4: Findings and Results

Review of Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of both graduate students and instructors regarding the factors that produce a high quality-learning environment. The high quality learning environment components being measured were based on the previous research conducted on fully online learning environments and includes student-to-student interactions, faculty-to-student interactions, community building, and instructional tools. Moreover, the study determined if students and instructors within the private university view the factors that support high quality in hybrid environments in the same manner. This study was significant because the findings informed a conceptual framework for high quality student engagement in hybrid learning communities based on the perceptions measured from the hybrid program.

The research questions designed for this study included a central question followed by sub questions that correlated to the factors shown to measure quality in fully online courses.

Central Question: How do graduate students and instructors perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction and in class meetings in building an engaged hybrid community?

Sub-questions (Quantitative)

1. How do graduate students perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and in class meetings in building online community engagement within selected hybrid courses?
2. How do instructors perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and in class meetings in building online community engagement within selected hybrid courses?
3. How do the perceptions between graduate students' and instructors' compare?

Sub-questions (Qualitative)

1. How do graduate students describe or perceive the role of the instructor in the online community?
 - a. What components of an online learning hybrid course environment do graduate students recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?
2. How do instructors describe or perceive the role of graduate students in the online community?
 - a. What components of online learning hybrid course environment do instructors recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?

Characteristics of the Participants

Students Eighty students enrolled across six doctoral-level hybrid-learning courses in four site locations were invited to participate in the study by completing

reflective journals at weeks 5, 7, and 10 of their 10-week course. Of the 80 students, 9 posted week 5 reflections; 5 of the original 9 posted week 7 reflections, and 4 of the original 9 posted week 10 reflections. The four students who participated in all three weeks were from Site 4 (2), Site 2 and Site 1. Of the 5 students who posted week 5 reflections, 2 were from Site 4, 2 were from Site 2, and 1 did not report a campus location.

The same 80 students were invited to participate in the study by completing an end-of-course survey instrument. Five of the emails were never delivered because the students' inboxes were full. Of the 75 students to whom the email invitation was delivered, 26 completed the survey for an overall response rate of 35%. Table 2 shows the student participants by site.

Table 2

The number and percentage of student participants by site.

Site	Number	Percentage
Site 1	2	8%
Site 2	4	15%
Site 4	9	35%
Site 3	11	42%

As shown in Table 2, all 4 sites were represented.

This ratio somewhat reflected the survey distribution ratio of 44% Site 4, 28% Site 3, 18% Site 2 and 11% Site 1. More than three-quarters of the respondents self-

identified as female (77%), this ratio reflected the overall self-reported class ratio of 64% female to 36% male.

Instructors In the first attempt to collect instructor responses for the survey, six instructors of current Ed.D. hybrid courses were invited to participate. This initial attempt resulted in one response to the instructor survey and one instructor interview. This limited instructor data was insufficient for comparison with data from the study survey. Thus, in an attempt to collect additional data from instructors, ten additional instructors who had taught at least one hybrid course for the Ed.D widened the instructor pool. This second invitation resulted in six additional survey responses. In total, seven of sixteen instructors participated in the survey for an overall response rate of 44%.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings are organized by the study's theoretical framework, engagement theory, and its three principles: relate, create, and donate (Kearley & Schneiderman, 1999). As described in detail in Chapter 2, the three principles capture the framework for a high quality learning experience (Kearsley and Schneiderman, 1999). To utilize the framework, the eight sections of the QOLT student and instructor survey instruments were cross-walked to the principles. Table 3 shows the cross-walk.

Table 3.

Crosswalk between the QOLT student survey instrument sections

Engagement Theory Principle	Brief Description of Principle	QOLT Survey Section	Brief Description of Section
Relate	Emphasizes the importance of classmate interaction amongst one another through group work and other collaborations (Kearsley and Schneiderman, 1999)	Section : Student Interaction and Communication	Eight question designed to measure how students relate to one another and the instructor
		Section : Facilitation and Instruction	Eight questions designed to measure how the instructor facilitated course delivery
Create	Stresses the importance of having the instructor create purposeful learning activities by constructing the domain of the project and allowing the students to craft their ripostes within the score of the domain perimeters (Kearsley and Schneiderman, 1999)	Section : Technology for Teaching and Learning	Five questions designed to measure the creation of an interactive learning environment through the implementation of technology
		Section : Instructional Materials	Five questions designed to measure the creation of engaging instructional materials
		Section : Course Overview	Seven questions designed to measure the students ability to navigate the course
		Section : Learner Support	Three questions designed to measure the students ability

			to navigate support systems
Donate	Highlights the significance of how building authentic assessments (i.e., assessments that students can relate back to their school or work) increases students' motivation and satisfaction (Kearsley and Schneiderman, 1999)	Section : Assessment of Student Learning	Six questions designed to measure how the course assessments and overall experience interplayed with "real world" experiences
		Section : Course Summary	Three questions designed to measure how the course implemented reflection into assessment

It should be noted that while the instructor and student survey headings were identical, the questions were worded differently. The student survey questions attempted to measure how students experienced the various components that lead to better community engagement, student learning, and understanding of course components. The instructor survey attempted to measure how instructors believed the tools assisted with community engagement, learning, and understanding of course components. Additionally, while the students were basing their assessment on their hybrid learning experience during the Winter 2013-2014 term, the expanded pool of instructors resulted in instructor participants who were basing their assessment on a hybrid course they taught for the Ed.D program in the past or on hybrid learning generally. Both students and instructors were asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a 5-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Additionally, it

is important to note that some qualitative information came out of the quantitative survey and is included within this section.

Each sub-section below begins with a brief overview of the engagement theory principle. That brief overview is followed by the findings from the related sections of the QOLT student and instructor surveys.

Engagement Theory Relate Stream The relate stream within engagement theory emphasizes the need for students to interact within one another in order to create community within the online learning environment. The interactions amongst peers forces students to work amongst an array of multiple perspectives and backgrounds to create solutions posed within the course work (Kearsley and Schneiderman, 1999). Through the review of the literature the relate stream expanded to incorporate both the importance of student-to-student interaction and student-to-instructor interaction. The literature showed that instructor feedback and facilitation of discussions with students contributed to a student's sense of community (Desai, Hart, & Richards, 2008; Betts, 2009). Both types of interactions, within a hybrid-learning environment, are supported within face-to-face interactions during executive weekends and online. The survey sought to measure how these online interactions, through the two components of the QOLT survey, were measured with the added element of in-person meetings.

Two sections in the QOLT survey were cross-walked to the "relate" stream: "Student Interaction and Communication" and "Facilitation and Instruction." The "Student Interaction and Communication" section included statements around learning activities, interactions with other students and the instructor, and the role of

the instructor to gauge students' perceptions of the interaction within the course.

Students reported a great degree of interaction across all statements. Table 4 shows students' level of agreement with the eight statements in the "Student Interaction and Communication" section.

Table 4
Student Perception Frequency of Student Interactions and Community

Statement	Strongly Agree		Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		No Answer
	%	%			%	%	
At the beginning of the course, getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the class.	46	27	19				8
The information about how to be successful in the course was helpful.	35	39	15	8			4
It was easy to navigate the online components of the course.	35	46	8	4	4		4
The learning activities (e.g., discussions) encouraged me to log on and interact with people frequently.	31	46	8	12	4		
The online resources encouraged me to interact with the course materials frequently.	35	46	12	8			
I understood how to participate in various learning activities such as reading and	54	35	8		4		

completing assignments, and the requirements were clear to me.					
The instructor's role in class participation was clear to me.	39	31	23	4	4
The learning activities helped me understand fundamental concepts and apply skills that are useful outside of the classroom.	35	54	4	8	

As shown in Table 4, no fewer than 70% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the statements. The results show that the students positively perceive the components assisted with their interactions within the course. These included the “getting to know you” introductions, the navigation and resources of the online classroom, the role of the instructor, their ability to participate in class and through the learning activities.

The comments from the students within this section of the QOLT survey focused on the effects instructors had in creating student-to-student interactions. One student commented, “Some instructors participate in discussion boards and others do not. I have found it helpful when they do, as they often encourage students to clarify their posts and elaborate on their thinking.” Another student commented, “We had a dynamic professor for this course! [He] made the class interesting, thought-provoking, and created a sense of hope and confidence in the transformation of education using various technologies to facilitate effective learning.” The highest

level of disagreement (12% disagree; 4% strongly disagree) was found in response to the statement, “The learning activities (e.g., discussions) encouraged me to log on and interact with people frequently.” As the comments indicated, the professors’ involvement with class discussion could encourage student engagement within the course. This slightly elevated level of dissatisfaction with learning activities, such as discussions, to create an engaged learning environment is further explored in the “create” stream outcomes of the QOLT assessment.

The instructor survey results indicated 100% agreement with the statements held in the Student Interactions and Community section of the QOLT section. The one comment posted within this section is in regards to the third question, which stated, “Navigation through the online components of the course is logical, consistent, and efficient.” In response, the instructor discusses the need for communication and trust with the student in order to have a logical, consistent and efficient course. The instructor stated, “Question 3 is interesting as an instructor because you don't know the answer unless student has the trust to interact with you. My assumption in preparing for a course is that it meets the points in #3. Again, one does not know that unless there is feedback from students about their perceptions of the logic etc.” The quote reflects the instructor’s need for continual student input for verifying that online components of the course are efficient.

The “Facilitation and Instruction” section created statements around instructor engagement through interaction and feedback with students in a course. Students reported a great degree of interaction within all variables. Table 5 shows students’

level of satisfaction with the eight statements of the “Facilitation and Instruction” section.

Table 5
Student Perception Frequency of Facilitation and Instruction (Course Delivery)

Statement	Strongly Agree		Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Answer
	%	%			%	%
The instructor helped me identify areas of agreement and disagreement among students on course topics that helped me learn.	23	39	15	15	4	4
The instructor helped guide the class toward understanding course topics in a way that helped me thing more clearly and carefully.	35	50	8	4	4	
The instructor encouraged me to participate in meaningful dialogues.	42	42	4	8	4	
The instructor encouraged me to explore new concepts in the course.	50	39		8	4	
The instructor helped me focus discussions on relevant issues.	46	42			4	
The instructor provided me with feedback in a timely fashion.	27	27	27	15	4	
I received frequent communications, such as announcements and	35	42	15	4	4	

emails, from the instructor.					
The instructor's communications about things like due dates and assignments instructions helped keep me on task.	39	31	12	12	8

As shown in Table 5, at minimum 50% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the statements. The highest level of agreement (at least 80% of students strongly agreed or agreed with the statement) was within the survey statements about instructor encouragement in both participation and exploring new concepts, guiding the class towards understanding course topics and focusing the student on relevant issues. Therefore, the students highly agreed that these statements were effective practices within the online component of a hybrid course.

There were higher levels of disagreement within this section of the survey as compared to the student interaction survey results. The comments from the students centered on the variations in teaching quality. One student commented, "The majority of the profs have been outstanding, but one or two lacked attention to detail and communication skills." Another student commented, "Again, one instructor made it more difficult for me to mark strongly agrees for many of these components.... sorry. If I could remove his influence from my responses, I would probably have more favorable marks. I am trying to disassociate his sphere of influence from these banks of questions/responses." Although the students were intended to answer based on their current hybrid experiences, the association of less engaged professors

influenced student results. The highest level of disagreement (12% disagree; 8% strongly disagree) was found in the statement, “The instructor’s communications about things like due dates and assignments instructions helped keep me on task.” However, the statement regarding timely feedback (15% disagree; 4% strongly disagree) also appeared in the comments and was associated with quality. One student stated, “As previously mentioned, timeliness and quality of instructor feedback has varied widely.” This section of the survey indicated an emerging theme with consistency in regards to communication and feedback. However, it is important to note that a definitive definition of timely feedback was not provided within this study and therefore could be interpreted differently amongst students and instructors’ perceptions.

The instructor survey results indicated ardent agreement with the statements held in the Facilitation and Instruction section of the QOLT section. Six out of the seven instructors strongly agreed (the remaining instructor agreed) that the instructor helps guide the class towards understanding course topics and the instructor sends communication about important goals and course topics. This indicates that instructors strongly agree that they assist in facilitating the understanding of course topics and goals for their class. Overall, the instructors’ agreed that the instructor should provide timely feedback, communicate due dates, and identify areas of agreement and disagreement in the course to further the learning experience. In comparison, the students agreed that the facilitation and instruction statements assisted their learning and engagement within the course. As the students’ comments indicate, the instructor helped keep students on track and at times provided them with

quality feedback.

Engagement Theory Create Stream The “create” stream within engagement theory emphasized the importance of creating an engaging course within the class structures. Through the literature review, the “create” stream determined the importance of implementing the right technology tools, instructional materials and engagement practices in order to create an effective learning environment. Confusion over instructional goals and faulty technology tools were found to be a prevalent complaint amongst online students (Song, Singleton, Hill and Koh’s 2004). Therefore, creating a sound infrastructure with clear sets of procedures and course objectives is a component of a quality engaged learning environment.

Four sections in the QOLT survey were graphed to the “create” stream; “Course Overview,” “Technology for Teaching and Learning,” “Learner Support” and “Instructional Materials and Resources.”

The “Course Overview” section of the QOLT survey, crafted statements around the technical tools implemented in the course and their effectiveness in the learning process. Students reported their level of agreement with all variables. Table 6 shows students’ level of satisfaction with the seven statements of the “Course Overview” section.

Table 6

Student Perception Frequency of Course Overview

Statement	Strongly			
	Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	%	%	%	%
How to get started in the	46	39	4	12

course and find the course schedule, due dates, and syllabus were clear to me.				
The purpose and format of the course and prerequisite knowledge and skills were clear to me.	50	42	8	
After viewing the course site, I knew who the instructor was, when he or she was available, and how to contact him or her.	62	31	4	4
The rules regarding emails, how to conduct online discussions, and other communication strategies were clear to me.	46	42	12	
Polices regarding academic dishonest such as cheating and plagiarism were clear to me.	69	27	4	
How to use the technology tools in the course was clear to me.	35	50	8	8
I had the opportunity to see samples of student work/assignments and to ask questions.	15	46	19	19

As shown in Table 6, at minimum 85% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all but one of the statements. The purpose of the course, course components (schedule, syllabi, etc.), instructor contact information, polices and rules for the class were clearly observed by the survey student responders. The comments from the students varied from challenges finding materials (“It is not always easy to navigate

the site to find information as to classes, schedule, or start-end times”) to dated course shells (“It appeared the course shells and assignment dates were oftentimes forwarded from course to course, giving inaccurate information on assignments and due dates.”); however, these comments did not deter from the strong support for the survey statements.

The highest level of disagreement (19% disagree) was found in the statement, “I had the opportunity to see samples of student work/assignments and to ask questions.” One student noted on the topic of seeing samples of student work, “Instructor new to his courses had limited access to prior example papers and was reluctant to answer questions on specifics because he did not feel that he had a grasp of what the assignment that he inherited, for lack of a better word, really asked.” Although the student projects assumptions on the instructor’s attitude, he did note that the lack of example work to assignments the instructor inherited, lead to students questioning assignment expectations.

In comparison, two instructors neither agreed nor disagreed about an instructor providing sample work in the course. One instructor stated, “Providing assignment samples are at the discretion of the instructor and program director. Some of the SOE faculties are philosophically opposed to providing samples of completed assignment - which arguably defeats the purpose of the assignment (i.e., spoon feeding our students). Students need to independently figure out how to structure their papers. In my view, the best researchers and writers should earn the highest grades. Online education and standardization is adversely impacting learning and undermining mediocrity in my view.” However, another instructor noted, “If I have

not taught the class before, I may not have easy access to examples of quality student work. This is a good idea. Perhaps this could become a new feature of the master shells for hybrid (and online) courses?” Therefore, the practice of providing sample work is not mandated and it is contested as a valuable practice within the faculty. The effects of providing sample work to students were not measured within this study and therefore its value towards students was not determined.

Overall, the instructor survey responses varied. All the surveyed instructors either strongly agreed or agreed with the statements regarding the clarity of the course syllabus, the availability of instructor contact information, the course description including the purpose of the course and the posting of academic integrity policies. However, one instructor strongly disagreed with the statement “A list of technical competencies necessary for course completion is provided, identifying and delineating the role/extent the online environment plays in the total course.” Within the comments section the instructor noted, “Doctoral students are professionals, so understanding standards of professional conduct is expected. Second, a list of technical competencies is not provided. This is covered in the orientation, so it would be redundant to repeat it in the course.”

The “Technology for Teaching and Learning” section of the QOLT survey, crafted statements around the technical tools implemented in the course and their effectiveness in the learning process. Students reported their level of agreement with all variables. Table 7 shows students’ level of satisfaction with the five statements of the “Technology for Teaching and Learning” section.

Table 7
 Student Perception Frequency of Technology for Teaching and Learning

Statement	Strongly				No
	Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Answer
	%	%	%	%	%
The tools (e.g., chat, Live Classroom, discussion forums, etc.) and media (e.g., videos) used in the course helped me learn.	39	35	23	4	
The course tools and media encouraged me to interact with others in the course.	35	42	19	4	
The course tools and media encouraged me to become an active learner and to interact with the course content.	35	42	12	12	
Information about access to the technologies required in the course was clear to me.	42	35	15	8	
The instructor used technology tools such as Dropbox, Wikis, Chat, Live Classroom, Google Docs, and Twitter that go beyond MS Office (Word, PowerPoint, etc.).	35	35	19	8	4

As shown in Table 7, at minimum 70% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the statements. This indicates that the majority of students perceived that the technology tools implemented in the course helped with the learning process, encouraged interaction with both the course and other participants, and were accessible and varied.

Although the majority of students agreed with the statements, the comments from the students were based on the ineffectiveness of the online synchronous sessions within the BBLearn system. One student commented, “Bb Collaborate is in significant need of an upgrade. Program oftentimes froze and was frustrating when attempting to collaborate.” Another student commented, “Many of the online interactive online sessions did not work properly.” Additional comments centered upon the instructor’s engagement with course instructional tools. One student stated. “Some instructors have used additional technologies (e.g., Adobe Connect) more than others. Some instructors have simply followed the established course design and nothing more. Others have provided many supplemental technologies and materials.” Emerging from both sets of comments is the level of instructor engagement with the course instructional tools. Although interactive sessions did not perform properly at times, instructors were utilizing the software to engage students on their own accord. Additionally, the latter comment highlighted instructors usurping faulty software to implement additional technologies (e.g. Adobe Connect) in order to engage the class.

The instructor survey results indicated 100% agreement with the statements held in the Technology for Teaching and Learning section of the QOLT section. This indicates that all the instructors agreed that the tools provided supported learning objectives (43% strongly agree, 57% agree), encouraged students to interact with one another (71% strongly agree, 29% agree), encouraged students to interact with the course content (86% strongly agree, 14% agree), information and access to tools was clearly provided (57% strongly agree, 43% agree), acceptable formats for assignment completion were clear (71% strongly agree, 29% agree) and that as instructors they

took advantage to the tools within BBLearn (43% strongly agree, 43% agree, 14% neutral). One instructor commented about the course being constructed prior to their teaching experience. The instructor stated, “Please keep in mind that the courses are developed by other individuals so many of the items in which I have selected neutral are not within my control since I am teaching courses which I have been given a copy of a shell and some of the areas discussed would require a collaborative faculty decision on how to approach the development of the content within the course.” This perception between a faculty member taking ownership of a course and being a faculty participant in a course is further explored within the qualitative section.

The “Learning Support and Resources” section of the QOLT survey, crafted statements around the level of clarity on how to navigate of the technical, academic, and student support services. Students reported their level of agreement with the variables. Table 8 shows students’ level of satisfaction with the three statements of the “Learning Support and Resources” section.

Table 8
Student Perception Frequency of Learner Support and Resources

Statement	Strongly Agree		Neutral	Strongly Disagree	
	%	%		%	%
The instructions and/or information for how to get technical support were clear to me.	31	50	12	4	4
The instructions and/or information for how to get academic support (such as the library, writing center, etc.) were clear to me.	35	46	8	8	4

The instructions and/or information for how to get student support (services and resources such as registration, career center, financial aid, etc.) were clear to me.	23	35	27	8	8
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As shown in Table 8 at minimum 58% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the statements. The highest level of agreement (35% strongly agree and 46% agree) came from the statement “the instructions and/or information for how to get academic support (such as the library, writing center, org.) were clear to me.” Interestingly, one of the only comments from this section pertained to academic support. The student stated, “We should have an online demo with the library to review resources available.” Although the one comment suggested improvement, the section indicated that the support systems are made available to students and therefore do not impede on their learning process.

In comparison, the instructor responses similarly strongly agreed or agreed to all of the statements. The instructors supported the statements that the technical support (43% strongly agree, 57% agree), academic support (57% strongly agree, 43% agree) and student support systems (33% strongly agree, 50% agree, 12% neutral) are articulated to the students and can aid in their success in the course.

The “Instructional Materials and Resources” section of the QOLT survey, crafted statements around the instructional materials (research journal readings, presentations, etc.) implemented in the course and their effectiveness in the learning

process. Students reported their level of agreement with the variables. Table 9 shows students' level of satisfaction with the five statements of the "Instructional Materials and Resources" section.

Table 9
Student Perception Frequency of Instructional Materials and Resources

Statement	Strongly			
	Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
	%	%	%	%
The instructor gave me adequate time and notice to acquire course materials.	46	39	12	4
It was clear to me which textbooks and materials were required and which was recommended.	50	31	8	12
I understood how all the materials were related to helping me achieve the learning goals.	23	54	12	12
The instructor provided materials that included more than text and that came from multiple authors/scholars.	58	35	4	4
The sources of all resources and materials used in the course were clear to me.	46	42	8	4

As shown in Table 9, at minimum 70% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the statements. This implies that students perceived that instructors gave them adequate time to acquire course materials and textbooks, students understood

how the course materials achieved the learning goals, they were provided more than text materials to learn from and the material sources were clear to the students.

The comments from the students were based upon obtaining course texts in time. One student commented, “Sometimes the information was not as clear. The textbooks were unclear and/or the videos we had to watch.” This last statement connects to the QOLT survey results as the highest level of disagreement (12% disagree) was found in the statement, “I understood how all the materials were related to helping me achieve the learning goals.” However, ultimately more students perceived that they were adequately prepared for the course.

The instructor survey results indicated almost 100% agreement with the statements held in the Instructional Materials and Resources section of the QOLT section. The instructors supported the statements that they provided students with adequate time to obtain course materials (86% strongly agree, 14% agree) and the syllabus outlines what is required versus recommended (86% strongly agree, 14% agree). Additionally, instructors supported the statement that the purpose of all materials is related to learning objectives (43% strongly agree, 57% agree) and that they offer a variety of instructional materials (43% strongly agree, 57% agree) that is properly cited (43% strongly agree, 43% agree, 14% neutral). One instructor disagreed with the following statement, “When possible, instructor provides options for how students acquire course materials.” However, the instructor’s rationale with disagreeing with the statement was not commented upon and was supported by the majority of his or her peers (29% strongly agree, 43% agree, 14% neutral).

Engagement Theory Donate Stream The “donate” stream in Engagement Theory emphasizes the importance of creating authentic learning experiences for students. Engagement theory hypothesizes that authenticating the learning experience by creating relatable assessments for students creates a more engaged learning environment. Through the literature review, the students reported a positive learning experience when their program incorporated real-world learning activities (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem and Stevens, 2012).

Two sections in the QOLT survey were graphed to the “donate” stream; “Assessment and Student Learning” and “Course Summary.”

The “Assessment of Student Learning” section of the QOLT survey, formed statements around the weeks learning activities and feedback garnered. Students reported their level of agreement with all variables. Table 10 shows students’ level of satisfaction with the six statements of the “Assessment of Student Learning” section.

Table 10
Student Perception Frequency of Assessment of Student Learning

Statement	Strongly		Neutral	No	
	Agree	Agree		Disagree	Answer
	%	%		%	%
What I was supposed to accomplish each week and by the end of the course was clear to me.	46	42	4	4	4
How assignments were graded and points were distributed was clear to me.	35	50	8	8	
How the learning activities helped me achieve the learning goals each week made	31	58	8	4	

sense to me.					
The different types of assignments (papers, exams, projects) were related to each other and helped me learn the topics.	31	62	8		
I had multiple opportunities to receive feedback from the instructor and self-check my progress in the course.	23	39	23	12	4
I had multiple opportunities to provide feedback to the instructor about my learning progress.	15	46	23	12	4

As shown in Table 10, at minimum 60% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the statements. The students understood what to do each week (46% strongly agree, 42% agree), how assignments were graded (35% strongly agree, 50% agree) and how their learning activities met learning goals (31% strongly agree and 58% agree). Additionally, the students agreed with the statement regarding how the different learning activities related with one another (31% strongly agree, 62% agree).

Students supported the statements that they had opportunities to receive feedback from the instructor (23% strongly agree, 39% agree) and they were given opportunities to provide feedback (15% strongly agree, 46% agree). However, the two statements related to feedback received the highest level of disagreement (12% disagree each). The comments from the students were again centered upon an inconsistency in instructor feedback. One student commented, “Much of this is

dependent upon the instructor. In most cases I would agree with these statements but there have been some professors who give either no feedback or feedback that is not timely enough to make adjustments on following assignments. Also, some professors simply didn't respond to emails in a timely way” Another student commented, “Regarding feedback exchange--with one instructor, I had ample time and great discussions. With the other, professional dialogue turned into a monologue most times. He did not seem to provide feedback to engender my professional growth.” Although both comments reflect students not obtaining or receiving ample feedback, it is important to reiterate that the majority of students felt that they did receive ample time to give and receive feedback.

The instructor survey results indicated a majority agreement with the statements held in the Assessment of Student Learning section of the QOLT section. Instructors supported the statement that the learning objectives were measurable (57% strongly agree, 14% agree, 29% neutral), the grading policies were clearly stated to students (71% strongly agree, 29% agree), the learning activities promoted the achievement of learning objectives (71% strongly agree, 29% agree), the assessment instruments vary and are appropriate for the student work being assessed (43% strongly agree, 43% agree, 14% neutral), students receive multiple instances of feedback (29% strongly agree, 71% agree) and the instructor solicits feedback (57% strongly agree, 43% agree). This indicates that all the instructors agreed with the assessment strategies in enhancing the learning experience. One instructor stated, “The instructor should always encourage students to ask questions ... To me that allows for the differences in learning styles of each student to emerge. In a blended

environment the ability to interact between the instructor and student is the most important in developing understanding of how students are assessed.”

The “Course Summary” section of the QOLT survey, formed statements around the reflection activities at the end of the term. Students reported their level of agreement with all statements. Table 11 shows students’ level of satisfaction with the three statements of the “Course Summary” section.

Table 11
Student Perception Frequency of Course Summary

Statement	Strongly Agree		Neutral	Strongly Disagree	
	%	%		%	%
During the last week or on the last day of class, I was given an opportunity to ask questions as a way to gain closure and insight into my course accomplishments.	39	31	15	12	4
During the last week or on the last day of class, I was given an opportunity to get feedback about my overall course experience.	39	27	19	12	4
I was given an opportunity to reflect on my overall learning experience in the course.	42	35	12	8	4

As shown in Table 11, at minimum 60% of students strongly agreed or agreed with all of the statements. Students supported the statements that they were given an

opportunity to ask questions (39% strongly agree, 31% agree), to get feedback (39% strongly agree, 7% agree), and reflect (42% strongly agree, 35% agree) during their final weeks of class. Students did not comment directly in this section.

The instructor survey results indicated agreement with the statements held in the Course Summary section of the QOLT section. Instructors supported the statements that they provided students with opportunities to ask questions (43% strongly agree, 57% agree), obtain feedback (57% strongly agree, 43% agree), and reflect (71% strongly agree, 29% agree) during the final weeks of class. This indicates that all the instructors agreed with the importance of providing communicative experiences during the end of a course.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data was gathered from the student reflective journals, interviews, and an instructor interview. All of the qualitative data for this case study was uploaded into the NVivo software system. The software system assists with the coding and tracking of qualitative data. The themes that emerged from the qualitative data were associated with the line of inquiry within the qualitative research questions. The qualitative questions for the study were as follows:

1. How do graduate students describe or perceive the role of the instructor in the online community?
 - a. What components of an online learning hybrid course environment do graduate students recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?

2. How do instructors describe or perceive the role of graduate students in the online community?
 - a. What components of online learning hybrid course environment do instructors recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?

The questions focused on the student and instructor roles and perceptions of those roles within the hybrid-learning environment. The themes that emerged included the role of the instructors and students within hybrid learning environments, the positive and negative effects of the relationships forged in hybrid learning environments and their effects on learning, and the instructional tools that enhanced or detracted from the environment. In addition to the NVivo software process, a Creswell (2007) graphical representation of the case study coding was created for the analysis of the findings as the software proved inconsistent. After the data was segmented, a chart was created of overlapping references that created patterns from the transcripts. After the patterns were extracted, reflective notes were added to the chart. Based on this list of patterns and notes a graphical representation of the emerging themes was created. The following section details the qualitative themes that emerged in regards to the role of the instructor, role of the student, and hybrid learning community.

Role of the Instructor. The perceived role of the instructor within the course was crafted through the perceptions of the students' and the instructors' feedback. Emerging from these perceptions was a duality in the role of instructors. Students perceived the instructors primarily as the architect of their learning within the course.

The students consistently discussed an instructor's role as a facilitator of the course and the creator of learning activities and materials to reflect learning outcomes. One reflective journal noted, "I believe that their role is to facilitate learning by demonstrating a personal presence and interest in the discussion board, which they can do through probing questions, thoughtful comments and offering additional comments." The instructor interview reflected a similar stance. The instructor stated, "teachers can model behaviors and writing practices in online classes. I try to be a good model in that way through my working because all of this is written." Therefore, both students and instructors viewed the instructor as setting the tone for discussion boards through modeling discussions. By crafting thoughtful comments and additional information in the discussion boards the students felt that the healthiest of online learning environments could be achieved.

Additionally, the creation of probing discussion board questions encouraged engagement in the boards. One student noted, that one instructor opened a new Discussion Thread to continue themes being discussed in the course long after the week was completed. The instructor took ownership of the course by utilizing course tools to expand the teaching environment. The students also discussed the importance of instructors creating meaningful learning activities. This creation of assignments also transcended to the in-class portion of the hybrid course. One student reflected, "The instructor's role is creating assignments, and providing learning materials that take advantage of digital and on line components. If the instructors approach a hybrid class the same as traditional class, then the likelihood of success feels as though it would be poor." The pedagogical technique of flipping a classroom during executive

weekends to engage the class more in dialogue was noted in a reflection journal as improving executive weekends. Additionally, the creation of icebreakers during the first week of was noted. The instructor perceived his role in creating a hybrid community similarly. The instructor noted, “I feel online hybrid courses the instructors have to be very creative, innovative and hardworking to develop that very thing, a sense of community in the course.” Lastly, an emerging theme of instructors owning the course by being the “culture expert” through the facilitation of discussion and creation of learning activities emerged in the students’ feedback.

The ownership of the course was not reflected in the instructors’ perceptions. The instructors, through survey feedback and an interview, agreed with their label of facilitator but acknowledged their lack of controls within the construction of the content. Once an instructor is assigned to a course they are given access to the course shell, where the course management system, content and learning activities are already crafted. During the interview the instructor noted, “I think that the workload in the course, from the beginning – and it’s interesting – because I felt when I looked at the workload, I was like, ‘Wow, this is a lot of work’.” The instructor noted, receiving the course ‘as-is’ and not owning the content or assessments but reviewing the amount of work as another participant. Moreover, the instructor went on to state, “[the course] needed to be basically updated a little bit. So we had major texts, including one that was really kind of a bear to get through. And I think it was worsened by the fact that it was a little bit older.” The juxtaposition of an instructor as an owner or participant in the course is grounded within the instructor and student perceptions of the facilitation, course management and learning activities within a

course. These three components compose the engagement of participants with the course content.

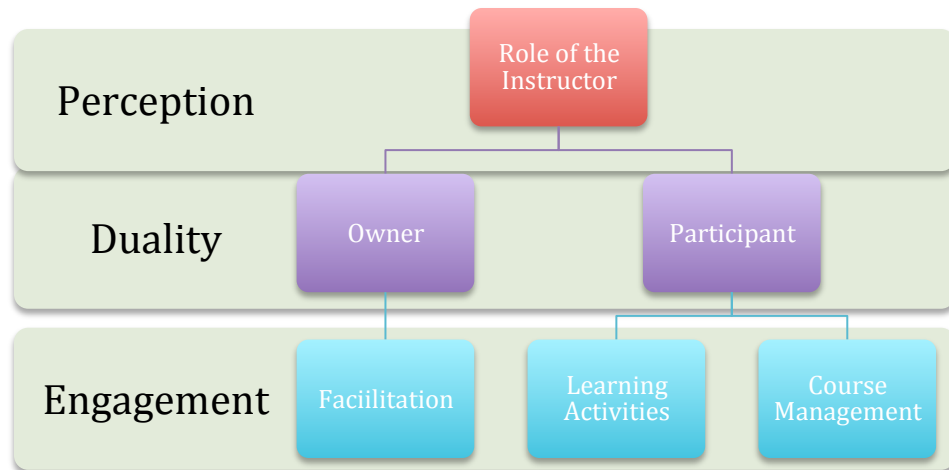


Figure 4: How the role of the instructor is perceived.

Role of the Student. The role of the student within the hybrid-learning environment was conceived through an instructor interview, instructor survey comments and student comments. The role of the student as a participant was repeatedly discussed. However, this notion was further deepened as a necessary need to generate a fruitful hybrid-learning environment. One instructor noted, “[students] have to show a kind of volition, so that they engage in the work early, not only in the term but each week...” The students’ will to engage in their learning is their ultimate role. In this volition of engagement, they are active learners, discussants and learners. This role was reflected in the students’ comments about their responsibility to “open up threads of conversation” and bringing in topics from their lens of focus that are not being discussed. The instructor interview noted, “So we have these things set up so

they could have ongoing conversations so we didn't have to end during the week and they accepted that invitation rather vigorously, they were very supportive of each other." Additionally, students expressed a need to step out of their comfort zone and challenge themselves and the class. The hybrid model was trumpeted with allowing for more open online conversations due of their in class meetings.

Building an Engaged Hybrid Community. The students' reflective journals were the primary tool in the analysis of the building of an engaged hybrid community (Figure 5). The student responses about their cohort of peers outlined the positive and negative effects of not building a community within this hybrid-learning cohort. The students who spoke less positively about their associates used terms like cordial, collegial in their descriptions. They discussed their frustrations with these colleagues in not contributing substance to class discussions, taking up in-class time with inept questions and how they impede on their learning. The negative perceptions of their colleagues were perceived as barriers to their learning. One student discussed how the lack of building relationships within the cohort effected how she participated in discussion boards. She noted that she would often just give positive uplifting responses to meet the discussion requirement. She commented, "Who wants to be a virtual schmuck?" This is in contrast to the defined role of the student above. The students noted that the relationship might have been better achieved had icebreakers in the beginning been conducted or if more peer-to-peer interaction was done during executive weekends.

Students who described their relationships in a positive light spoke of their colleagues as support systems both in and out of class. The shared experiences of the

hybrid cohort model allowed them to relate and empathies with one another's struggles. The students conjectured that the positive relationships enhanced their learning as the shared in-class experiences transcended into more fluid discussions online. One student noted, "the overall positive relationship allow us to be honest and open in our discussion online, by text and in class." Unlike the students who had negative cohort experiences, they described being put into group activities during executive weekends helped them familiarize themselves with their peers as they worked towards a common goal. The hybrid element allowed relationships to form with a higher accountability because of the face-to-face component.

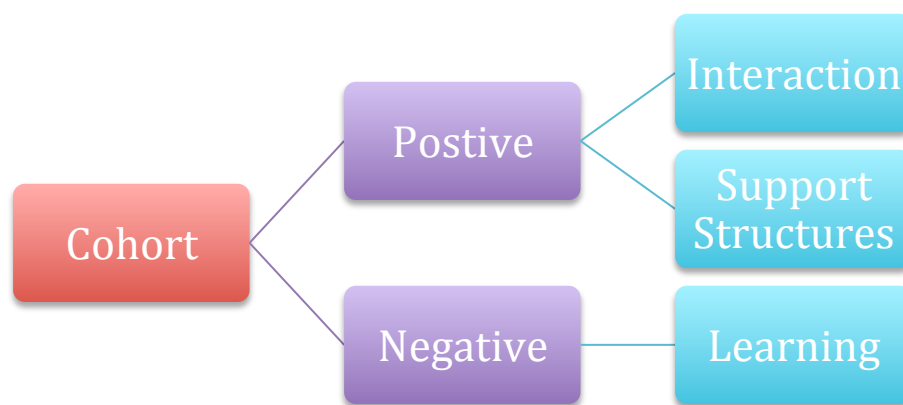


Figure 5: Building Community Engagement

Additional Findings

Student feedback also persistently discussed the limitations of some instructional tools. BBConnect was highlighted repeatedly about being a dated and non-user friendly system. The need to use some of the features in BBLearn, such as the blog, was not readily apparent to one student. Another commented that it felt that the use of certain technologies was implemented that did not feel necessary to the

course-learning environment. Hypothetically, these comments may be in line with their notations on course instructors creating newer learning activities because of their experiences with the in place shell activities.

Moreover, students discussed the flexibility of instructors in allowing students to use technologies in Google. One instructor noted that group pages in the course management system were left untouched as students used Google drive and hangout to conduct their activities with one another. The instructor noted, “The opportunity to talk about each other’s writing, their ideas for major projects, their collaboration for the team project in the course did not take place on blackboard for any of the four teams. They all chose other ways to do that. Some of them used Google Drive and some of the tools within that.” When given the option students did not choose to use BBLearn to facilitate their group learning activities. However, advantageous these other software systems are in creating interactions amongst students, they are an additional software system to learn and navigate. A concern of one student was the in-class time spent on learning these systems. The student noted, “[his classmates] waste a lot of time during our face to face class time asking technology questions...this time takes away from our ability to discuss content.” Therefore, the student felt that the technology hindered the in-class time that could be spent on content.

Summary

This chapter reviewed both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the research study. The quantitative findings were divided within the section by the three streams of the engagement theory; relate, create, and donate. Overall, the students and

instructors perceived the online instructional tools, student-to-student interactions, student-to-instructor interactions, and other learning components that made up the Quality Online Learning and Teaching Assessment to be present within their hybrid course. Many of these components were shown as contributing to the quality of their learning experience based on the student and instructor comments within the survey.

The qualitative findings incorporated data from the student and instructor interviews as well as the student reflective journals. The findings were coded in order to measure the perceptions of students and instructors roles within a hybrid course. The role of the instructor showed a perceived duality in that the students and instructors both perceived the instructors as the architect of the learning experience; however the instructors also perceived themselves as being participants within a third-party designed course. The role of the student was perceived as an active participant.

Lastly, the qualitative findings also reflected the importance of building a positive community from the beginning of the course. The students that spoke positively of their cohort reported that they felt they had a stronger online interaction and support system within their classes.

Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this explanatory case study was to gather graduate student and instructor perceptions of the factors that produce a high quality hybrid-learning environment within a private, northeastern university. High quality engagement was defined within the context of Engagement Theory. Moreover, from the observations a framework for high quality student engagement within a hybrid-learning setting was generated.

The research was designed to answer questions focused on instructor and student perceptions of online community engagement quality factors within hybrid courses. The central questions were followed by sub questions that correlate to the factors proven to measure quality in fully online courses.

Central Question: How do graduate students and instructors perceive the importance of online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction and in-class meetings in building an engaged hybrid community?

Sub-questions (Quantitative)

1. How do graduate students perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and in-class meetings in building online community engagement within selected hybrid courses?
2. How do instructors perceive online instructional tools, student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and in-class meetings in building online community engagement within selected hybrid courses?

3. How do the perceptions between graduate students' and instructors' compare?

Sub-questions (Qualitative)

1. How do graduate students describe or perceive the role of the instructor in the online community?
 - a. What components of an online learning hybrid course environment do graduate students recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?
2. How do instructors describe or perceive the role of graduate students in the online community?
 - a. What components of online learning hybrid course environment do instructors recognize as helpful and/or challenging in facilitating high quality online student-instructor interaction in the learning process?

The literature review in chapter two reinforced the emerging set of best practices within fully online learning environments while highlighting the gap in knowledge within the hybrid-learning environment. Palloff & Pratt's (2007) eight elements of community (people, shared purpose, guidelines, technology, collaborative learning, social presence and reflective practices) were interconnected to the framework of engagement theory to define quality engagement practices. Although a large amount of research had been conducted within fully online learning environments, a gap in the literature emerged when researching these engagement perceptions within hybrid learning environments. This study sought to answer if

students and instructors perceived the set of best practices for fully online learning as valuable and present within the hybrid-learning environment at a private northeastern university.

The single case study implemented a mixed methods approach that included survey collection, student and instructor interviews and student journal reflections. The student participants were doctoral students at a private northeastern university enrolled in a hybrid program. The instructor participants were hybrid-learning instructors at the same private northeastern university.

The analysis of the findings in chapter four reviewed both the quantitative data organized by the Engagement Theory streams and the qualitative data structured on the research questions. The following chapter will cover the interpretations of the findings and the results from those findings, a recommended actionable solution and a final summary.

Interpretation of Findings, Results and Conclusions

The interpretations of the findings are separated by the quantitative and qualitative findings. The results and conclusion section will then combine both quantitative and qualitative interpretations.

Interpretation and Results of Quantitative Findings. The quantitative data was collected through the Quality of Online Learning and Teaching (QOLT) survey. The survey was broken down into eight subsections. The survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement to various statements within each subsection. Through the literature review the subsections and subsequent statements were tied to sets of best practices for online learning and teaching.

As the literature review indicated, an online student's academic success correlated to their participation in the course (Morris, Finnegan, and Sz-Shyan 2005; Davies and Graff, 2005). Therefore, the more students interacted with one another, the instructor and the course content, the more successful they were in the course. Thus, creating an interactive engaged learning environment for fully online courses is important for academic success. The QOLT survey measured the students' interaction with one another, the course content and their instructor. It was shown that 70% of the hybrid students surveyed strongly agreed and agreed with the statements about the student interactions and the community building within the online setting. More specifically, the students positively perceived the statements regarding the "getting to know you" introductions, the navigation and resources of the online classroom, the role of the instructor, their ability to participate in class and through the learning activities. All the instructors surveyed also agreed with these practices. Therefore, these effective online practices are shown to have a measured importance within hybrid settings.

Additionally, 80% of the students confirmed that the instructor's activity within the online portion of the course encouraged their interaction. Moreover, the instructors reaffirmed through their survey responses that they concurred with the practices of creating an interactive online learning environment through the learning activities and their pedagogy practices. Thus, the inherent importance of creating a participatory environment within fully online environments was perceived to be of importance in the hybrid learning environments as well.

Through the student comments, the notion of the instructor driving the interactions within the course emerged. As one student commented, “[the class] had a dynamic professor for this course! [He] made the class interesting, thought-provoking, and created a sense of hope and confidence in the transformation of education using various technologies to facilitate effective learning.” Fully online students perceive instructors as the drivers of online discussions and view instructor modeling as a key component to online engagement (Shackelford and Maxwell, 2012; Veseley, Bloom and Sherlock, 2007). The perception of the instructor as the driver of engagement therefore prevails within the hybrid setting.

Instructor feedback and facilitation of discussions contribute to a student’s sense of community (Desai, Hart, Richards, 2008; Betts, 2009). Therefore, creating an online environment that allows students to help contribute to a purposeful learning environment proliferates their own engagement within the course. Thus, it is imperative to craft an environment where students can create such a classroom atmosphere through an understanding of their course layout, the technology implement, the learning support systems and their instructional materials. The QOLT survey found that 85% of the hybrid students understood the purpose of the course, course components (schedule, syllabi, etc.), instructor contact information, policies and rules for the class. Additionally, all the instructors felt that they created the environment that the above listed materials were clearly outlined. Moreover, 70% of the hybrid students perceived that the technology tools implemented in the course helped with the learning process, encouraged interaction with both the course and other participants, and were accessible and varied. Furthermore, all the instructors

strongly agreed or agreed that the tools provided supported the students learning. Hybrid students also agreed that the support systems (technical, academic, student) were clearly outlined and accessible, as did the instructors. Lastly, 70% of hybrid students and 100% of the instructors perceived that the instructors gave them adequate time to acquire course materials and textbooks, understood how the course materials achieved the learning goals, were provided more than text materials to learn from and the material sources were clear to them. Thus, the online portion of the hybrid-learning environment maintained the same principles to create an engaged learning environment as a fully online environment follows.

Within creating an engaged learning environment, the theme of an instructor's lack of ownership within a course emerged. This theme was fully developed through the qualitative session but appeared through the comments within the QOLT survey. It was within this section that an instructor stated, "please keep in mind that the courses are developed by other individuals so many of the items in which I have selected neutral are not within my control since I am teaching courses which I have been given a copy of a shell." This was paralleled by the student's comment that reflected their knowledge of an instructor's lack of ownership within a course. The student stated, "[the] instructor new to his courses had limited access to prior example papers and was reluctant to answer questions on specifics because he did not feel that he had a grasp of what the assignment that he inherited, for lack of a better word, really asked." Both comments reflect the instructor's role of a participant and not an owner within the course and a disassociation with creating the engaged course environment.

Authentic learning experiences and course reflection exercises enriched and increased satisfaction in the fully online learning environment (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Song et. al, 2004; Vonderwell, 2003). Therefore, creating authentic learning experiences through assessments and reflection creates a quality engaged learning environment. The hybrid students were asked to measure their perceptions of the assessment structure within the online portion of their hybrid course. Eighty percent of the hybrid students agreed that they understood the structures of the assessments (what to do, when to do it, how it was graded and why they were doing it) but only sixty percent agreed that they had opportunities to receive feedback from the instructor and they were given opportunities to provide feedback. The decreased support prevailed through the reflection portion of the QOLT survey, where students supported to a lesser fervent percentage the reflection statements. The instructors who strongly supported both sets of assessment statements and reflection statements in agreement did not mirror this decrease.

Instructors perceive students as the drivers of online discussion (Vesely, Bloom and Sherlock, 2007). This perception may contribute to the imbalance of responses between students and instructors regarding feedback and contribution. Students within this section associated instructor engagement and feedback with the quality of their instruction and subsequent course. This is supported by students comments such as “timeliness and quality of instructor feedback has varied widely” and “the majority of the profs have been outstanding, but one or two lacked attention to detail and communication skills.” However, it is important to note, that none of the participants defined what timely quality feedback was within the online portion of a

hybrid setting. However, given that this is emerging as a student gauge for quality instructors, a mutual understanding of the definition should be conceived.

Interpretation and Results of Qualitative Findings. The interpretation and results of the qualitative findings stem from the instructor interview and student reflective journals and interviews. The qualitative data was coded and then put into themes as patterns emerged. Findings were constructed to measure how instructors and students perceived one another's role in the hybrid-learning environment as well as the construction of an engaged hybrid learning community.

The role of the instructor took a dual role within in the constructs of a hybrid-learning environment. The instructor owned the course, in terms of their facilitation of the course. This means that the instructor had control of their participation within the discussion boards, instruction during executive weekends and the feedback. They controlled the habits in which they brought forth these activities. In juxtaposition, the instructor inherited a participant role in the context of the course management and learning activities within the hybrid-learning environment. The instructors inherited the assignments, the course materials and the online discussion board prompts each week for the course. The duality of owner and participant defines the instructor within the hybrid learning setting within this case study.

The role of the student was defined as a participant. However, their participation was further analyzed within the context of the instructor interview and student reflections. The instructor interview perceived that the role of the student not only had to be a willing participant in the course, but had to act in a sense as volition of engagement, thereby becoming active learners, discussants and learners by opening

up discussions based on their lens of focus. Students had to be willing to engage early and often to further the conversation and push the conversation forward. The student reflections indicated that their participation within the discussion board was left till the deadlines although they acknowledged the benefit of posting earlier.

The qualitative assessment of the student and instructor perceptions of building a hybrid learning community revealed the importance of constructing a group dynamic. The students that perceive positive group dynamics created support systems amongst one another were more forthright and engaged within online discussions and conjectured that the relationships positively affected their learning experiences. The students commented that their positive group dynamics were built through group collaborations during executive weekends and through online projects. In contrast, the students who negatively viewed their peers within their cohort discussed their frustrations with colleagues perceived as not contributing substance to class discussions, taking up in-class time with inept questions, and otherwise functioning as barriers to learning. When students perceived their colleagues in a more negative light they were more likely to not engage with them fully online. The students noted that the negative relationships might have been more positive had more icebreakers in the beginning been conducted or if more peer-to-peer interaction was done during executive weekends. Therefore, the importance of building a community through introductory exercises becomes paramount as these groups potentially affect a student's perceived learning within the hybrid-learning environment.

Conclusions

This study was conceived to develop a conceptual framework for a high quality student engagement in hybrid-learning communities based on both the quantitative and qualitative findings. The conclusions for this study both converged and extended the sets of best practices within fully online learning environments. Therefore the conceptual framework builds upon the three streams of the engagement theory (create, relate, donate) that was shown to create effective hybrid-learning practices within the quantitative findings. Within each stream, are additional attributes derived from the qualitative data that could strengthen the quality student engagement in hybrid learning communities. Figure 6 is a graphical representation of the high quality student engaged in hybrid learning community's conceptual framework.

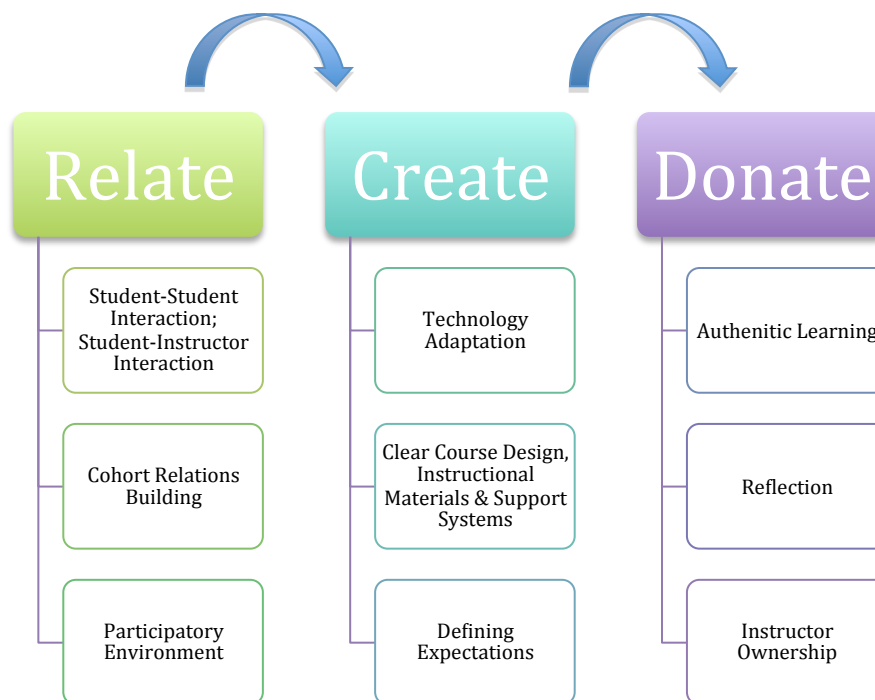


Figure 6: Conceptual Framework for High Quality Student Engagement in Hybrid Learning Communities

The “relate” stream’s quantitative assessment revealed that students agreed that their interactions with one another, the course content and the instruction added to their online learning experience. Additionally, the instructors believed these types of interactions and facilitations were pertinent to their class. Through the qualitative assessment, the importance of cohort relationship building within the first executive weekend and then throughout the first term through group projects was critical and creating a positive cohort. When these positive cohorts were perceived, students felt their interactions both online and in-class were healthier and their peers were an additional needed support system. Lastly, establishing a participatory environment that creates a discussion where students post early and often creates a high quality student engaged hybrid-learning community.

The “create” stream’s quantitative assessment revealed that students agreed that technology implemented created an interactive online learning environment, and the instructional materials, course design and support systems created a clear supportive online learning environment. Moreover, the instructors agreed that these were pertinent components to the success of the online course. Through the qualitative assessment, the importance of defining roles and expectations emerged to offset uncertainty about the instructor’s role within the course. The students’ comments tied professor feedback, both in the quality of the feedback and their interactions with the class online and during executive weekends, to their quality as

an instructor. Therefore, to define the instructor's role within the course will define the students' expectations for the course.

The "donate" stream's quantitative assessment showed that students agreed that the course assessments and overall experience interplayed with "real world" experiences and that the students were given a chance to reflect on their experience in the class. The instructors also felt that these practices were pertinent components to the success of the online course. However, within this tier the theme of an instructor as a participant as opposed to an owner emerged. The authentic learning assessments for the course and the discussion board prompts for the online class are inherited through the course shell. Therefore, within the conceptual framework "instructor ownership" becomes a component of the donate section. By giving instructors ownership of the authentic learning assessments, the instructors are engaging with the materials and their students to create assessments that interplay with the specific student's "real world" experiences. By giving instructor's ownership to write the discussion board prompts, the instructor is using their expertise to formulate the questions that they can engage with in the online forums.

The quantitative assessment exposed contention with one of the survey components. Instructors, within the comments section of the QOLT survey debated the merits of providing sample work to students. This discussion reflected that not all the quality online learning and teaching components were considered best practices within courses. Therefore, this component was left out of the conceptual framework. By contrast, the qualitative reflections highlighted the importance of the face-to-face interactions become paramount to building community throughout the entire course

within hybrid learning environments. As the study showed, the perceptions of in-class experiences students had with their cohorts bled into their learning experience, interactions and perceptions.

By incorporating the proven pillars of the engagement theory with the threads pulled from the interviews and reflective journals a conceptual framework for high quality student engagement in hybrid-learning communities emerged. Through these practices a clearer, more interactive hybrid course that authenticates the learner experience for the students within the course and engages the instructor's knowledge of the topic can be formed.

Recommendations

The recommendations moving forward are incorporated into the conceptual framework for high quality student engagement in hybrid-learning communities. The following are the recommendations based on the study's findings. These recommendations would contribute and strengthen the recommended framework laid out in Figure 6 above and would likely lead to a high quality course.

1. Create interactive activities in the initial face-to-face meetings to augment online interactions within the course. For example, instructors can incorporate orientation icebreakers or group activities for classes in their initial face-to-face class meetings. Additionally, adding group assignments throughout the term will enhance continual interactions amongst classmates.
2. Construct award systems into the course that reward students for leading or building upon online discussions. For example, students' discussion board grades could be based on posting before the deadlines frequently and with

quality comments. This could encourage students to post early and often and create a participatory learning environment.

3. Define the course instructor's expectations for their participation within the syllabi. Allow the instructor to set the conditions for their expectations such as their feedback schedule, teaching philosophy, learning philosophies, and communication structures within their syllabi. .
4. Allow instructors to have ownership of their course. Ownership may look different in different contexts. For example, instructors could write their own discussion board prompts to reflect their expertise when the course incorporates a discussion board. Alternatively, the instructor may be allowed to supersede assignments to reflect the class interests if they are provided a pre-constructed course shell. This could allow the instructor to take ownership of the online course conversations and tailor it to their knowledge base as well as create authentic learning assignments for the students within the course.

Further research is needed to determine if these adjustments and recommendations would further enhance the hybrid-learning environment. However, based on this study's conclusions, these practices will further create an engaging hybrid-learning community.

Additional research should be conducted on the intrinsic value of providing sample work to students within a course. This practice was debated amongst the faculty participants and sought by the student participants; however the value of such

a practice was not measured. Therefore, measuring the effects of providing sample work to students should be reviewed.

Lastly, additional research should be conducted on how students and instructors define quality instructor feedback. Within this study, students inferred that the quality of their instructor was based, at least partially, on the feedback (both in timeliness and quality) that they received throughout the term. Therefore, measuring student and instructor perceptions of what defines timely, quality feedback should be reviewed.

Summary

The findings for this study showed that many of the “best practices” within fully online learning environments transfer into hybrid-learning environments. However, important distinctions within the “role of the instructor” and the effects of both positive and negative hybrid learning communities emerged. To fully develop a conceptual framework for high quality student engagement within hybrid-learning communities, these distinctions were added to engagement theory practices. Therefore, through both the qualitative and quantitative findings a conceptual framework for high quality student engagement in hybrid-learning communities was created. Based on this conceptual framework certain recommendations were made to create a more engaged hybrid-learning environment.

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Appendix A Instructor Interview Questions

The following interview questions are designed to measure an instructor's perception of the community, instructional tools and overall quality of the online component to their hybrid courses.

- Can you describe your course experience this quarter in terms of student interaction with you and their classmates?
- What are some of the pedagogical tools and methods you use within the hybrid-learning environment?
- Can you give an example of how students react to these tools and methods?
- What do you think is the role and responsibility of the students in your hybrid course?
- What do you feel is your role within shaping the online community within the course?
- Could you tell me about your experiences within the class that facilitated to and detracted from high quality student engagement?
- How would you improve the quality of the online learning and teaching within a hybrid course?

Appendix B Student Interview Questions

The following interview questions are designed to measure a student's perception of the community, instructional tools and overall quality of the online component to their hybrid courses.

- Can you describe your course experience this quarter in terms of student interaction with the instructor and your classmates?
- What are some of the course tools and methods that were used within the hybrid-learning environment?
- Can you give an example of how you reacted to these tools and methods?
- What do you think is the role and responsibility of the instructor in your hybrid course?
- What do you feel is your role with as a student in shaping the online community within the course?
- Could you tell me about your experiences within the class that facilitated to and detracted from your engagement within the course?
- How would you improve the quality of the online learning and teaching within a hybrid course?

Appendix C Reflective Journal Prompts

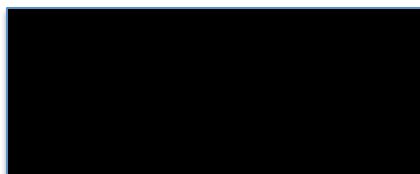
During the end of week five, seven and ten of the term a group of selected students will write reflective journals based on the following prompts.

Week 5: How would you describe the relationships with other students within your course? How do you think these relationships affect your learning within the course? How do you feel that relationships are created and maintained in the online setting?

Week 7: Which online tools do you utilize to interact most effectively online? What are the components of that tool that make it most effective for your use? How would you improve the online tools to improve your online learning experience?

Week 10: How would you describe what it's like to be an online student in a hybrid course? How does the online learning component to a hybrid course utilize the online environment for teaching and learning? How would you assess the quality of the online component in the hybrid learning setting?

Appendix D Site Permission Letter



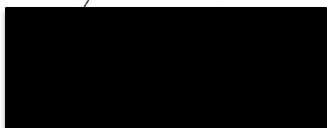
PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

January 7, 2014

Dear Institutional Review Board:

[Redacted] will allow Ms. Samantha MercantiAnthony, [Redacted] on (Ed.D.) Program, to collect data from Ed.D. students and instructors. Specifically, the School of Education will allow Ms. Mercanti-Anthony to conduct a quantitative survey with Ed.D. students and instructors, to conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with Ed.D. students and instructors, and to analyze the reflective journals of Ed.D. students.

Sincerely,



Appendix E
Informational Email to Program Directors

Dear Program Directors,

My name is Samantha Mercanti-Anthony and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program as well as an employee in the School of Education. As you may already know, I recently gained permission from Dean [REDACTED] to conduct my dissertation research within the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program. My Committee Chair is Dr. [REDACTED], and my Committee Members are Dr. [REDACTED] and Dr. [REDACTED]. The purpose of this letter is to share with you the purpose of my study, the methods that will be employed, and how I will protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

My mixed method single case study is titled, “An Intrinsic Exploratory Case Study: Instructors’ and Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Community Engagement Quality Factors within a Selected Hybrid Program at a Private University.” The purpose of the study is to measure the perceptions of graduate students and their instructors on selected elements that create a quality hybrid course. The findings from this study will inform the development of a framework for best practices.

Research methods include:

- Post-course instructor and student surveys utilizing the Quality Online Learning and Teaching (QOLT) survey created by The California State University
- Reflective student journals
- Post-course instructor interviews
- Post-course student interviews

Instructors and students in six Ed.D. courses will be invited to participate in the study:

[REDACTED]

Participation in the study is voluntary and participants may decline to respond to any question or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The surveys will be completely anonymous and will not collect identifiers or identifying information. Additionally, I will be employing a third party to conduct the instructor and student interviews. The audio recordings will be sent to a transcription service; I will only have access to the non-identifiable interview transcripts. Lastly, the name of the institution will not be used in the report. These extra are being employed because of my role within the program and school.

Should you have any further questions about the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Appendix F
Email Invitation to Students for Reflective Journals

Dear Students,

My name is Samantha Mercanti-Anthony and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program as well as an employee in the School of Education. I have permission from [REDACTED] to conduct my dissertation research within the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program. Instructors and students in six Ed.D. courses will be invited to participate in the study. The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in a reflective journal exercise about your experience in your class.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decline to respond to any prompt or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Should you choose to participate, you will be given access to a WordPress site that has been set up so that you will have your own private access through your chosen user name and password. Since this is a non-[REDACTED] site, you can create a non-identifiable username and password. Once logged into the reflective journal site, only you will be able to view and edit your journal. Open-ended questions will be posted in your reflective journal at the end of week's five, seven and ten. Responding to the prompts should take no more than 30 minutes. Your responses will be non-identifiable. Your responses will only be linked to your non-identifiable user name. Additionally, your responses will be confidential. Only me and my supervising professor, Dr. [REDACTED], will have access to your responses. Neither your instructor nor other students will have access to your responses.

At the conclusion of week ten's reflections, students who wish to expand upon their reflections can volunteer to participate in a semi-structured interview. You will receive an invitation to participate through the WordPress site. To protect your privacy and confidentiality, the interview will be conducted by third party interviewer, Mr. [REDACTED]. The audio recording will be sent to a third-party transcription service and I will receive only the non-identifiable transcript.

Obtaining your feedback about your course experience is a vital part of my research. Should you choose to participate please follow the directions below.

1. Access the registration for the WordPress Site using the following link: [link]
2. Input a user name, password, email address and [REDACTED] location (Site 1-4). Complete registration.
3. The site will email you once the first reflective journal questions are posted.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Samantha Mercanti-Anthony
[REDACTED]

Appendix G
Invitation Email to Instructors for Interview

Dear Instructor,

My name is Samantha Mercanti-Anthony and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program as well as an employee in the School of Education. I have permission from [REDACTED] to conduct my dissertation research within the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program. Obtaining your feedback about your instructor experience is a vital part of my research. Therefore, the purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in an interview about your instructor experience.

Instructors and students in six Ed.D. courses will be invited to participate in the study. The interview will take no more than 45 minutes of your time. Given my role as a student in the program and an employee in the school, I will be employing a third party interviewer, Mr. [REDACTED], to conduct the interviews. Mr. Long will be contacting you toward the end of the course to set up a date and time for the interview. Your participation is voluntary and you may decline to respond to any question or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The audio recordings will be sent to a transcription service; I will only have access to the non-identifiable interview transcripts. Lastly, the name of the institution will not be used in the report.

Please note that I will be contacting students about mid-way through your course to participate in a reflective journal exercise, as well as a post-course survey and interview (also to be conducted by Mr. [REDACTED]). Additionally, I will be reaching out to you again during Week 10 of your course to invite you to complete a post-course survey.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Samantha Mercanti-Anthony
[REDACTED]

Appendix H
Invitation Email to Students for Survey

Dear Students,

My name is Samantha Mercanti-Anthony and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program as well as an employee in the School of Education. I have permission from Dean [REDACTED] to conduct my dissertation research within the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program. Instructors and students in six Ed.D. courses will be invited to participate in the study. Obtaining your feedback about your student experience is a vital part of my research. Therefore, the purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in a post-course survey.

The survey is anonymous and will take no more than 20-30 minutes of your time. Your participation is voluntary and you may decline to respond to any question or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The survey will not collect any identifiers or information that will identify you personally. Data will be reported in the aggregate, and the name of the institution will not be used in the report.

To participate in the survey, please click on the below:

[REDACTED]

Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Samantha Mercanti-Anthony

[REDACTED]

Appendix I
Invitation Email to Instructors for Survey

Dear Instructor,

My name is Samantha Mercanti-Anthony and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program as well as an employee in the School of Education. I have permission from [REDACTED] to conduct my dissertation research within the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program. Instructors and students in six Ed.D. courses will be invited to participate in the study. Obtaining your feedback about your instructor experience in your course is a vital part of my research. You may recall my invitation to participate in the study by participating in an interview with third party interviewer, [REDACTED]. **The purpose of this email is to invite you to participate in a post-course survey.** Please note that you may participate in the post-course survey even if you did not participate in the interview.

The survey is anonymous and will take no more than 45 minutes of your time. Your participation is voluntary and you may decline to respond to any question or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The survey will not collect any identifiers or information that will identify you personally. Data will be reported in the aggregate, and the name of the institution will not be used in the report.

Please note that I will be contacting students in your course to participate in a post-course survey and interview (to be conducted by third party interviewer, Mr. Jamel Long).

To participate in the survey, please click on the below:

[link to survey instrument]

Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Samantha Mercanti-Anthony
[REDACTED]

Appendix J
Modified Invitation Email to Instructors for Survey

Dear SoE Faculty,

My name is Samantha Mercanti-Anthony and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program as well as an employee in the School of Education. I have permission from [REDACTED] to conduct my dissertation research within the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program.

The instructor survey is anonymous and will take no more than 10 minutes of your time. Your participation is voluntary and you may decline to respond to any question or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The survey will not collect any identifiers or information that will identify you personally. Data will be reported in the aggregate, and the name of the institution will not be used in the report.

The survey will be open until Monday, April 21st.

[REDACTED]

Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Samantha Mercanti-Anthony
sm853@drexel.edu