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UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO  
Hahn School of Nursing and Health Sciences  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN NURSING

From Presence to “e-Presence” in Online Nursing Education

By

Lisa M. Kaiser, RN, BSN, MSN, PhD(c)

A dissertation presented to the  
FACULTY OF THE HAHN SCHOOL OF NURSING AND HEALTH SCIENCE  
UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN NURSING

May, 2005

Dissertation Committee

Dr. Diane Hatton, Chair

Dr. Linda Robinson

Dr. Jerome Ammer

## From Presence to “e-Presence” in Online Nursing Education

### Abstract

Online web-based course offerings are now common in many institutions of higher education. In response to the current and severe nursing shortage, estimated to represent a 20% vacancy rate by the year 2015, (Tarkin, 2003) many more universities have created online nursing courses for registered nurses wishing to continue their education in nursing. The National League for Nursing (NLN) set research priorities that urged exploration of the impact that technology has on the content and nature of teaching and learning in nursing education (1999).

Using a series of separate synchronous, online focus groups and 1:1 interviews with nurse educator experts and online nursing students, this qualitative study explored the meaning of ‘presence’ in online nursing courses. This study examined how; a) nurse educators conveyed being present to students in online classrooms, b) online students interacted with peers and faculty in the online classroom, and c) and if, nurse educators used strategies with their online students that urged development of ways of being present with patients’ in disembodied environments.

A grounded theory approach was used to develop the *Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses*. Conditions or antecedents are identified. The core category of connecting is highlighted along with four key dimensions of connecting. Consequences include situations that stem from *making the connection* with others or *not making a connection* with others and shed light on both pedagogical concerns and future patient care issues.

Future research implications include implementing other innovative qualitative designs that would add to the theory, such as participant observation in online courses. Studies addressing gender differences and learning styles would add to this growing body of knowledge. Extending the work to examine presence in disembodied places is valuable future work as nurses carry out therapeutic interventions with patients in disembodied environments of care.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to  
Dorothy Dick Mason  
My Aunt, Godmother and Mom!

Without your love and support this would not have been possible.

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The completion of this dissertation hails the end of a satisfying journey that would not be as deeply appreciated without recognizing several individuals that have contributed in many ways during this process.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought many changes that deal with nursing, education, and technology. Online web-based course offerings are now common in many institutions of higher education. Growing numbers of students are pursuing educational opportunities without ever stepping foot on a university campus. In 1999, it was estimated that 700,000 students took online courses and Green (2000) predicted that number to triple by 2002. According to the Web Based Commission (2000), the postsecondary online market was estimated at 1.2 billion dollars and is expected to rise to 7 billion by the year 2003. This approach to higher education transcends some of the traditional barriers formerly related to geographic access and location (Cuellar, 2002). These barriers no longer prevent students from attaining their educational goals.

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2000) reported 63 nursing baccalaureate programs were being offered online. In 1999, the AACN Board of Directors and membership approved a white paper on distance technology in nursing education (AACN, 1999). In this discussion, several forces were identified as having an impact on the changing environment of nursing education. A key component in the white paper questioned the relationship of the high-tech learning environment to the social and

behavioral skills needed in a humanistic focused practice discipline such as nursing. For example, could students learn relational skills in an environment where they were isolated from their classmates and faculty?

Addressing the issue of technology in nursing education, the National League for Nursing (NLN, 1999) set research priorities that included several factors associated with the infusion of technology into nursing education. One stated imperative was to explore the impact of technology on the content and nature of teaching and learning in nursing education. In another report, the Pew Health Professions Commission (1998) outlined twenty-one competencies for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The commission suggested a radical revamp of the content and learning experiences in nursing education, including the use of technology. Specifically, the commission urged the incorporation of educational technology in the teaching and learning practices for health professionals, which in turn would make education more accessible.

Current reports of the growing crisis related to the shortage of nurses were frequently cited in the media. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO, 2002) estimated that there were 126,000 unfilled nursing positions in the American healthcare system. It was feared that these numbers would continue to rise. Quoting the American Hospital Association Reports, Tarkin (2004) shared that 13% of nation wide nursing positions were vacant and that figure was predicted to rise to 20% by the year 2015. The shortage was especially severe in the state of California that ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in the number of nurses per capita (Petrillo, 2003).

In response to the current nursing shortage, many universities have created online

nursing courses for registered nurses wishing to continue their education in nursing (Carnevale, 2000). The opportunities for higher education in nursing have not stopped with baccalaureate education since many masters and doctoral programs in nursing are also offered in web-based formats. The Peterson's Guide to Nursing Programs (2001) described distance learning as those courses that were delivered off site through electronic media such as cable or satellite television, computer conferencing and/or teleconferencing. In their guide they listed 87 graduate nursing programs that offered some form of distance learning. While the various types of programs were not broken down into which type of distance learning they offered, one could surmise that a significant portion of those offered courses via the Internet.

Among members of the higher education community, there was considerable concern over the rapid growth of online courses. A frequently cited issue was the loss of *face-to-face* interaction and instruction (Billings, Conners & Skiba, 2001; Diekelmann, 2000; Lia-Hoagberg, Vellenga, Miller, & Li, 1999). Faculties, as well as students, have become comfortable with the "traditional" classroom environment and being able to *connect with* or *be in* the presence of others.

The volume of computer-mediated communications (CMCs) has been growing at a rapid rate and so presence has become an important topic in the field of technology. Teleoperators believe that it has been critical to design virtual environments that support the believability in, or a sense of presence in these disembodied places (Heeter, 1992; IJsselsteijn, Ridder, Freeman, & Avons, 2001).

Nursing has been known for its personal touch and human contact that included



relationship building. There have been many new challenges for nurse educators in a cyber world. One challenge was to effectively impart ways of being with clients using methods other than the modeled behavior that occurred in face-to-face interactions. According to Easter (2000) learning how to be present was not amenable to classroom settings, but more aptly relayed in face-to-face practice settings. Nurse educators have started preparing nurses that will have professional interactions with clients in various virtual environments of care. An additional challenge for nurse educators will be to design and deliver online courses that support a sense of connectedness or presence with other students and faculty members.

Although this study focused on presence and the pedagogical aspects of nursing education, presence was 'nested' or embedded within the context of nursing practice. Strauss and Corbin (1998) described the conditional/consequential matrix, a coding device, which locates a phenomenon within the full range of conditions. The relationship between education and practice has been interwoven and recognition of this will assist in tracing the web of connectedness.

#### Purpose of the Study/Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to discover the meaning of presence in online nursing courses. For purposes of this study, presence was defined as a mutual sense of connectedness, being with, and/or being available to another within virtual environments.

More specifically, this study explored; (a) how nurse educators conveyed being present to students in online classrooms, (b) how online students interacted with peers and faculty in the online classroom and (c) if and how nurse educators taught their online

students ways of being present with patients in embodied and/or disembodied environments.

### Significance of the Study

This study was significant for three reasons. First, the findings of this study may contribute to the body of knowledge associated with pedagogical strategies in online classrooms. Pedagogy was defined as, “the art, science, or profession of teaching” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2003). Pedagogical practices included those activities that enhanced student learning. Through this knowledge, nurse educators will have the opportunity to examine the findings to determine if the new insights will better support the notion of presence in their online classrooms. Although presence has been a known construct in nursing, recognizing the importance that it has to online courses will lead educators to support interactions and behaviors that lead to satisfied and engaged learners.

The second, albeit a longer-range contribution of this study, will be to provide valuable information associated with providing professional nursing care to patients in virtual environments. Many nurse scholars have agreed that nursing presence is one of the most powerful and important nursing interventions (Carpenito, 2000; Godkin, 2001; McKivergin & Daubenmire, 1994). Presence is listed in the *Nursing Intervention Classification* (NIC) system (McCloskey & Bulechek, 2000). As stated by Sandelowski (2002), “virtual environments are emerging as an ‘empirical-metaphysical testbed(s)’ for timeless philosophical inquiries concerning the nature of being” (p. 62). In other words, we as nurses must re-conceptualize the meanings of embodiment, physicality, and space

(Sandelowski, 2002). The discoveries made in this study may provide a basis for interventions with patients in faceless environments.

Finally, this study utilized an innovative methodological strategy by conducting synchronous, online focus groups to explore the study questions. Nurse scholars are among the growing body of scientists that are exploring the utility and power of the Internet in research. Scholars in the fields of social and behavioral sciences, marketing, communications and nursing have conducted research using the Internet. A variety of methods including ethnographies, interviews, focus groups and surveys via the Internet are becoming more commonplace (Gurak & Silker, 1997; Kaye & Johnson, 1999; Murray, 1995). Through the process of completing this study and sharing the steps involved in conducting research in this manner, the scientific community will be exposed to an additional application available for qualitative inquiries.

#### Method

This study, a qualitative, grounded theory study examined presence in online nursing courses. The method was selected because the goal of this study was to discover concepts derived from the data that would lead to the development of a theory related to the phenomenon of interest. Charon (1998) stated that grounded theory has its roots in symbolic interactionism. Chenitz and Swanson (1986) suggested that grounded theory is useful when examining complex processes between individuals. Interactions between individuals in online courses that may or may not demonstrate *being present* could be considered complex in nature.

Synchronous, online focus groups were the primary means of data collection for

this study. Focus groups allow for interaction among participants and being held online in a disembodied place required that participants were present for each other. Several detailed phases of preparatory work were undertaken prior to conducting the online focus groups. Recruitment and scheduling activities required attention to detail and generated many e-mail communications between the researcher and participants (faculty experts and nursing students) that were associated with coordination and planning. Several challenges and rewards of this approach to data gathering were identified.

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method on an ongoing basis. Coding followed the technique identified by Strauss and Corbin (1998) starting with open coding and advancing to axial and selective coding. Integrative diagrams assisted in delineating the emerging theory.

### Findings

The findings of this study provided the basis for the development of the *Theory of Connecting or Being Present in Online Nursing Courses*. The theory was developed around the core category of connecting or being present in online nursing courses. Several conditions or antecedents to being present or connecting were identified and influenced the phenomenon of interest. Presence or connecting had 4 dimensions that further delineated the theory. Specific consequences to connecting or not connecting with others were identified and shed light not only on pedagogical concerns but on future patient care situations as well.

### Summary

Nursing education is in a unique place and time. Nurse educators are able to reach

many students from geographically disperse and often underserved areas. Examining the meaning of presence in the faceless learning environments offered via the Internet will support nurse educators' efforts in providing courses that promote presence. Since presence has been identified as a key intervention in practice settings, discussions about nursing presence and its direct link to clinical practice is an integral aspect of nursing education. Being able to recognize the role of *presence* in disembodied environments will benefit the practitioner and patient alike. Having clear meaning ascribed to presence in online environments will allow nursing faculty and students to address this important aspect of professional practice in ways previously unavailable. The *Theory of Connecting or Being Present in Online Nursing Courses* provides a framework for educators as they teach in these disembodied places.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of the Related Literature

The following review of the literature begins with the arduous process of exploring definitions or perspectives of the uses of the word *presence* and understanding how the term had been used over time. Attributes of presence will be enumerated followed by a presentation of the philosophical underpinnings of presence. Social meanings ascribed to presence will be highlighted. Presence and its meaning in three interconnected contexts; nursing, education, and technology will be explored.

Online focus groups were used in this qualitative study to explore the meaning of presence in online nursing courses. A cursory review of the literature related to traditional focus groups as a qualitative method will be examined along with a review of the literature on online focus groups.

### Definitions of Presence

“Presence is of Latin and French derivation from the words *praesen* from, *prae* meaning in front and *sens* meaning being” (Doona, Haggerty & Chase, 1997, pg. 6). Biocca (1997) offered the early Greek word of *propospon*, meaning “a face facing another face” (pg.17).

The Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED) (Simpson & Weiner, 1989) provided the many definitions of presence that follows:

1) the fact or condition of being present; the state of being before, in front of, or in the same place with a person or thing; being there; attendance, company, society, association, 2) an instance of being present, 3) in reference to the manner in which Christ is held to be present in the Eucharist, 4) the quality in reproduced sound that gives the listener the impression that the recorded activity is occurring in his presence, 5) the maintenance by a nation of political interests and influence in another country or region, 6) in certain connections, used with a vague sense of the place or space in front of a person, or which immediately surrounds him, 7) in reference to ceremonial attendance upon a person of superior, especially royal rank, 8) hence, a place prepared for ceremonial presence or attendance, a person who is corporally present sometimes referred to as the embodied self, 9) demeanor, carriage, or aspect of a person especially when stately or impressive, nobleness, majesty, or handsomeness of bearing or appearance, something present, a present being, a divine, spiritual, or incorporeal being or influence felt or conceived as present, 10) presence of mind, the state or quality of having one's wits about one or having full control over oneself (Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

#### Historical Uses of Presence

One of the earliest uses of the word was noted in the OED when, in 1340, it was found in the following phrase; “*be folke bat I visited nocht with bodily presens*” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, uses of the word had great reflection in physicality, or the embodied self. Another major focus during that time

dealt with those things comprising a Holy Presence within the framework of a Christian tradition, such as the bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This belief served as a focal point in the Judeo-Christian tradition of Roman Catholicism. In a recent discussion, Fiester (2001) suggested that this type of presence required faith since the Body and Blood of Christ was not physically visible, or present, in the Holy Eucharist.

The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries built upon those uses and began using the word presence with regard to a certain personal demeanor, or carriage in appearance (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). An example might be reflected in a statement such as, “He certainly has an air of presence.”

Being *in presence* was also utilized during this time to denote those who were in attendance at ceremonial functions with persons of a superior rank (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). In many contemporary news briefs it was often stated that certain heads of state were present at or *in presence* for a particular meeting or summit. Presence of mind was also being used during the turn of the century as in, “The Commander ...never wanted Presence of Mind in the most immergent Dangers” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

Between the mid 1700’s and the mid 1900’s history reflected a broadening in the uses of the word presence under the categories previously described. There appeared to have been an advancement of the use of presence in terms of a “present being, a divine, spiritual or incorporeal being or influence felt or conceived as present” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989).

It was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that the use of term took several different directions. Reproduced sounds and the quality of the reproduction were



measured against the degree to which a listener felt that he was present at an actual recording (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). The phrase 'stage presence' was used to refer to those in the performing arts such as a stage actor or operatic performer having that special demeanor mentioned previously.

Uses of the term in the context of the political/military arena came into the English language in the mid 1950's. It is frequently used to describe or denote a country's military activity or location in a certain region (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). An example of this may be, "The White House confirms reports of a strong United States presence in the Gulf."

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century advances in technology resulted in an expanded use of the term, such as web presence, virtual presence, and telepresence. Businesses quickly identified the power of a web presence that made their corporate name, image and product information available for millions to access right along with their competitors in cyberspace. Virtual presence, as described by Witmer and Singer (1998) is experiencing a computer generated environment rather than an actual physical location. Tammelin (1998) expanded on an earlier understanding of telepresence from simply "industrial remote control systems to currently also including references to virtual realities and interaction among geographically separated members of a group" (p. 5).

Citing Brown (1993), an editor of *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Doona et al. (1997) stated that presence had been used in the English language for four centuries. It was interesting to note that over time the initial meanings or uses of the word were not replaced with more meaningful renderings or interpretations. Rather, the use of

the word presence has broadened in its meaning. The term presence had found its way into three interrelated contexts, nursing, education and technology that have relevance to the profession of nursing and deserve investigation.

The attributes of presence noted in the literature included the notion of physicality. Some of those attributes include being with, being there (Dunniece & Slevin, 2000; Fredriksson, 1999, Heeter, 1992), connecting with, connectedness (Golberg, 1998) oneness, staying with, and being available (Dunniece & Slevin, 2000; McKivergin & Daubenmire, 1994) . Self-giving was an action that required being fully able to give oneself to another and physicality could be implied in this instance.

#### Philosophical Underpinnings

Presence had its roots in existentialism. Existentialism studied individuals in the concrete actuality of existence. It also “infers human awareness of the self and others” (Paterson & Zderad, 1988, p 4). Although existentialism encompassed atheism and agnosticism, the extension of the philosophy over time had a profound effect on modern theology that addressed issues such as transcendence, the limits of human existence along with authenticity and commitment (Cazadora, n.d).

Existentialism, primarily a movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was developed by the contributions and work of several philosophers. Some of the contributors to this school of thought were Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, and Jean-Paul Sartre. There was evidence that the roots of existentialism have been traced to St. Augustine in his works from the 4<sup>th</sup> century (History of Existentialism, n.d.). Many of these great

*thinkers* supported various aspects of previous works on existentialism but in many cases added other dimensions to the philosophy over time.

Kierkegaard was often referred to as the father of existentialism, but the additions made to existentialism by Heidegger, a German philosopher active in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, brought us the dimension of *being*. Heidegger called his philosophy “existential phenomenology” emphasizing human activity over consciousness (Rohmann, 1999). One of the hallmarks of existential philosophy was that “existence precedes essence” (Akram, 1991, ¶ 1). Akram continued by stating that the fundamental problem of existentialism was concerned with ontology, or the study of being.

Heidegger published his seminal work *Being and Time* in 1927 and included a new term, *dasein*, or *being-there*. Dasein was described as having five modes; authenticity, inauthenticity, everydayness, averageness, and publicness. According to Omery and Mack (1995) being is the *presencing* of persons. Distinctions have been made between *being-there* as having a physical component and *being-with* as having a psychological component (Doona et al., 1997).

Interesting work related to *being* grew from two French philosophers, Marcel and Sartre. Marcel (1950) stated that presence was a reality that was not demonstrated; it was discovered. He continued by suggesting that through presence, a person confirms his own being (1950). Sartre distinguished between two types of being: En-soi and Pour-soi. En-soi is the being of an object, fixed and static whereas Pour-soi is the being of a human being, fluid and free (Akram, 1991).

### Social Meanings of Presence

Presence has been widely applicable in society. Perhaps the act of *being-there* or *being with* was one of the things that distinguishes humans from other life forms. Society has given a wide range of meanings to presence as described in the preceding section. Particular to this writing, presence and the connection between nursing, education, and technology were of interest.

In an ethnography entitled *Life Online*, Markham (1998) examined individuals' use of online technology, specifically computer-mediated communications. Markham questioned if there were differences in the *real* world versus a textual, disembodied, virtual world where one could recreate physicality in cyberspace. In the final analysis several themes emerged, key among them was that computer-mediated communications could be viewed on a continuum from a tool to a way of being.

Streibel (1998) posed several questions related to technology and physicality. In the case for physical space versus virtual space, Streibel suggested that disconnection of the physical self and place could lead to disconnection from others and a subsequent loss of communal life. He challenged whether one could have a living relationship and a mutual stake in each other's lives when one was connected to another through a solely virtual representation. Streibel's position argued the question if the push for more activity in cyberspace was moving away from the actual intention of being present to others. By disconnecting with the physical self as Streibel stated, interacting with others in disembodied virtual places risked the human connection with which society had become accustomed.

In a recent event reported in the news, a young man died of an overdose while participating in an online chat room. The young man was interacting in a drug related chat room using his web cam. Despite seeing the visual image, many people egged him on, and urged him to take more drugs. His brother sadly stated, "These people treat it like somehow it's not the real world." He said, "They forget it's not just words on a screen" (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 2003).

### Presence and Nursing

Presence is a familiar concept in nursing. Nursing presence first found its way into the nursing literature in the 1960's when Sister Madeline Clemence Vaillot introduced her query on the philosophical notion of existentialism and commitment in nursing (Clemence, 1966; Doona et al. 1997; Doona, Chase & Haggerty, 1999; Snyder, Brandt, & Tseng, 2000). Based on the works of Marcel, Clemence suggested that through commitment and the giving of self, nurses were *presences* for our patients (Clemence, 1966). Contrary to this historical tracing was the work of McKivergin and Daubenmire (1994) who credited the introduction of the concept presence into the nursing literature to Paterson and Zderad in 1976. Paterson and Zderad, like Clemence, based their work on the philosophical roots of existentialism. They define "presence as the quality of being open, receptive, ready, and available to another person in a reciprocal manner" (as cited in Praeger & Hogarth, 1990 p. 283). Patterson and Zederad (1988) suggested "nursing is an expression, a living out of the nurse's authentic commitment ... which is an existential engagement directed toward nurturing human potential" (p.14). The authors continued by adding that this existential involvement provided genuine presence in the nurse-patient

situation, which was hallmark of the beautiful moments that gave meaning to nursing. Pivotal to *Humanistic Nursing*, Patterson and Zderad (1988) suggested that a nurse's actions (being-with and doing-with) were expressed through their body. This position suggested that physicality was required for nursing presence to exist or occur. Similarly, Bernardo (1998) stated that presence was not a task and therefore could not be captured in technology. This posed questions as to whether one could be present in disembodied interactions. Herein lies the tension between a disembodied professional interaction and an interaction between two or more fleshy, embodied people.

Since that time there has been a plethora of published work related to nursing presence. According to Frederiksson (1999), certain concepts including presence have reached a level of maturity within the professional literature that made research synthesis an appropriate approach for qualitative research designs. In other words, research synthesis was a particular method that could be used to examine a variety of related studies and synthesize the findings into a more comprehensive account (Estabrooks, Field, & Morse, 1994).

While there was evidence of both qualitative and quantitative studies being conducted on nursing presence, Holzemer (1997) suggested that the utility of the concept in nursing research may be questionable because of its subjective nature that makes it difficult to measure. He continued by suggesting that nursing presence could only be measured by obtaining validation from the patient/recipient. This posed the potential for measurement error, as in the hypothetical case of a nurse who noted that they intervened with a patient by offering nursing presence, but the patient did not recognize it as

presence. Snyder et al. (2000) concurred that conducting research on the use of presence was very difficult due to its subjective nature. In their discussion on the use of presence in critical care units, Snyder et al. (2000) cited two examples of qualitative studies that had been conducted on the topic. These studies shed light on the phenomenon and how presence occurs, but they supported the belief in the inherent difficulty of measuring presence.

Coming from an empiricist perspective, Holzemer (1997) added that additional work needed to be done with regard to the measurement of presence. Exploring presence from a positivist stance caused particular challenges with regard to the measurement of the concept in research. By basing this current exploration in an interpretive method, the concept of presence was viewed differently. This study viewed presence from a different paradigm and, using an interpretive method, does not seek to “measure” it.

In discussing connection and spirituality, Golberg (1998) suggested that connection could be used as an overarching concept that encompassed presence as well as many other concepts. She stated that presence was a way of being and that providing presence empowered others. Golberg argued that empathy, while related to presence in the sense of *being with*, stated that while on a mental level, it usually required a physical aspect.

McKivergin and Daubenmire (1994) distinguished between physical presence as *being there* and psychological presence as *being with*. Many scholars felt that nursing presence was much more than physical presence and made distinctions between types of presence. Easter (2000) categorized types of presence as physical, therapeutic, holistic,

and spiritual. The three stages of nursing presence described by Godkin (2001) were bedside presence, clinical presence, and healing presence. She distinguished these stages in the following manner; bedside presence included uniqueness and connecting with the patients experience, clinical presence consisted of sensing and going beyond the scientific data, and healing presence combined what one knew would work and then when to act with being present.

*Being with or being there* in the nurse patient relationship was identified as a hallmark of the concept of presence. In their existential exploration of the concept of presence, Doona et al. (1997) identified nursing presence (being with or being there) as a central phenomenon of nursing practice. Duniece and Slevin (2000) described presence as a central role in their study of nurses being present with patients receiving a diagnosis of cancer. Examining caring conversations in nursing, Fredriksson (1999) said that identifying *being there* and *being with* made visible an ontologic and theoretical demarcation in human relating. McKivergin & Daubenmire (1994) stated that presence related to the essence of nursing practice. Pettigrew (1990) acknowledged that for some, *being there* or *being present* was equated with the therapeutic use of self.

In a recent offering, Melnechenko (2003) suggested that “the only way for a nurse to help another to make sense of what he or she is going through and to live quality of life from that person’s perspective, amid all the noise of the tasks and technology, is to give the gift of welcoming presence” (p. 22). She continued by adding true presence held the other as an expert with free choices to live as they wish.

Presence was listed as a nursing intervention in Mosby’s *Nursing Interventions*



*Classification (NIC)* (McCloskey & Bulechek, 2000). Specific activities identified in the NIC that related to presence as a nursing intervention included;

(a) demonstrate accepting attitude, (b) verbally communicate empathy or understanding of the patient's experience, (c) be sensitive to the patient's traditions and beliefs (d) establish trust and a positive regard, (e) listen to the patient's concerns, (f) use silence as appropriate, (g) touch patient to express concern, as appropriate, (h) be physically available as a helper, (i) remain physically present without expecting interactional responses, (j) provide distance for the patient and family, as needed, (k) offer to remain with patient during initial interactions with others on the unit, (l) help patient to realize that you are available, but do not reinforce dependent behaviors, (m) stay with patient to promote safety and reduce fear, (n) reassure and assist parents in their supportive role with their child, (o) stay with the patient and provide assurance of safety and security during periods of anxiety, and (p) offer to contact other support persons (e.g., priest/rabbi), as appropriate (McCloskey & Bulechek, 2000, p. 453).

This position posed interesting questions with regard to the many contemporary practice areas such as tele-health, tele-nursing, phone case management, triage, and nursing call lines. Sandelowski (2002) concurred by stating that these dramatic examples of nursing care in disembodied practice areas call for a reconceptualization of presence, place, and bodies in nursing.

O'Neill and Kenny (1998) found that when nurses provided spiritual care to

patients, presence was the most used therapeutic intervention. Pain and suffering were areas in which, according to Pettigrew (1988) nurses, by employing the intervention of presence, could have a significant and positive effect. Snyder et al. (2000) described presence as a nursing intervention that conveyed much of the caring aspects of nursing. Duniece and Slevin (2000) also supported the idea that presence was a therapeutic force in nursing. Doona et al. (1997) stated that nursing presence was emerging as a central phenomenon of nursing practice. An editorial by Carpenito (2000) supported the idea that presence was one of the most powerful nursing interventions but stated that there was a “difference between being there and just being there” (p. 1). She illustrated this statement with a personal memoir from earlier days in nursing. As a novice, she described giving care to an offensive patient. It could be said that she was *being there* while all the time she was avoiding their offensive behavior and in fact she was *just being there*. Had she the experience to forge ahead and addressed her concerns about the patient’s offensive behavior, she would in fact have been more fully *being there* for that patient. Benner (1984) identified *presencing* or being with a patient as one of the competencies of the helping role of the nurse.

In linking nursing presence to nursing judgment, Doona et al. (1999) defined common features of nursing presence that contributed to nursing judgment; (a) uniqueness, connecting with the patient’s experience, (c) sensing, (d) going beyond the scientific data, (e) knowing what will work, (f) knowing when to act and (g) being with the patient. These authors suggested that nursing presence and nursing judgment coexist.

McKivergin and Daubenmire (1994), in contrast, made a different connection

with presence in nursing when they linked presence in nursing and healing as an *implied relationship*.

Questions arose as to whether nursing presence could be taught. Doona et al. (1999) by linking presence to nursing judgment, lead one to believe that these skills or behaviors were or could be learned however, the authors stated nursing presence could not be taught and suggested that presence could be cultivated. On the other hand, McKivergin and Daubenmire (1994) suggested that the qualities of presence could be taught in ways that lead the learner to a level of knowing that presence was a choice, a commitment, and a gift to others. Benner (1984) stated that the more expert a nurse was, the more likely it is that they would be able to engage in presence. This suggested that experience played a role in *learning* presence. Benner continued in a discussion about the teaching-coaching function of nursing practice and stated that through this role, nurses offered patients ways of being through their perspectives.

In summary, there were two ways of viewing presence in nursing. The first perspective was that presence was an act or way of being that required physical embodiment, an *in-person* interaction between two or more individuals. The other viewpoint supported the notion that presence was more than a mere physical act that encompassed interactions in a variety of modalities.

#### Presence and Education

In this study, distance education was viewed as a set of teaching strategies that were designed to meet the learning needs of students in a variety of locations that physically separated the learners and faculty. Web-based courses were defined as those

course offerings that were available in their entirety online via the World Wide Web.

Traditional classrooms were defined as those learning settings where the learners and the faculty were physically located in the same environment (AACN, 1999). Hybrid, or blended courses were those courses that were delivered through a combination of modalities.

Presence in teaching-learning environments has become increasingly more pertinent in light of the rapid growth of distance education and the advent of web-based courses. Historically, in the *traditional* classroom-setting faculty have relied on visual and embodied cues from students to guide their classroom activities. (Banks, 1998; Diekelmann, 2000). Carlson (1999), reported that she has cultivated a *persona* or presence in the classroom. She argued that her classroom presence was created through credibility. Pielstick (1998) said that leaders communicate their *vision* via physical presence. This belief challenges one to consider whether a teachers' vision for imparting knowledge was best, or could only be accomplished through physical presence.

The distance education literature reported a variety of investigations related to the effects of the lack of face-to-face interaction between faculty and students. Studying public health students, Cannon, Umble, Steckler and Shay (2001) found that more than half of those interviewed identified the lack of direct faculty contact and feedback as problematic. In a study examining differences among live and distance education courses in nursing, Lia-Hoagberg et al. (1999) noted that the local students were more satisfied with instructor contact than their offsite counterparts. Tammelin (1998) stated that the presence of the teacher, not the technology, is what fostered

learning. She added that faculties needed to develop methods to foster presence in online learning environments. Hassenplug and Harnish (1998) noted in their study examining the importance of interactivity in distance education courses, that there were increased levels of student interaction with increased levels of faculty physical presence. This loss of face-to-face interaction was one factor that students reported as being a barrier to participation in online coursework.

In a pilot study benchmarking best practices in web-based courses Billings et al. (2001) identified connectedness as one of the study variables. With the data gathered through the implementation of an instrument entitled the *Current Student Inventory* (CSI) their findings showed a positive correlation between student connectedness (dependent outcome variable) with both faculty and peers and a lack of isolation and positive satisfaction with online courses in nursing. However, Arbaugh's (2000) study of the interactions (dependent outcome variable) among students in a web-based Master's in Business Administration (MBA) course, showed that there were no differences in instructor-student interactions between virtual classrooms and physical classrooms.

In a recent qualitative study that described nurses' experiences with online learning, Attack (2003) found that online and face-to-face dialogue with peers was critical in keeping nurses from withdrawing from the course. Not all of the students felt a connection with others in the cyber classroom and described feelings of isolation.

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) identified women as *connected knowers* who developed procedures for gaining access to other peoples' knowledge by making connections with others. This type of connection could imply that some sense of

presence occurred or was required during this process. Belenky et al.'s work was suggestive of the notion that women learn differently than men and that different pedagogies were required to reach different students. Are online course offerings more suited to men where connecting with others takes on a different face or one that is atypical of traditional classroom experiences?

Zukas (2000), a historian teaching in the online environment, offered an interesting thought regarding physical presence. He shared anecdotal evidence that in many of his traditional classrooms men with deeper voices, larger sizes, and aggressive attitudes were often *privileged* in comparison to women and shy men. These men were privileged in the sense that quieter students and women had less chance to participate than students with the *typical* male characteristics. Zukas stated that “physical presence can be intimidating and alienating...in some cases it’s not so bad to be disembodied” (p. 68). This idea was supported in a discussion by Salmon (2000) who stated that shyer students may not need to *fight their way in* to the online classroom discussions. Zukas suggested that studies related to learning styles are indicated in order to best develop online learning environments that will meet all learners needs.

Student and faculty satisfaction were paramount variables in studying the effectiveness of online learning environments. Diekelmann (2000) anecdotally indicated that, faculty lamented the opportunity to see their students and to connect with them.

McLellan (1999) stated that setting the tone in online learning environments could substitute for a lack of cues. He defined social presence as a sense of immediacy and intimacy and suggested that social presence was highly correlated to favorable learning

outcomes. The thrust of his discussion demonstrated that presence or the perception of it, in a traditional classroom or one augmented with some type of distance technology, was vital to both faculty and student success and satisfaction.

### Presence and Technology

With the ever-increasing amount of computer interactions, presence has become a *hot topic* in the field of technology. Computers promise to make learning more interesting, efficient, and accessible (Schwarz, 1996). As experts in technology design virtual environments it is critical that the believability in, or a sense of, presence (being there) be integrated in these virtual worlds (Heeter, 1992; IJsselsteijn, Ridder, Freeman, & Avons, 2001; Witmer & Singer, 1998).

Mantovani and Riva (1999) stated that any definition of presence that was based on or required physical presence was unfounded. The authors continued by adding that a true definition of presence was dependent on different ontologic positions. Mantovani and Riva (1999) also suggested that the validity of presence should not rely so heavily on the reproduction of physical aspects as on the capacity to produce a context within which social actors could communicate and cooperate. This contention was supportive of the main premises of virtuality; however, it was in direct opposition to the nursing and educational research previously cited. Other scholars have developed meanings for types of presence other than physical presence such as, social presence, subjective presence, objective presence, (Huang & Alessi, n.d.; IJsselsteijn et al., 2001; Mantovani & Riva, 1999), personal presence, environmental presence, (Heeter, 1992) and telepresence, a feeling of being in a location other than where you actually were (IJsselsteijn et al., 2001;

Tammelin, 1998). The premise of social presence in virtual reality was simply that if other people were in the virtual world, there was more evidence that the world existed (Heeter, 1992). If you had never seen another human being in the *real world*, it would be difficult to imagine that you were not alone and that others existed. The same holds true in virtual places, interacting with others adds believability in the fact that you are not alone and that the virtual place is real.

Much of the literature on presence in technology addressed attributes that enhanced ones feelings of presence in virtual reality. These attributes or characteristics included video movement and color, user characteristics, and graphic clarity and richness (IJsselsteijn et al., 2001; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Witmer & Singer, 1998). Visual arts such as photographs, PowerPoint® slide presentations, streaming video, and animation within online courses were included that added an additional dimension that enhanced the learning environment. While these technological enhancements were not in and of themselves presence, they added a humanistic element that lead the virtual user to be more involved and connected.

Huang and Alessi (n.d.) described virtual reality as a technology that involved an artificial or illusory reality that is experienced by the user as a substitute for true reality. (p. 1). Multiple studies have been done on presence in virtual reality. Examples of work in the field of technology that addressed presence included conceptual analyses, quantitative and qualitative research studies, and psychometric reviews related to new instruments designed to measure presence. In a recent study, Freeman and Avons (2000) conducted focus groups to explore user's subjective experiences of *being there* in a



mediated environment. It was found that user's identified with and felt presence while watching stereoscopic television relating it to realism and naturalness.

Perhaps one of the most compelling efforts has been that of Witmer and Singer (1998) who have developed a questionnaire to measure presence in virtual environments. To measure presence in virtual environments, Witmer and Singer (1998) developed a questionnaire entitled *Presence Questionnaire* (PQ). An item analysis was conducted using four different experiments with a total of 152 students. The investigators identified four factors that contributed to a sense of presence; (a) control factors, (b) sensory factors, (c) distraction factors, and (d) realism factors. Examples of these factors included; (a) how natural did your interactions with the environment seem? (b) how much did the visual aspects of the environment involve you? and, (c) how much did your experiences in the virtual environment seem consistent with your real-world experiences? The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the factors tested had a positive correlation with the PQ total score.

Recent work has been done toward the development of items that could be used to measure various dimensions of and phenomena related to presence in virtual reality. This dynamic resource list displayed in table format, identified various subjective and objective measures of presence that were gathered from a discussion that took place on an ongoing *presence list-serv* in the spring of 2000 (Lombard, 2001). This discussion involved members of a community of scholars interested in the concept of presence.

Even though many of the items identified were particular to the work of technologists in the field of computer science, some of those items have great capacity

for transferability in the study of presence in online learning environments. Examples of items that could be applied to online learning environments were, to what extent would you characterize the medium as having the ability to; (a) use rich and varied language, (b) convey multiple types of information (verbal and nonverbal), and (c) transmit a variety of cues beyond the explicit message. The questionnaire also contained a Likert-type scale that asked the respondent to perform various tasks with different media and evaluate each medium with bipolar, semantic responses that include; impersonal/personal, unsociable/sociable, insensitive/sensitive, and warm/cold.

#### Focus Group Literature Review

Traditional focus group methodology has been used in social science and health related research for the purpose of “generating constructs, hypotheses, and information...” (Kingry, Tiedje, & Friedman, 1990, pg. 124). Morgan (1997, 1998) stated that focus groups were merely group interviews that represented a fundamental way of listening to people. Focus groups were designed to capture the meanings and understandings of a particular topic using the discussions held among participants. These discussions generated rich data with an emphasis on discovering new meaning. The actual content of the discussions served as the source of the data. Morgan (1997) suggested that one of the strengths of a focus group lies within the power of group interaction to enrich the data.

Mann and Stewart (2000) share that 30 years after the first attempt to log in to a primitive computer network, scholars are now examining this powerful phenomenon as an option in conducting research using the Internet. The Internet offers opportunities

unlike any seen before and the potential for research using the Internet is quite compelling (LaCoursiere, 2003). Sweet (1999) shared that qualitative research has benefited greatly from the electronic revolution and now currently owns a company that offers opportunities for researchers to conduct online focus groups.

In a discussion about using the Internet for nursing research, Lakeman (1997) suggested that online focus groups for nursing research could be quite feasible. Efforts to learn more about this technique yielded a smattering of information about the process, which for the most part had played out in market research. In the late 1990's, online qualitative research was considered to be in its infancy (Qualitative Research Consultants Association Task Force, 2002). Taking a challenge to *twist it a bit* (when referring to determine how hardy and robust focus group interviews were), Mann and Stewart (2000), provided a chapter on online focus groups in their book entitled *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research*. The authors felt that to date, little had been written about online focus groups. In their chapter on online focus groups, they continued by defining two distinct types of online focus groups; "synchronous, or 'real time' and asynchronous, or 'non-real time'" (p. 101).

The literature on online focus groups was sparse. This review found no instances of synchronous, online focus groups for purposes of research; however, samples of asynchronous focus groups from various disciplines are highlighted below.

O'Rourke (2002) described a joint project between the Center for Disease Control and the National Institute of Justice to explore the impact of transnational crime and public/correctional health. A contractor was engaged to design, test, and monitor a web

site used for their online focus group. This focus group was asynchronous in nature, posting a series of 51 questions over a period of 10 days for participants to log on and respond to at their leisure.

Exploring online focus groups and the merge of technology and method, Burton and Bruening (2003) focused their efforts on the asynchronous type of online focus groups. Their study queried students about the use and importance of a new sports stadium. While they identified many of the advantages and disadvantages of this approach they did not offer the synchronous approach as a suitable method to consider in future research.

Adler and Zachrin (2002) provided a nursing example of the use of online focus groups in their study of pregnant women on bed rest. They conducted their study by using a series of sequential questions passed on to their participants via email over a four week period. While they found that this approach was useful in studying isolated populations, there was no indication that a synchronous focus group was considered.

The most recent description of virtual focus groups detailed a study using discussion boards to examine perimenopausal women with migraine headaches (Moloney, Dietrich, Strickland & Myerburg, 2003). Discussion boards were created and accessible to participants for periods ranging from three to five weeks. The authors suggested that it may be desirable for future studies to have chat rooms in “real time”.

Interacting in a faceless, text only environment has the potential of influencing meanings that could be ascribed to facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice. Those features that were observable and held meaning in the traditional focus group setting

could be lost in the text only cyber-focus groups. Greenbaum (1997) felt that Internet focus groups were an oxymoron in that this medium lacked some of the essential features of focus group research. One reason that Greenbaum offered in support of this statement was that was impossible to duplicate the non-verbal input in this medium, which often added to a greater level of understanding during the analysis of the data. Sweet (1999a) countered by suggesting that the absence of sight and sound strengthens the use of perceptual senses by not relying on the typical embodied cues.

#### Summary

In a cyber world, presence was often viewed as a mutual sense of *connectedness*, *being with* and/or *being available* to another within virtual environments. Many have argued about the significance of presence in disembodied places, but the major question was, can one be *present* in online education? This review of presence in the nursing, education and technology literature has supported the theoretical plausibility of conveying presence and teaching students to convey presence in an online learning environment.

All three sources of literature supported the notion that presence could occur on, or across varied contexts. These contexts might reflect a continuum of abstraction ranging from physical presence (the least abstract) to spiritual presence (the most abstract). Telepresence might be somewhere along this continuum. Multi-dimensionality, along with varying degrees of intensity were features of presence; however, communication and cooperation were often discussed as key attributes of presence in all contexts.

Being present or connected with others in online learning environments has been noted to impact student satisfaction with their online courses (Atack, 2003; Billings et al., 2001; & Lia-Hoagberg et al., 1999). These findings supported the relevance in identifying how faculty and students relayed being present to each other so that online learning environments could meet student needs and enhance their learning and satisfaction.

While the existing literature reported the use of online focus groups, all examples utilized an asynchronous approach. Technology offers the opportunity to conduct online focus groups in *real time* or in a synchronous fashion. However, to date there were no examples found in the literature of synchronous focus groups being utilized in scholarly research. It was noted however, that one group of researchers suggested that holding synchronous or *real time* online focus groups could be a desirable option for future studies (Maloney et al., 2003).

## CHAPTER 3

### Method

This chapter focuses on the methodological aspects of this qualitative, grounded theory study exploring the meaning of presence in online courses. It begins with a rationale for why grounded theory and focus groups were selected. A reflexive piece informs the reader of the researcher's potential biases. Design activities are highlighted along with a discussion of the preparatory work which included adaptations or changes to the original plan. Procedural activities are described including the processes of recruitment, scheduling, a description of the participants, data collection, data management, and analytic procedures.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1999) grounded theory was defined as “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (p. 2). Grounded, qualitative research frequently begins with a sensitizing concept that lends understanding and guidance while providing meaning to the concept under study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin continued by suggesting that sensitizing concepts were open to detailed formulation and could provide content that allows one to grasp the concept in terms of one's own experiences. Sensitizing concepts act as lenses to assist the researcher in identifying and locating phenomenon within the data. Presence was a

sensitizing concept in this study. Presence was the lens that informed the researcher's decision for sample selection and data analysis. Kools, McCarthy, Durham, and Robrecht (1996) described a process of determining or selecting a perspective with which to examine data. Presence was the perspective that framed this study and it was the perspective that guided the steps in the analytic phase.

#### Rationale for Selecting Grounded Theory and Focus Groups

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of being present to others in online nursing education courses. The aim of this study, like other grounded theory studies, was to unearth or discover concepts derived from the data or to generate a theory, not to test a theory. Morse and Richards (2002) shared that the goal of a grounded theory study was to apply careful and thoughtful analysis of the data and a theory or substantive explanation of what was going on would emerge. The authors added that grounded theory has its roots in symbolic interactionism and that grounded theory seeks to understand ways in which these realities are constructed. According to Charon (1998) symbolic interactionism focuses on social interaction. This perspective supports the fact that reality is socially constructed and negotiated between people. Chenitz and Swanson (1986) stated that grounded theory is particularly useful in conceptualizing behavior in complex situations. Presence in online nursing education courses is a complex process that occurs between and among individuals in an unusual context; a disembodied space. Because of the perspective of presence and the complexity of the nature of disembodied interactions, grounded theory was selected as a method in which to base this study.

For this study, focus groups were selected as a means to gather data related to



presence. Focus groups provided a basic way to listen to people and purposive sampling in focus group methodology was a technique that ensured that participants that had the expertise and knowledge in a given topic were recruited to a study (Morgan, 1998). The intent of this study was to gain insight from individuals that had experience with online nursing courses. Focus groups allowed for interaction between the subjects and the moderator but this approach also encouraged discussion among the participants. This approach to gathering data was selected because of the interactive nature of focus groups. Since the phenomenon under study was presence in online nursing courses, the lens of presence became the rationale for selecting a method for data collection. Therefore, the focus groups in this study were conducted online in a synchronous chat room area. This approach asked the participants to be present to each other in a disembodied place.

#### Reflexivity and Researcher Bias

In qualitative research, reflecting on personal beliefs and experiences about the study topic is frequently practiced. The process of reflexivity demonstrates a position and personal investment in the study (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Reflexivity also brings forward personal experiences and how they shape the researcher's perspective. Strauss and Corbin (1998) add that the experience is not used as data but rather it allows the researcher an opportunity for self-awareness during the analytic phase of research. The researcher considered theoretical models of bias and personal experience to develop the following reflection;

Having taught over 20 online nursing courses this researcher came to the study with certain beliefs and ideas, initially with strong feelings about the

efficacy of this way of teaching. I was concerned that I would not be able to reach my students in the online format and that the quality of interactions would suffer. Over time I began to see that students were motivated to succeed and the quality of work at times, far surpassed many of my live, 'in-seat' experiences of the past. I felt connected to my students and tried hard to make that happen for each of them. Oddly, as I began to read the literature about online teaching and outcomes, I was surprised to see many accounts of dissatisfaction related to connectedness or the lack thereof. I wondered if this was due to the degree of effort of both the educators and students. I wondered if it was the technology that drove these feelings. These very concerns led to my interest in conducting this study as I toyed with the idea of presence. Can one be present in a disembodied place? If so, how does someone go about demonstrating that? Being present seemed intuitive to me, but clearly there must be more to being present than met the eye. Being open to the fact that there were specific actions that one takes to relay presence lead me to this study. I was anxious to see what others thought.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of San Diego approved this study on June 25, 2003 (Appendix A).

### *Preparatory Work*

Preparatory work is a stage of qualitative research that allows the researcher an opportunity to learn more about their field and sample before proceeding with

recruitment and data collection activities (Morse & Richards, 2002). In this study there were four phases of preparatory work; (a) choosing where to conduct the focus groups, (b) developing and preparing the cyber site for the focus groups, (c) testing the technical aspects of the site, and (d) refining the focus group questions.

A variety of options were explored to determine where and how to conduct these synchronous cyber focus groups. Several companies offered the cyber facilities to conduct online focus groups such as Quesst, Itracks and 20/20 Research (recently merged with Qualtalk). It was found that the costs were prohibitive, many charging from 5-7 thousand dollars per group. Another issue with Quesst for example, was that the company did not take on any projects where they did not moderate the groups.

TappedIn ([www.tappedin.com](http://www.tappedin.com)) an online community for educators was explored as a potential option for holding these synchronous online focus groups. TappedIn is a free service and after joining, one can obtain a virtual office, a place to communicate with others in cyberspace. Maneuvering within this cyber place required skill and mastery of complex commands. The researcher determined that the complexity was overwhelming and concern grew that potential participants would feel dismayed.

Usenet groups, Internet Chat Relays (ICR's), Instant Messenger Services like Paltalk, and conferencing software such as Net Meeting offered additional options. Those were quickly eliminated because all subjects would need to have the software program or would need to download it to their computers. Some worked with certain selected Internet Service Providers such as America Online (AOL), MicroSoft Network (MSN), and Yahoo. Feeling that these options would be a deterrent to many individuals, they

were also eliminated.

The driving forces in determining which approach to use to conduct the cyber focus groups were cost and complexity. The initial idea of using an empty course shell to hold the cyber focus groups was clearly the most appealing choice. Working with the academic computing department at the University of San Diego, access to a course shell (a pre-set format within which to build an online course) was obtained. The platform (a term used to identify a packaged system for delivery of online courses) was WebCT ([www.webct.com](http://www.webct.com)). Being unfamiliar with this platform, the researcher attended two, half-day seminars to learn about WebCT. Fortunately, many of the nuances to building material within online courses across various platforms were conceptually similar. Designing and tailoring the site to meet the needs of this study was fairly easy for this researcher since many of the complex features common to online courses would not be required. Only the chat room feature (an area within an online course where synchronous text-based conversations can occur) would be utilized.

Recognizing the need to reduce participant frustration and focus attention on the research prompts, the shell used for this study was modified. A primary goal was to streamline and simplify the appearance of the cyber place to cut down on confusion for those entering the site. The home page background colors were changed to be less intrusive. Two icon links were created for users; a link for the participant information sheet which, when clicked, opened up a separate window, and the second link directly to the chat room area. The links within the chat room area were labeled with the appropriate dates that users would enter based on the date that they had signed up for participation.

There was a need to test the ease of use and technical aspects of the site to make sure it was user friendly. Seventeen individuals (family, friends and colleagues) with varying degrees of computer knowledge and differing ways of connecting to the Internet were invited to conduct this test. Of the 17 invited, 7 did not respond to the e-mail; 4 were unable to join the scheduled pilot test; and 6 responded that they would assist in the technical test of the site. Those that agreed to participate were sent a *userid* (pseudonym given to log on to the cyber site) and password along with directions (Appendix B) on how to access the site. On the morning of the technical test, one individual did not show up and one individual accessed the site 45 minutes before the scheduled time but did not stay. One of the features of the chat room was the ability to archive activity within the chat area itself. Because of this feature, times of arrivals were documented. Four participants were synchronously in the chat room and all of them stated that they had no trouble following the directions and accessing the site.

Problems accessing the site became apparent during the testing of the technical aspects. Some individuals were unable to access the site by entering the uniform resource locator (URL) in the address area on their browser page. Directions on how to set up their browser to be compatible with WebCT were sent to those individuals immediately. This proved helpful and access to the site was achieved. This dilemma drove the decision to send future participants instructions on how to set-up their browser to ensure compatibility with WebCT (Appendix C).

The second test in the preparatory phase was held to refine the questions initially developed for each of the targeted focus group participants. Thirteen e-mail invitations

were sent to nurse colleagues at the graduate and or doctoral level that had experience or expertise in qualitative methods, focus groups, and, or online teaching/learning. Of the 13 invited, 2 did not respond to the invitation; 3 were unable to participate; and 8 responded that they would join the second test intended to finalize and refine the questions developed for future participants.

During this second test, the researcher refined the focus group questions by either clarifying them or adding new questions specifically intended for each group of future participants. An additional issue identified during the preparatory work was group size. Some felt that the fast paced scrolling of text was difficult to follow. Participants agreed with the decision to limit the number of participants to a maximum of six. The decision to limit focus groups to 6-8 participants was well supported in the literature for both traditional focus groups (Morgan, 1998) and online focus groups (Sweet, 1999) however it leaned toward the lower end of Morgan's recommendation.

The researcher created a separate series of questions, or interview guides for each group (both nurse educator experts and nursing students) of participants. The questions developed were both closed and open-ended in nature and designed to illicit responses that provided examples of if and how individuals relayed being present to others in online nursing courses, to discuss strategies that enhance the notion of being present in online nursing courses, and to learn if these experiences played a part in preparing for future disembodied interactions. The tactic of using probes to draw out more information from students proved helpful in adding depth to their responses. Often student comments were brief and many times students would reply, "I agree." At times, phrases, or probe

questions were used to urge more in depth responses such as; “can you tell us more about...” These phrases were used with faculty participants as well, but not to the extent that they were used with students. Faculty participants were more forthright with their comments and needed little urging to participate.

Based on the preparatory work intended to refine the focus group questions, the questions for each group of participants were finalized. The interview guide for the nurse experts was:

- (a) As more nurses are involved in taking online nursing coursework, do you feel that presence is an important concept for educators to consider? If so, please discuss how presence is important to you.
- (b) Describe some strategies that you feel are helpful in establishing a sense of presence in online courses.
- (c) Are there qualities that an online educator should possess that enhance the notion of presence? If so, describe.
- (d) Thinking about the technology at your disposal, describe how those tools are of assistance in relaying a sense of presence in the cyber classroom.
- (e) Can you share some examples of how others, (students and guests) convey being present to you in the cyber classroom?
- (f) How do you see students being available or present to each other in the cyber classroom? Are there things that they do that demonstrate this behavior?
- (g) Can you describe how you teach relational skills (the human aspect, being there and connecting with others) to your cyber students? Are they provided with

activities that enhance these skills?

- (h) What actions or behaviors make an online student extraordinary?
- (i) Is it time to introduce nursing students to ways of being present to their future patients that may be in disembodied environments of care (i.e.: telehealth, phone triage, online support groups)? How might you do so?

Based on the findings from the second test of the preparatory work, the student-centered interview guide was finalized as:

- (a) Describe how you connect with or be in the presence of your classmates and faculty in your online courses.
- (b) How important is it to feel connected to others in your cyber- class?
- (c) Can you describe how your professor gives you a sense of being present in the cyber classroom, things that he/she may do?
- (d) Can you describe situations that would urge you to connect with your professor in another medium (i.e.: face-to-face, telephone)?
- (e) How do you like getting course feedback online? What forms does the feedback occur? How does it feel to get that feedback online?
- (f) Tell me about things you do in the cyber classroom that give others the feeling that you are present.
- (g) Describe how you are learning relational skills (the human aspect, being there and connecting with others) in the high tech learning environment.
- (h) What things might you do in a situation of caring for a patient in a disembodied environment of care (i.e.: telehealth, phone triage, online support groups) that



relays therapeutic nursing presence?

#### Recruitment and Scheduling Activities

Two groups of participants were of interest to this study; nurse educator experts and student nurses taking online nursing courses. Selecting these two groups of participants stemmed from the perspective lens of presence that guided this study about online nursing courses. The selection process was also supported by Morgan's (1998) position regarding the use of purposive sampling in focus groups.

Nurse educator experts were described as those that had either published or presented in online nursing courses and/or presence. Nurse educator experts meeting the inclusion criteria were identified by compiling a list of individuals that had published manuscripts related to online nursing courses or presence. Additionally, potential participants were gathered from various conference proceedings where they had delivered presentations related to the field of interest.

Thirty-five emails were sent to nurse educator experts inviting them to join the study. The researcher sent a pre-scripted invitation highlighting the study and notifying potential participants that a \$25.00 gift certificate to an online bookstore would be offered as a thank you. This *e-invitation* (Appendix D) was copied and pasted into the email. "Invitation-Cyber Focus Group" was placed in the subject heading. Simultaneously, invitations were posted to web sites that were frequented by nursing students.

There were few responses (5) to the first round of invitations sent to the nurse educator experts. A colleague thought that the subject heading might have appeared to be some sort of unwanted advertising. Not having considered that or taken into account the

enormous amount of email that nurse educators got on a daily basis, invitations to the original 35 were resent and 42 more were emailed to pre-identified, potential participants with a new subject heading “Dissertation Help”. After making that change, responses returned at a rapid rate.

The inclusion criteria for nursing student participants were that they were currently taking online nursing courses. Nursing students taking online courses were initially recruited by posting invitations to bulletin boards frequented by nursing students. The invitation shared information about the study; the inclusion criteria, time commitment, remuneration, and how to contact the researcher. The invitations were posted to the following sites; [www.virtualnurse.com](http://www.virtualnurse.com), [www.nursezone.com](http://www.nursezone.com), [www.ezboard.com](http://www.ezboard.com), [www.advancefornurses.com](http://www.advancefornurses.com), and [www.arborwood.com](http://www.arborwood.com) and remained there for over four weeks without response.

Based on failed initial student recruitment efforts, student recruitment activities were expanded to include contacting universities that offered online nursing courses. Thirteen universities that offered online courses were contacted. Three universities replied requesting that information about the study be sent to them. A complete and approved proposal packet was sent to each of the three universities via email. Additionally, an invitation to participate was posted on a school of nursing listserv that outlined the inclusion criteria, the study, and the offer of remuneration in the form of a gift certificate to an online bookstore.

Snowball sampling was also utilized for the recruitment of student participants. Many of the nurse educator expert participants assisted in recruitment by informing their

students of the opportunity to participate in the study. Their students were given the information required to contact the researcher about the study. Snowball sampling was also effective in that many students passed the word to their classmates that were taking online nursing courses.

To schedule participants for upcoming focus groups, three dates/times were arbitrarily selected in order to meet the needs of participants throughout North America and Europe. After receiving an interest reply, another form letter was sent thanking those for their interest (Appendix E). Four attachments were sent with the second email: (a) a participant information sheet (Appendix F), (b) a schedule of focus groups to select from (Appendix G), (c) a participant profile (Appendices H and I) to complete and return, and (d) the browser set-up information sheet. First choices for scheduling were accommodated for all interested participants. Once the profiles were returned, participants were sent directions to the cyber site via an email attachment, which included a unique password and *userid* for their scheduled, upcoming focus group.

Access to the site required a specific *userid* and password. To maintain anonymity, colors were selected to represent participants. For each focus group, a new password was issued. This required frequent changing of passwords for each *userid* after every focus group in order to provide security to the site.

#### Moderating the Focus Groups

Lofland and Lofland (1995) suggested that in settings without face-to-face contact, the achievement of intimate familiarity may require that the researcher be involved in the disembodied interactions. The researcher's personal, albeit disembodied

connections with the participants through several emails and by participating as the focus group moderator allowed for some level of connection or knowing that added a sense of familiarity and comfort for participants. According to Krueger (1998) a moderator's role is to guide the discussion, not to act as a participant by engaging in the discussion or attempting to shape the outcome of the discussion. It was very challenging to remain somewhat detached from the discussions given this researcher's personal level of interest in the topic.

### Data Collection

The two data collection strategies utilized in this study were synchronous online focus groups and individual interviews. Data were collected during two synchronous, online focus groups for the nurse educators and four synchronous online focus groups for students. In addition to the focus groups, interviews were conducted with six nurse educators.

The individual interviews were conducted following the same interview guide used in the focus groups however; a more conversational flow hallmarked these interactions. Some information from previous discussions was shared which stimulated more in depth feedback during the interviews. Concurrent data collection and analysis was helpful during the interviews as it allowed the researcher to share certain comments made from previous data collection sessions which in turn raised the level of interaction during the individual interviews.

### Sample

A total of 33 individuals participated in this study. Demographic data were

collected for all participants (Table 1). Seventeen nurse educator experts participated representing 15 different university settings. All were experts in the field of online teaching/learning and had presented or published on the topic. Twelve invited experts in the area of presence declined to participate. Not having experience with cyber education, one person, an expert on presence, declined to participate stating that their focus had been on presence in face-to-face contexts and felt uncertain as to their contribution to this study. This was very interesting because that individual did not connect this study examining presence in online nursing courses and their respective area of expertise. Some perceive that there is a difference between face-to-face interactions and disembodied interactions. This position sparks the question, is there a difference in being present to others in live, face-to-face interactions and disembodied interactions that occur in cyber space?

The ages of the nurse educator experts ranged from 41 to 62 years with a mean age of 52.81 years. One participant declined to state his age. Fifteen of the participants were female and two were male. Of them, 14 were doctorally prepared and three held a Master of Science in Nursing degree. There was a mean of 20.11 years of teaching experience with a mean of 5.3 years experience teaching online. The data reflected in this chapter are related to the sample only. The analysis of presence will begin in chapter 4.

*Table 1. Demographic Data of Nurse Educator Expert Participants (N=17)*

Age	n
40 – 45	2
46 – 49	3
50 – 55	5
56 – 59	2
60 – 65	4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mean = 52.81 years</li> </ul>	
Years Teaching Experience	n
1 – 10	1
11 – 20	9
21 – 30	5
31 – 40	2
Years Online Teaching Experience	n
1 – 3	4
4 – 6	9
7 – 9	2
10 – 12	2

The participants shared that they utilized a variety of platforms and software to deliver their online courses such as WebCT, Blackboard, Front Page, IZIO, Dreamweaver, Interactive Web Forum and Moodle Exam Software. Many suggested that they had started with one format and then, over time had progressed to using other mediums.

There was diversity in the types of courses that the participants were teaching. Examples included: theory, research, pathophysiology, pharmacology, health assessment, transcultural nursing, informatics, organizational transitions, issues, health science information, educational technology, medical surgical nursing, community nursing, leadership and management, a Registered Nurse (RN) to Baccalaureate in the Science of Nursing (BSN) bridge course, and several elective courses such as end-of life, electrocardiogram (ECG) interpretation, and oncology. All participants stated that they “did it all” when it came to their role and involvement with their online courses; developing, teaching, and coordinating. Only three of the participants shared that they had access to an instructional design specialist to assist when needed.

This group of educators taught in a range of programs including RN to BSN completion programs, BSN programs, Master of Science in Nursing (MSN) programs, and Doctorate in the Philosophy of Nursing (PhD) programs (Table 2). A few faculty participants taught in multiple programs and some taught selected nursing courses that did not lead to a degree in nursing. This group typically taught from both home and school. Only two reported teaching from school and not from home. To access the Internet most reported using high-speed cable, but many utilized both cable and dial-up

depending on location.

*Table 2. Types of Programs Taught*

Types of Programs Taught	n
Selected Nursing Courses	2
BSN	7
RN – BSN	6
RN – MSN	1
MSN	8
PhD	3

Of the 17 nurse expert participants, only one reported having participated in an online focus group before this experience. This person had participated in online focus groups with students at the end of a course for an evaluation. Eleven had previously participated in a traditional focus group.

Sixteen students taking online nursing courses participated in the study. This group represented four different university settings. Their ages ranged from 23 to 60 with a mean of 42.81 years. Fourteen were female and two were male. The educational preparation of these participants varied: one beginning their nursing education, some taking their BSN requirements, others working toward their MSN while others were taking courses for their Doctoral degree. One participant had a doctoral degree in a non-related field and was enrolled in an MSN program.

Six students had completed only one online course. Some had taken as many as



13 courses online. The average number of online courses for this group was 4.9 (Table 3). The age of the students ranged from 25 to 60 years of age (Table 4). With regard to the reason that they were taking online courses, four did not respond, one did not have a choice, five chose online courses for their flexibility, three due to geographic reasons, two for both geographic and time flexibility, and one because it was the preferred choice for learning. It was equally divided among the student participants as to which format that they were familiar: Blackboard or WebCT. All but one student planned to take more online courses. The one that did not plan to take more was graduating after completion of the current course.

*Table 3. Number of Online Courses Taken by Students*

Courses	Number Taken
0 – 3	8
4 – 6	3
7 – 9	3
10 – 13	2

*Table 4. Age Distribution of Student Participants*

Age	n
20 – 25	1
26 – 30	3
31 – 35	1
36 – 40	1
41 – 45	1
46 – 50	6
51 – 55	1
56 – 60	2

### Data Management/Analysis

The data were archived and then copied into a word processing program and saved as word files. The data were then sorted by responses to individual questions. The sorted data were printed out for manual coding and analysis. Extensive theoretical memos were done of each focus group and interview.

As described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), a grounded theory approach to data analysis was used to develop a substantive explanation of presence in online nursing courses. The constant comparative method was employed for the analysis of the data on an ongoing basis. This allowed for the development of categories (concepts) in one data set that were then compared to additional data sets. The data derived from all focus groups and interviews were compared to each other for similarities and or differences.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1999) “the purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically...” (p. 102). Glaser and Strauss described four stages in the constant comparative method; “(a) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (b) integrating categories and their properties, (c) delimiting the theory, and (d) writing the theory” (p. 105). Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that this microanalysis done line-by-line allows for the beginning development of categories and to suggest relationships among various concepts.

#### *Process of Coding*

Describing the processes involved in coding, Strauss and Corbin (1998) noted that in open coding concepts that are representative of the phenomena are identified. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that during open coding “data are broken down into discrete

parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences” (p. 102). Strauss and Corbin (1998) continued stating that terms, events, actions or interactions that are similar are grouped into categories. To illustrate the analytic process, the core category of connection will be highlighted. The participants described ways of being present in online nursing courses. Initially, 18 open codes were identified (Table 5).

*Table 5. Open Codes for Presence*

linked	collaboration	in it together
interaction	reassuring	engaged
reaching	answering	involved
bond	available	there
personal contact	participating	sharing
understanding		

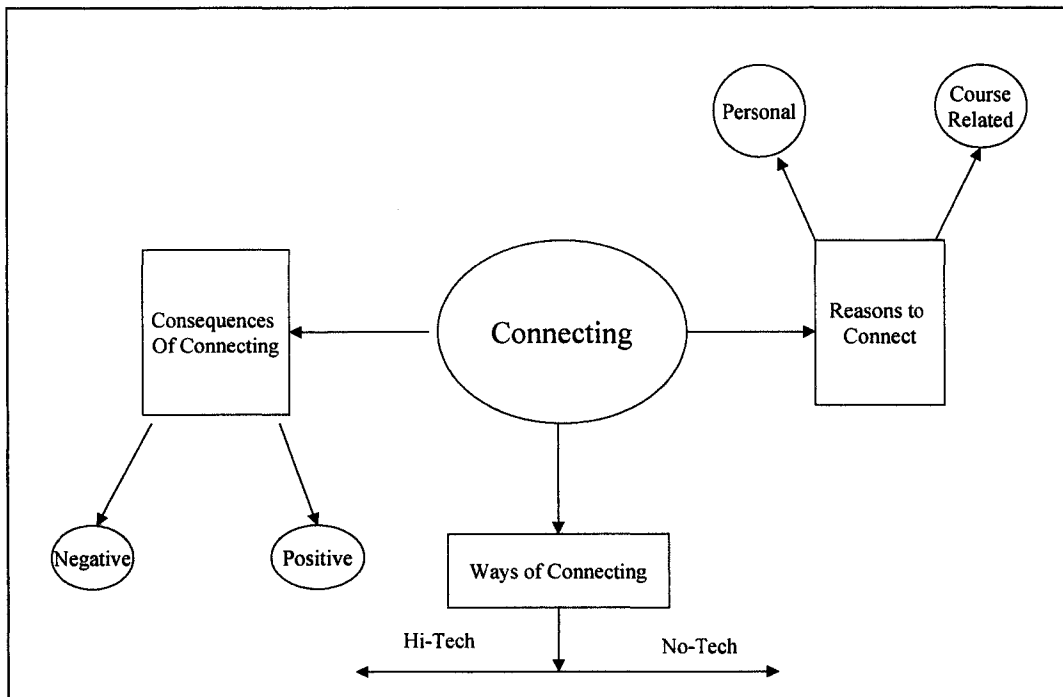
The researcher identified no additional codes that were reflective of being present in online nursing courses after the final focus group conducted with students and the last two expert interviews were completed and added no new meanings to presence. It was assumed that the data had reached saturation at that time. This cluster of codes ultimately developed into the core category of this study, *connection*. *Connection* seemed to capture all of the things that the participants said about being present in online nursing courses.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) described the next phase of open coding as the development of subcategories. For example, in this situation *connecting* could be further described in terms of how, when, and why individuals connect with others. This process gave dimension to the term *connecting* and urged consideration of how this term was different from others. This process further explained a concept and provided clarification that was more specific. How individuals connect with others in the online classroom could be situated along a continuum ranging from *high-tech* approaches such as email to

*no-tech*, or live approaches.

Axial coding was the next phase in the process of coding data using the grounded theory method and involved “relating categories to subcategories along the lines of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Figure 1, a graphic representation created by this researcher demonstrates the process of axial coding using the core category of connection as an example.

*Figure 1. Demonstration of Axial Coding*



The final phase of the coding process was selective coding, during which categories were related to each other, integrated, and began to take on the form of a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A central category was identified and the relationships of other categories were determined. In this study, connecting is the central category.

*Rigor*

Ensuring rigor in qualitative research requires detailed attention to several steps throughout the design of the study (Morse & Richards, 2002). Mann and Stewart (2000) stated that rigor might best be demonstrated through the transparency of the decision-making at every stage of analysis. In this study, detailed methodological notes were kept throughout the process from determining where and how the study would be conducted to the completion of data collection and analysis. This was consistent with Sandelowski's (1986) work that described rigor in qualitative research. Sandelowski suggested that the process of auditability is achieved through clear, detailed notes about the study from beginning to end. Methodological decisions were made based on the review of the details found within the methodological notes.

Morse and Richards (2002) spoke of the use of appropriate sampling techniques as an additional means to ensure rigor in qualitative research. Seeking valid representation with the study sampling technique was accomplished with the use of purposive and snowball sampling. This assured that those with the appropriate levels of experience were contacted to participate in this study with a focused topic such as presence in online nursing courses.

Member checking, also a part of an audit trail, was intended to achieve two purposes; one, to serve as a means to validate the data, and second to offer participants the opportunity to add or expand on the topics discussed during the focus group or interview. The researcher conducted a member check by sending complete transcripts of each focus group and interview to all subjects following their participation. One nurse

expert returned the transcript with corrections, using the member check only to correct typographical errors in the document. Three other nurse experts responded stating that they had nothing else to add, and one student participant responded stating that the transcript “looked fine.” This process did not add to the richness or clarity of the data. The five participants that did respond represented approximately 6% of the total group of participants. One could question whether or not the participants received their respective transcript due to some technological failure or if they chose to not take the time to review it. Another consideration lies in the fact that since these transcripts were archived and saved verbatim, that some felt no need to verify them for accuracy. A thoughtful discussion as to measures to address this process will follow in Chapter 5.

#### Summary

This qualitative study that explored the meaning of presence in online nursing courses utilized grounded theory as a method of inquiry. Presence as a perspective informed decisions related to subject selection, data gathering, and analysis. Two groups of participants were recruited to this study; nurse educator experts and nursing students.

Synchronous, online focus groups were the primary means of gathering data and this approach called for various non-traditional techniques in the design, planning, recruiting, and coordinating aspects of this study. Incorporating preparatory work in this study proved pivotal in ensuring success of the complexities associated with this design. Contingencies were developed when unforeseen technological problems arose, such as the inability to access the cyber site. Listening carefully to suggestions made by those assisting in the preparatory phase led to the development of questions more aptly suited

to each group of subjects thereby grounding the questions in the experiences of the preparatory experts. Individual interviews augmented the data obtained during the focus groups.

Various steps were taken to ensure the rigor of the study. They included detailed methodological notes, purposive sampling techniques, and member checks. Analysis of the data was done following the steps of coding outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings

This chapter presents the findings of this qualitative study that explored the meaning of presence in online nursing courses. The chapter opens with a brief description of what online learning environments are typically like and describes the types of online learning environments that the participants of the study had familiarity with and utilized. This discussion provides contextual grounding for the remainder of the study findings. While not central to the development of the theory, participant views and comments on the value of presence in online nursing courses are presented. This offering reinforces the theme that presence was the lens or perspective from which this study was based. The *Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses* will be presented followed by a detailed demonstration of the development of the theory through study findings supported by participant comments and integrative diagrams.

This study's sample represented a cross section of individuals that had experience using a variety of systems and structures in their online courses as detailed in the previous chapter. Some participants were involved in online courses that were augmented with live, in seat class meetings at various intervals throughout the duration of the course. While many of the faculty participants had previous experiences with a



variety of online learning environments, all participants were currently engaged in online courses that utilized a preset delivery system such as WebCT or Blackboard. All but one participant had experience using the synchronous chat room feature within the course shell/system.

Online learning environments vary greatly. They can range from the basic posting of a course syllabus on a web site to the complex development of an interactive course within a structured course shell or system. Some online courses are delivered in their entirety via the Internet whereas others may be augmented with live, or face-to-face meetings at various intervals throughout the course. Most online courses rely on text-based exchanges of information. Some courses have the ability to deliver materials using advanced technology such as video streaming. Many online course instructors tend to avoid a heavy reliance on high technology. Multi-media features such as video streaming may present problems due to variations in student's abilities to download these materials based on their Internet connection capabilities or technological skills. Online courses offer a distinct way of teaching and learning that requires attention to details that relate to connecting with others.

These disembodied learning places represent complex contextual settings with highly abstract properties and dimensions. Reliance on technology as a primary means of communication poses new twists in teaching-learning environments as knowledge and ideas are exchanged among students and faculties. Interactions, typically text-based in nature, are key to the development of these learning communities where connecting with or being present to others occurs.

### The Value of Presence

Both educators and students used a variety of words that reflected coming together or connecting with another when presence in online courses was described. The act of presence was embedded in action-oriented behaviors described as reaching out, reassuring, answering or responding, participating, sharing, understanding, being available, contacting, interacting, and being engaged. The *embedding* of presence in these action-oriented behaviors was required for presence to be recognized by others in disembodied learning spaces. As described by these participants, presence was a condition that was needed for one to feel connected. As one participant stated, “I think that social presence is necessary to lead to a sense of connectedness.” Another participant added that presence is “a necessary condition if you want students to participate in active learning online.” In addition, a third stated, “I believe that presence is the factor that takes an online course beyond the realm of being a correspondence course.”

Presence in online nursing courses was an important way of being to all of the faculty participants in this study. Being present was interpreted as a process that extended one’s self and thereby reached others in the disembodied learning environment. Being present was an action that allowed two or more people the opportunity to interact and exchange thoughts and ideas. Presence, or connecting with and being with others in online nursing courses (disembodied environments) was considered to be an important feature and aspect of online nursing education to all of the faculty participants. They thought that being present to others was key to successful online courses that led to positive student outcomes.

Universally, faculty participants agreed that presence in online nursing courses was important. One nurse expert stated,

I think that you are exploring a concept that is critical to successful, enjoyable online learning. One nurse interviewed said, “you know nurses are ‘people’, we want interactions with people when we are learning.”

Presence gets to the heart of it.

In response to the question regarding the importance of presence in online nursing courses, another expert shared the following;

I think it is very important. Simply answering questions defeats the purpose of online education. I think that our students work together to build a common knowledge base about the topic they are discussing and this would not be possible without their presence on a routine basis. The interaction with a faculty member is important in keeping discussions on track and giving a certain amount of feedback but the connectedness of the students is where the learning occurs.

Based on the previous statement, it could be asserted that presence or connectedness is the home, or place where learning lives. Without presence and a sense of connectedness among student learners, knowledge and the processes of gaining knowledge would become static.

Student thoughts on the importance of presence in their online nursing courses varied widely. One student spoke to the importance of presence in the following statement,

It is very important to me. We can discuss the issue of class subjects, assignments, and see another's insight if we have difficulty. In one of my classes we were assigned to groups. It really helped to feel connected to the group.

Another shared these thoughts about the importance of presence in online courses when compared to other live, or face-to-face courses, "It is (*presence*) [italics added] quite important but in a different manner than traditional classroom relationships. Traditional classroom relationships call for eye contact, body language etc."

One student talked about the value of presence in online courses to her, "it does not bother me that sometimes it does seem like I am alone in class, it is hard to get group projects done sometimes." However, this student continued by suggesting that the connection to others served a specific purpose directly related to coursework, and in that respect, found that connecting to a few people was valuable. Many student participants prefaced their responses with the use of inclusive language such as "we", "us", and "our" which might indicate on some level they had a sense of *being with* others to some degree even if they had not articulated that idea.

As in live or face-to-face interactions, the perception of belonging, being engaged, or valued, played a role in presence in disembodied learning environments and agreement between the intended receiver and sender was necessary for one to consider that presence had occurred. Because presence was a perceived connection one could question if connections were *real* or could one pretend to be present, or in other words, go through the motions of being present without truly being present. When asked to

describe the things that they do in the cyber classroom to give others the feeling that they were present, one student shared that, “the only thing that I do is answer my discussion board questions and respond to someone else’s.” This approach at best could be suggestive of offering very little in the way of being present to others since this typified at a minimum basic course participation.

All of the student participants except for one, agreed with the importance and value of being present to others in online courses. Student participants thought that being present to others in their online class helped to alleviate feelings of isolation and assisted them in meeting course goals. The one student that did not feel that presence or connecting with others in the online classroom was important because they did not want to listen to others “blab on and on”, or did not want to become “touchy/feely” with others. This situation represented the one negative case in this study. This negative case offered a window of opportunity to explore this position more fully by asking, “Is this person’s perspective based on a preferred learning style, or a personality trait?” Negative cases ask where we should go from here and in this situation urges further discussion, which will be elaborated on in Chapter 5.

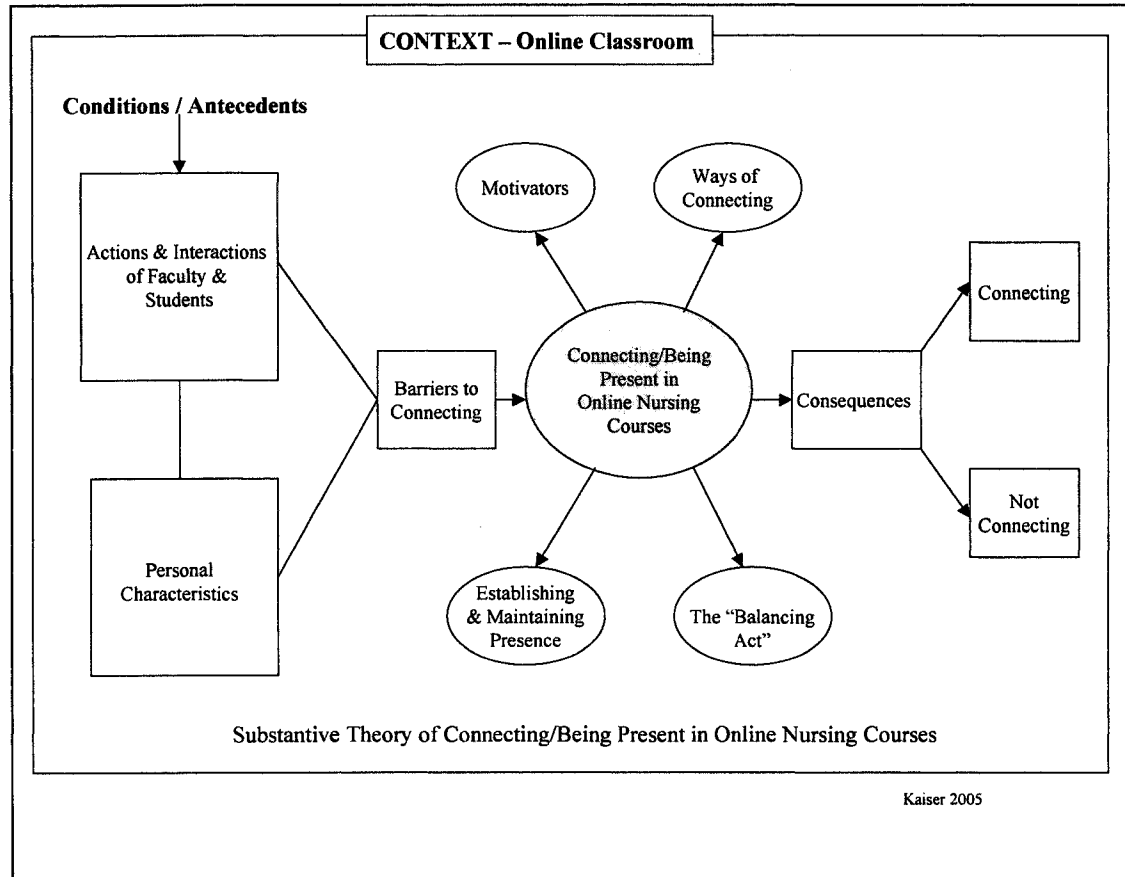
Looking toward the future and the value that presence held in online courses, one faculty expert shared the following, “...I also wonder if the concept of presence may change with the new generation of students. In a recent study that I participated in, we noticed that undergrad students were less likely to miss face-to-face than grad students.” This suggested that with the changing face of technology, presence was being transformed. Once presence was introduced and palpable, its absence would be missed. If

one had not experienced presence in this fashion, perhaps the expectation of it would be lessened. Another faculty shared a glimpse of the future by adding, “I know some educators who think that the physical university will disappear, and all education will be online. When I mentioned the lack of presence, I am told that students will grow up without it and won’t miss it.”

### Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses

The *Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses* emerged after thoughtful analysis of the data. The online classroom represented and provided the context for the study and subsequently situated the findings in that environment. Several conditions or antecedents existed under which presence or connecting with others (the core concept of this study) in the online class occurred, and they included actions and interactions of students and faculty as well as personal characteristics of each group. Barriers to making a connection or being present to others in the cyber classroom were identified as; (a) the gatekeeper phenomenon, (b) time, (c) the digital divide, and (d) infrastructure. The core concept of connecting with others or being present to others in the online classroom is presented along with 4 key dimensions of connecting; (a) motivators, (b) ways of connecting, (c) establishing and maintaining presence, and (d) the “balancing act”. A discussion of the consequences of connecting or not connecting with others will complete the presentation of the theory. Figure 2 is a graphic representation of the substantive *Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses* based on the data derived from this study.

Figure 2. Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses.



### *Conditions and Antecedents*

There were many actions and interactions that occurred among and between students and faculty that influenced and affected being present or connecting with others in online nursing courses. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) these conditions could be considered causal as they influenced the phenomena of interest (in this study, presence) within a specific context (online nursing courses). Examples of these conditions included; (a) the level of sophistication of students and faculty, (b) the level of experience with online courses, (c) the degree of comfort with technology, (d)

faculty workload, (f) student time demands, (g) personal desire and motivation, and (h) technological capabilities.

Several of the study questions evolved around personal attributes, characteristics, behaviors, and interactions that were reflective of being present in online courses. Both qualities inherent in faculty and outstanding students were explored as well as the acts of relaying feedback to students and developing relational skills in online environments.

Faculty articulated a long list of qualities that an online educator should possess in order to relay a sense of presence in the online classroom. Many of the identified qualities such as creativity, passion, humor, being supportive, caring, respectful, having command of the course content, critical thinking skills, desire for student success, sensitivity, being accountable, and being flexible could be considered “best practices” for all educators. One faculty offered more explicit information regarding this when they stated “Many of these qualities speak to the best practices cited by Chickering and Gamson in terms of timely feedback, interactions with students, respect for diversity, promotion of active learning, etc.”

What are the differences between live, in seat classroom instruction and online instruction? A few descriptors reported by the participants as unique to online instruction were; (a) having a conversational style of writing, (b) knowing when to step in, or “finding the balance”, (c) possessing a certain level of technical ability, (d) a pioneering attitude, (e) an ability to communicate their love for this delivery method, and (f) being able to transcend the medium. Quick feedback, although felt important in all teaching/learning situations took on a different level of importance in online



classrooms due in part to the sense of immediacy perceived in faceless environments. Faculty shared their thoughts about these skills and qualities in the following; “Faculty who teach online must communicate their ‘love’ for this type of learning, be patient and supportive and facilitate self-direction and learning by students.” Another educator expounded on this topic,

I think the online educator should be confident in themselves and the medium they are using. We require any faculty member teaching online to complete a course on online pedagogy before they are allowed to offer a course. I think patience, skill with the technology, understanding the frustrations that go with online education, ability to deal with conflict among students and the willingness to squelch someone who is dominating the classroom are all necessary characteristics. Additionally, the faculty member must be genuine, understand that communication can be skewed without facial expressions and gestures and be very aware of what they are writing to students. I also believe that online educators should be responsible and accessible and not just give feedback such as ‘good job’ to a student’s long discussion of a topic.

Students shared both positive and negative thoughts related to behaviors or qualities of instruction. The primary identifying feature that students thought demonstrated a *good* online instructor was communications. Faculty that had frequent and timely interactions with students were noticed and valued by students. One student shared, “I had one instructor that was very verbal with discussion board feedback and email feedback. Another instructor did banners in the home page.” Another student

stated,

Most of the time the instructors that I have had offer feedback in the discussion groups. This last semester, she let us answer questions, comment on each other's work and then at the end she would offer her answers to the questions. She did not grade our answers so there was freedom to explore several areas.

When instructor communications were not clear, students perceived this as undesirable, "I had to send one teacher 5 emails at the beginning of her class because she was so vague." One student added to this by stating, "I think one of my main comments would just be that the communication really needs to be more than that in a regular classroom. For me, the lack of face to face contact needs to be compensated for by frequent online contact."

Students also tended to recognize the differences of instruction between live and online classroom settings. One student said, "I think that the instructors need to be educated in how to moderate online classes – the student needs are different." Comparing the delivery of material in live classrooms and online classrooms, one student shared her frustrations with the following, "Especially when lecture is just the same as the presentation online – anyone can read power point presentations." Another said, "...but in a live classroom part of the educators job is to draw those people into the process and elicit their input." And in closing of this discussion one student stated, "still, the educator has a real challenge with getting everyone to participate.... you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink." Participation within online courses promoted a sense of presence to others by becoming *real* through specific actions or

activities.

Faculty described many features of outstanding students in general. As with the qualities of an instructor that relayed presence, most of these were descriptive of all students regardless of the learning environment. Common to all students were the following; having academic integrity, substantiating their work, delivering quality work, being punctual, keeping up with course activities, being motivated, being self-directed, possessing critical thinking skills, and interacting. One faculty expert shared predictors of success, "...organized, responsible, adult learning, goal-motivated, independent, autonomous."

Qualities that were more reflective of an outstanding online student included; (a) a willingness to connect with others, (b) accepting a new way of learning, (c) embracing technology, (d) being technologically savvy, and (e) understanding the power of an online presence. Another faculty member shared,

Extraordinary online students: I look not only for quantity of comments, but quality of comments as well in my discussion groups. Some students may post to the group, but add little to the discussion. The extraordinary student will contribute to the discussion in a substantial way, but also display critical thinking and analysis of the discussion that goes beyond the assignment per se.

For the most part, students felt that a key feature in their success surrounded their computer skills and knowledge. Using course tools was not intuitive and students thought that having an orientation to the course tools was important. One student stated, "If you have used online learning a lot it would be very different than the first time you

use it. Also, if people are not comfortable on computers that would probably impact their learning.”

Giving and receiving feedback in disembodied spaces reflected preferences and attitudes of students while at the same time illustrated faculty behaviors that directly affected students. Students had much to say about this and some comments were associated with the *ins and outs* or the processes involved in getting feedback online while others spoke to how it really felt getting disembodied feedback.

Speaking to the process, one student shared, “some critique of work is on the discussion board, otherwise word documents use tracking to make comments on papers and return them. Grades are posted in Blackboard and additional comments via email.” One student cited the consistency of online feedback; “I like getting feedback online because I feel that it keeps things consistent.”

Another student stated,

Well it is interesting because when it is on the discussion board everyone can read it – so if you need private feed back I email the instructor – so far none of the feedback has bothered me – I feel ok about it.

Many students enjoyed the immediacy of online feedback when taking examinations.

One student shared,

I love getting instant test results – as soon as we take a test, it gives us our score. As far as some of our projects, sometimes it takes the instructors a long time to grade them, but that is true in any program.

Another stated,

I like the feedback online. Especially when we do the quizzes online. The results are immediate and the rationale for the answers are available. I love that part. I like taking tests online as well. Occasionally the time limit is stressful, but for the most part I think it is the best way to take tests. When papers or assignments are submitted the instructors are able to offer direct feedback by adding comments while the information is still very fresh and important. Helps for studying for tests as well.

Examining the negative aspects of online course feedback were often linked to timeliness, ability to improve work, and privacy. Addressing privacy, one student said, "I think as long as the feedback is done appropriately and privately online is fine with me." One student shared the following,

Much of the time we only receive a grade and no remarks of how we could have done better. It leaves you wondering if you missed something in the presentation given you by the professor or if you just totally misunderstood, if you make bad marks.

Another student said,

Well, if you have posted your discussion and it is graded you never know what the criteria was for the evaluation or what you can do to improve it, it seems that kind of feedback is missing from the instructor.

Addressing timeliness, one student said, "I don't have a problem getting feedback online but I do like my feedback to be at regular intervals, not all at the end of the course." Another concurred by adding, "Oh, and the feedback in a timely manner is

always preferred.” Supporting this, one expert shared the following,

Other strategies that were helpful in establishing presence would be to have activities throughout the semester that require some contact between student and instructor. For example, progress reports may be required on large projects (e.g., major paper). This would serve two functions. One, the students would get feedback from the instructor. Two, the instructor can provide more personal guidance to student should it be required.

Another student pointed out an additional issue related to online feedback, “the problem with posted feedback in the written form can be misinterpretation of mood or tone.” Agreeing, one student added, “yes, the professor must be skilled as well.”

One student discussed the value of being able to discuss grades with an instructor. She stated, “I like the feedback online, but sometimes I feel like that the feedback is a *fait du compli*.” When questioned by other participants, she continued by adding, “maybe because the opportunity to discuss the grade has not been put out there...it seems like such a finality.”

Based on the student comments, online feedback took many forms. Privacy and immediacy were of importance. Students reported they wanted feedback that gave them ideas as to how they could improve their work. Moreover, being able to discuss a grade had meaning perhaps beyond merely a point of argument, one that could be viewed as a learning tool.

When both faculty and students were asked about how relational skills were being taught and learned in their online courses, the answers varied greatly between the

two groups. Some faculty wondered how they were accomplishing this since these skills were typically ones that were role-modeled in face-to-face interactions. One faculty voiced concern stating,

I am concerned about behaviors of disadvantaged and nontraditional students. I feel that they need to be socialized into nursing and the only way to do that adequately is face to face interactions. The online course for the RN/BSN students has worked well because they are already licensed and have adapted the social behaviors of nursing.

Another shared, “A huge part of the hidden curriculum in nursing is related to social process, so as online teachers we need to role model social skills and help students develop those skills.”

Others attributed this process to the relationship that their students had with their clinical preceptors. One faculty expert said, “I envision that there would be satellite clinical courses with preceptors as the socializers.” Clarifying the dilemma, another added, “only excellent ones! And they are hard to find.”

Referring to this process as the development of ‘*soft skills*’, several faculty members had strategies that they employed to foster the acquisition of relational skills to their students. Some spoke to the use of technology to shed light on these skills, “I know some have used student videos for such activities. The student videos doing the skill and then sends the video to demonstrate the skill.” Others incorporated specific course activities intended to assist in developing relational skills such as, “I use both activities and assignments for relational skills. For example, ask them to do a client

history and then write out the history and reflect on how they did.”

Faculty agreed that graduate students were more likely to possess strong relational skills and that the focus needed to be with those taking basic or undergraduate courses. Typically it was felt that some type of face-to-face interaction was required to role model those professional behaviors with students.

Students on the other hand did not recognize this as an important aspect of their education. Many felt that these skills were already ones that they had already developed.

One student stated,

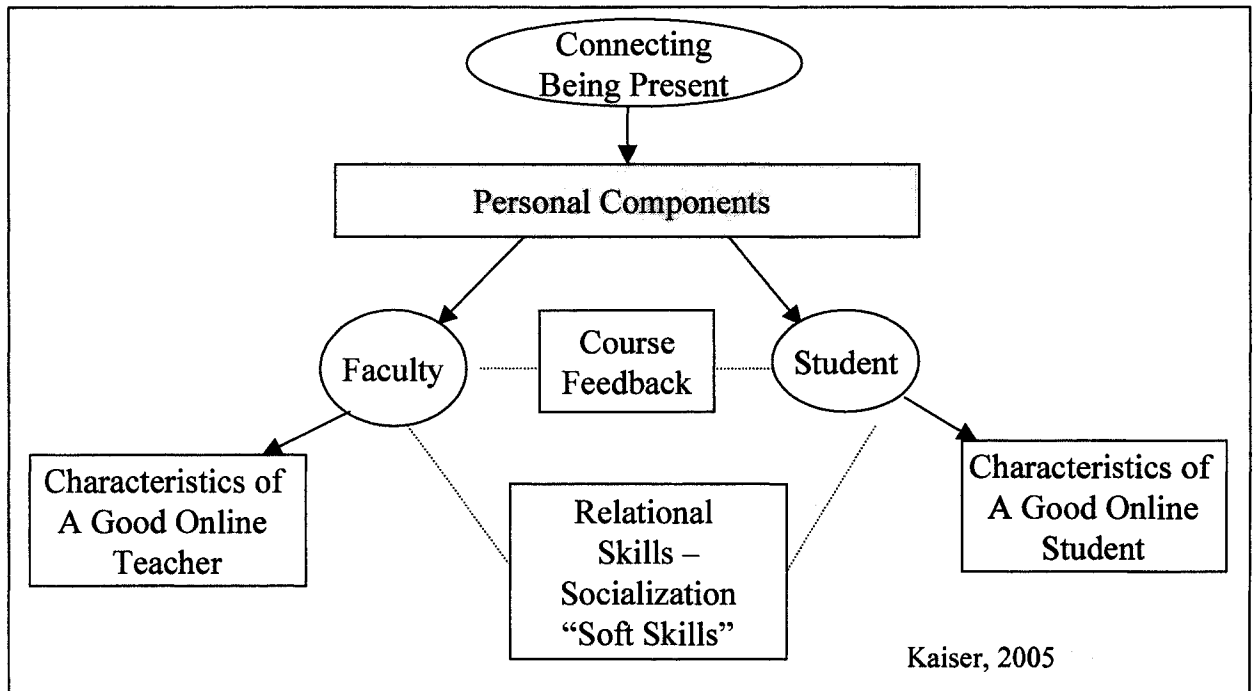
I think that by the time you reach a college or master’s level, you should have learned the human aspect of interaction already. Also for those in master’s programs, we have usually had years of nursing experience, so we don’t need to be taught the human side – we have lived it.

Some students linked this skill set to the clinical setting. One student shared, “I feel like I get most of that in clinical.” Generally students discounted this need and its importance to nursing education.

Overall, developing relational skills for student nurses in an online learning environment posed unique challenges for the nurse educator. Depending on *high-tech* features assisted in this endeavor while many still relied on the traditional face-to-face opportunities such as the use of clinical preceptors. Based on the study findings, Figure 3 demonstrates the relationship among the concepts related to *personal components*.



Figure 3. Personal Components



### Barriers

Several factors were identified that acted as barriers to being present for another in the online classroom. A majority of these events could be classified as *life events* or contingencies. Examples of this phenomenon included having busy schedules and family or work needs. One faculty member spoke of workload and its impact on presence, “I like being present for the students, however being on the tenure track is quite challenging.” More often, faculty spoke to the students’ busy schedules when attempting to coordinate a synchronous course activity, “Synchronous discussion groups have not worked well for our classes, but asynchronous discussion works well. Our students work all hours and we cannot find a time that meets everyone’s needs.”

Referring to synchronous group chats, one student said, “I think that this format is

also great, but requires a set time to meet and that is often difficult given everyone's schedules." Based on these examples, the educational experience of a synchronous forum takes second place to convenience. Data suggested that connecting with others in the online classroom was not dependent on synchronicity, but on content and frequency of contact.

The act of *not being present, selectively being present or avoiding presence* is a phenomenon of responding, ignoring, or eliminating; a *gatekeeper* role of sorts, and plays out at the hand of individuals. One might choose to not interact in various online discussions. In course discussions, some students did not meet the educators' expectations for interacting with others. One faculty participant stated that she, "emails them *students* [italics added] with a specific question to answer in the posting" thus, raising the expectation of participation and interaction with others. This *gatekeeper* phenomenon extended to email communications as described in the following offered by a student, "...I often find it difficult to get replies if I use standard email."

An additional barrier to connecting with others was brought to light by faculty participants as they shared thoughts about the *digital divide*, or those that did not have the technology to support the use of streaming video as an example. One faculty stated, "we rarely use streaming video...only small clips that you can download so we accommodate students with slower connections." Concurring with the previous statement, another expert said, "If streamed video is used judiciously they seem to like. It depends on the time for download and the computer they are using." Variances among student learners and their counterparts pose interesting issues related to access and consistency in the

cyber classroom. Creatively, some faculty participants developed *work-arounds* or unique approaches to problem solving in order to address these concerns. One shared the following, “During orientation, the students are able to download the audio/video streaming onto their hard drive so there is no longer delays on the phone line. It works really well.” Another offered this piece of advice, “ In some courses, we have taken the video, placed it on a CD and sent it to students who have trouble with dial-up connections. It is cheap and does the job.”

The infrastructure within which a faculty works to deliver an online course influences the ability to which presence can be relayed or communicated to others in the online classroom. Most faculty participants reported, “doing it all” with regard to developing and building their online courses. Only a few stated that they had access to an instructional designer to assist in course development. A more sophisticated course developed in conjunction with an instructional designer may incorporate features that more aptly support the notion of presence or connection to others. University infrastructures classified as student support services like libraries, bookstores, and tutoring centers offer various ways within which to support a sense of connectedness to others.

In an effort to support a sense of connectedness, faculty shared the following, which ultimately highlights the role and importance of a supportive university structure; “I include virtual office hours that allow students to chat, ask serious questions or just socialize if they need it.” Another offered, “I ask them to make an appointment for the online office hours. I am in my office but do not keep the window visible and will miss

someone who just drops by.”

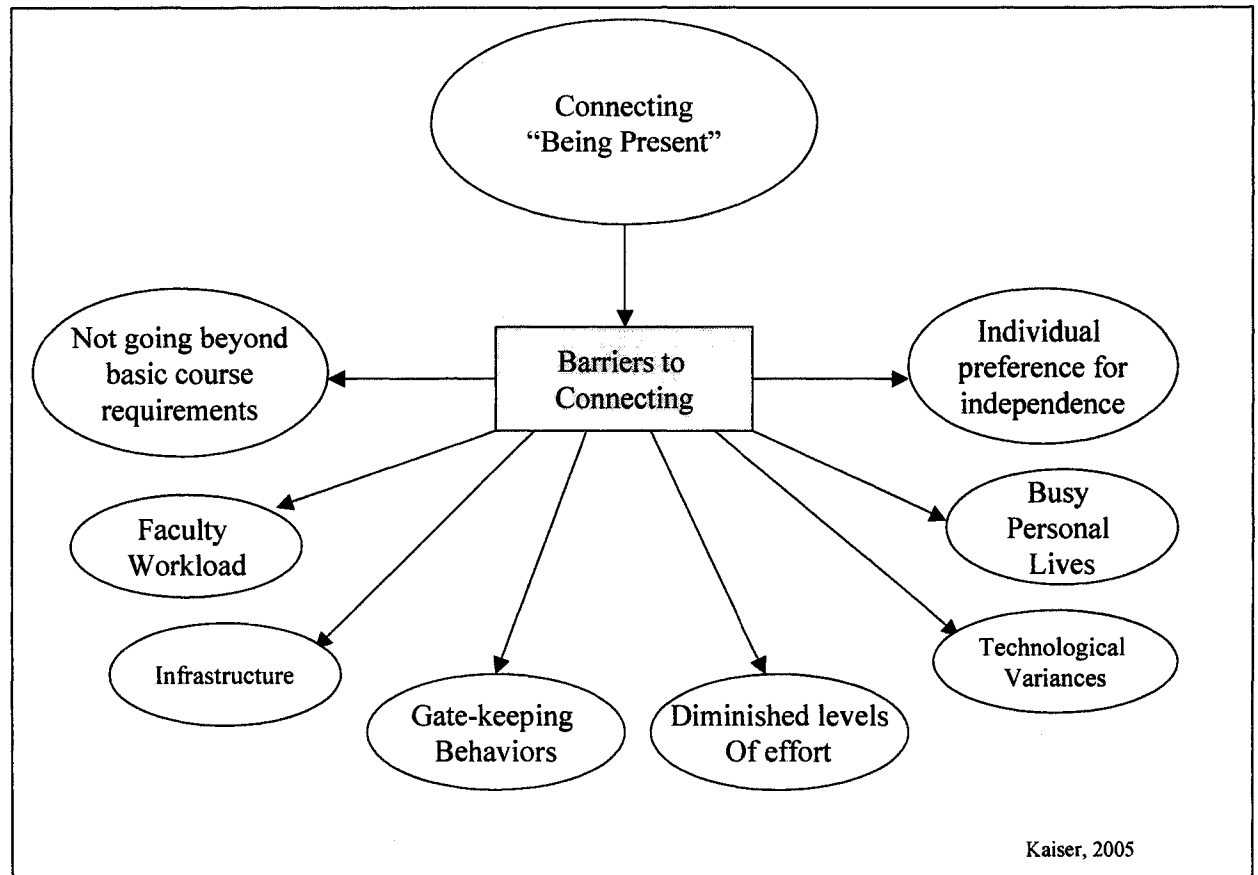
An interesting discussion grew from a debate on online office hours. One faculty shared the following,

“Oh our Dean told us last semester that they (online office hours) cannot count. We have to be ‘present’ in the office for a certain number of hours a week. Not sure where that came from. I am present at my work but not necessarily in the office for well over 40 hours...we do not get to count online office hours as real hours so I stopped that”

This statement offered an opportunity for further discussion about presence and the need to reconsider presence and its meanings especially for those involved in online education. Suggesting that the time did not count when a faculty member spent time online with an online student negated the premise of presence in disembodied places.

Other situations that had the potential for inhibiting connections included minimalist behaviors by students such as only meeting basic course requirements, preferences for independence (learning style), faculty workload, and student perceptions of diminished levels of effort on part of the faculty. One student shared the following, “... two of my classes the instructor just read the power point presentation --- no discussion how boring and a waste of my time.” Based on the data, Figure 4 depicts conditions that acted as barriers to connecting.

Figure 4. Barriers



### *Connecting or Being Present*

#### *Motivators*

Both faculty and students had examples of when contact with another was indicated. *Motivators*, or meeting needs captured issues such as clarification, affirming, supporting, confirming, interpreting, assessing progress, redirecting, discussing, and being able to ventilate. On a deeper level, these factors might represent internal motivators such as the fear of not doing well in class, or not being considered a “good teacher”.

One student found a valid motivator for connecting with others as was related in

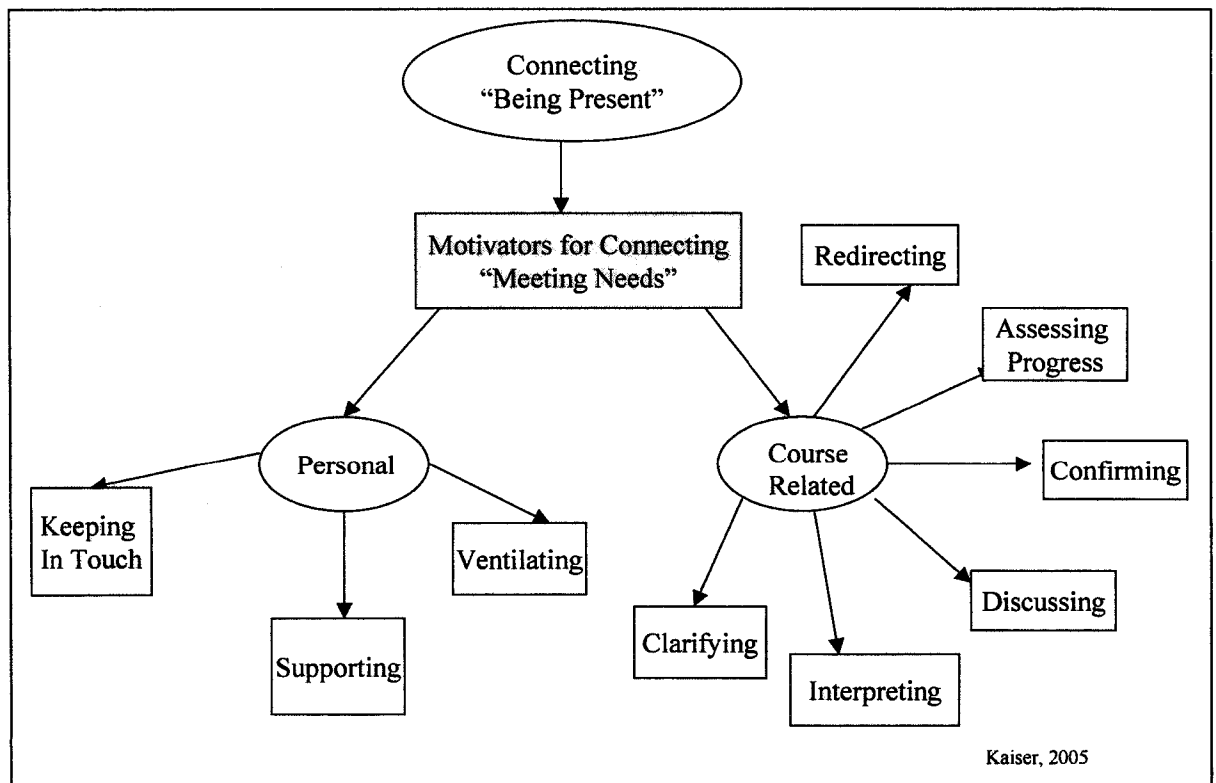
this passage, “Had a real difficult class and had fellow classmates email me asking if I had the same feelings as they did. We found out that a lot of us were having difficulties and formed a support group via emails.” This suggested that the motivation for connection could be driven by course activities rather than a personal desire. Another student had stated a combination of factors why connecting to others was important,

I feel that it is important because I do not live close to anyone else in school and sometimes I feel left out. So I call and email friends in my class to keep in touch.

It is also important that I do not miss any information.

This example demonstrated that the motivation for connection stemmed from a social aspect as well as course related needs. Figure 5 depicts the relationship of concepts associated with motivators to connect based on the study findings.

*Figure 5. Motivators for Connecting*



Kaiser, 2005

### *Ways of Connecting*

Connecting or being present to others in online courses occurred in a variety of ways. The connection varied by degree and intensity depending on the medium used. Many of the participants were involved in courses that were offered in their entirety via the Internet. Other courses were blended, or ones that utilized the Internet and met on occasion in a live, or face-to-face setting. *Making the connection* could be ascribed to two distinct categories; (a) in class, and (b) out-of-class. These connections could be viewed on a continuum from *high-tech* to *no-tech* or, live, face-to-face interactions and were based on need and perceived level of importance.

### *In-class Connections*

Within the online course environment, there were several vehicles with which one could use to connect with others. These were typically referred to as course tools, or structures built within most courses that allowed for text based entries or activity by both students and faculty. A widely used tool called a discussion board offered a place for faculty to post questions that students took turns answering and discussing, frequently commenting on the posting of other students. Faculty shared thoughts on the use of the discussion boards as a means of connecting in the online classroom, as well as a tool to measure student participation,

All students must participate to have credit for attendance. In the FTF (face-to-face) the student just has to show up. Some students dominate and others say nothing. The discussion board method requires participation from all. You still have the dominators, but they are taking up only the time it takes to read what

they say. They cannot interrupt a thought of a more meek student as happens in the FTF setting.

Another faculty stated, “I use the discussion board for clinical conference and it is correct that the students are more present with this modality.”

Students unanimously cited the use of discussion boards as a primary way of connecting with others in the online classroom. Use of the discussion board was viewed as a required activity and differences lie within how the use of the discussion board was perceived. Some students felt that the discussion board was the primary tool and way of communication in an online class saying, “the biggest thing that I do is checking the DB *discussion board* [italics added] daily and posting to others comments and questions.”

Some used this course tool as the course minimum; “We are required to make a comment on one person’s discussion board.” Whereas other students utilized this vehicle to a greater extent, “Well, I have posted interesting articles on the discussion board. Sometimes I comment on others discussion.” As an example of maximizing the discussion board one student shared the following,

In our particular specialty option we have a forum for non-class discussion. We share professional events, questions, new jobs, ideas, etc. There is that non-class connection. During class on DB *discussion board* [italics added] were also critiquing each other’s work, making suggestions as part of our learning process.

There were other technological tools that could be used to augment in-class communications. Considered an upgrade to the chat room technology, a product known as *Class Live* could be used to enhance interactions. One faculty member shared the



following, “Class live allows the instructor to communicate with students as in a chat room but also use a whiteboard to do things like drawing or formulas so that students can see as you describe.” Interjecting a bit of humor at the marvels of technology, one expert said, “How did we ever manage with manual typewriters and a simple landline phone?”

A second way that the in-class connection was made was through the use of chat rooms. At times, chat rooms were reserved as a place for students to meet to work on group projects before presenting a finalized product. One faculty shared a creative use of chat room technology,

For synchronous discussion with a larger enrollment I break the students into groups, assign a leader and recorder and ask they meet prior to scheduled time to determine answers to case study questions, post the group consensus and then at the synchronous time we can discuss and clarify the postings. This encourages all to participate. The leader, recorder roles rotate each month.

Due to the hectic schedules of working students, many faculty members did not utilize chat room technology for synchronous chats. Sharing the same dilemma that most reported, one faculty member stated, “We use only asynchronous discussions because of the difficulties to set specific times for working adults across multiple time zones.”

Students reported that using synchronous chats were rare due in part to the difficulty in scheduling conflicts. For one student participant this study was the first time that she had ever experienced an online synchronous chat. A student highlighted one caveat to this technology when she shared, “My classes use both. Though I do not like chat discussions, too difficult to follow unless small groups.”

The chat room technology has limitations mostly associated with finding a convenient time for everyone's participation. It was thought to add a dimension of *realness* to computer-mediated communications in that the connections were live and conversations were spontaneous.

An example of the highest end of technology being used in online courses was the use of video streaming. This high-tech feature was not discussed in the student groups. This was perhaps due in part to the fact that faculty participants represented three times the number of university settings than the student groups and therefore the likelihood of using this technology was greater among the faculty groups. Faculty discussed the advantages and disadvantages to using this technology. One stated, "We use streaming media for lectures. Although the lecture form may be critiqued, the sound of the human voice to the student creates another form of presence. It's also a different medium other than reading and writing." Another expert shared,

The students seem to enjoy the video streaming but even though I think it is really neat, I have had several students tell me they just ran off the text. I am disappointed that they don't like to listen to me. I guess it depends on each individual learning style.

Still another stated, "By streaming, students feel as though they are sitting in the classroom and hearing me. They have the opportunity to ask questions about the video but generally there are no questions."

The above examples of in-class approaches to connections were by nature *high-tech*. They required the use of a computer and an Internet connection in order to *make it*

happen.

*Out-of-class connections*

Students and faculty participants alike made connections with others in their online courses in ways that utilized methods that were out of the structure of the course itself. While many course platforms had an email function built into them, the use of private email connections was referred to frequently in discussions about how one connected to another. Of these out-of-class connections, they were categorized by the degree of technology, ranging from *high-tech* to *no-tech*.

Students shared many examples of using other high-tech means to connect with others in their courses. One student determined that there were differences in the ways that she connected, “little – post discussion responses to modules; big – send personal emails to classmates in response to their discussion boards.” Another student cited an example that was driven by the instructor, “My one instructor had us do a web page about ourselves and we could go and see what people were like.” Expanding the use of high tech tools, one student shared, “We do discussion board postings and occasional chat rooms. I use the Instant Messaging and web cast for other contact with students and faculty.” Another student stated, “...when you come online with instant messenger your buddies see and send messages.” Making a more formal connection, several students talked about forming a regular online support group, “...that is exactly why we formed our Wednesday night chat group.” Continuing with that theme another student shared, “it was our gripe night, kudos night and just general support group night.”

Some of the other out-of-class, *high-tech* approaches to connecting such as web

cast and the web cam required the use of additional hardware such as cameras and microphones. Others require special software programs that needed to be installed in the computers of those using the technology.

Categorized as *low-tech*, phone contact was the most frequently cited example for connecting with others outside of the online course structure. Typically, students used the phone to reach their instructors and at times other students. Several of the student participants were involved in blended courses, or those using both live class meetings at varying intervals coupled with the Internet based components. For those students, their needs to meet on a personal level were satisfied during one of the live, in seat classes. For those students taking purely online courses, the complexity of the problem at hand seemed to be the driving force for contact other than that made via computer-mediated communications. One student shared that “usually a phone call is made when you need direct contact.” Another student explained the reason why a different mode of connection was valuable, “I tend to talk a lot and sometimes have trouble getting everything that I want to say in an email, so phone or face to face is good.”

Dissatisfaction when a student received a grade that was less than expected was one of the reasons described that led students to seek out the instructor by phone (low-tech) or in person (no-tech). One student shared the following, If you do not agree with a grade given for an assignment, or need face time you can contact the instructor and set up face-to-face office time. Also, we are given all of our instructors phone #'s *numbers* [italics added] and email, so they can be contacted at any time. Supporting this

occurrence was an exchange between two participants that went in the following manner, “I had no phone contact with my instructors.” immediately followed by “you must have never received a bad grade!”

Other reported situations that spurred contact beyond the computer were issues that related to confusion about the course or specific activities such as, “I have called many times to my instructor when I have had difficulty understanding a posted question. Or difficulty running assigned software.” Perceived immediacy of a situation as determined by students was also cited as a reason to contact their instructor via phone or in person. One student shared, “Also the urgency. If it’s a program you can’t download you need help right away.” Another shared, “I often only have one day of the week that I can work on school and often need the answer right away...the phone helps then.”

Faculty reported using lower tech options for connecting with their students as well. Interestingly, phone contact initiated by faculty members was not as frequently mentioned as student initiated calls to faculty. One faculty participant shared, “I include phone to student communication in my online courses if only to connect a voice with a name and bring out questions that might not have been emailed.” Describing strategies used to connect with students, one faculty stated, “Use of pictures of self and possibly classmates, providing opportunity for phone numbers both at work and home so students can call...” One student described an instance of faculty phone contact, “I had an instructor call me once because I had not done an assignment correctly and she gave me a chance to correct it, but we discussed it by phone.”

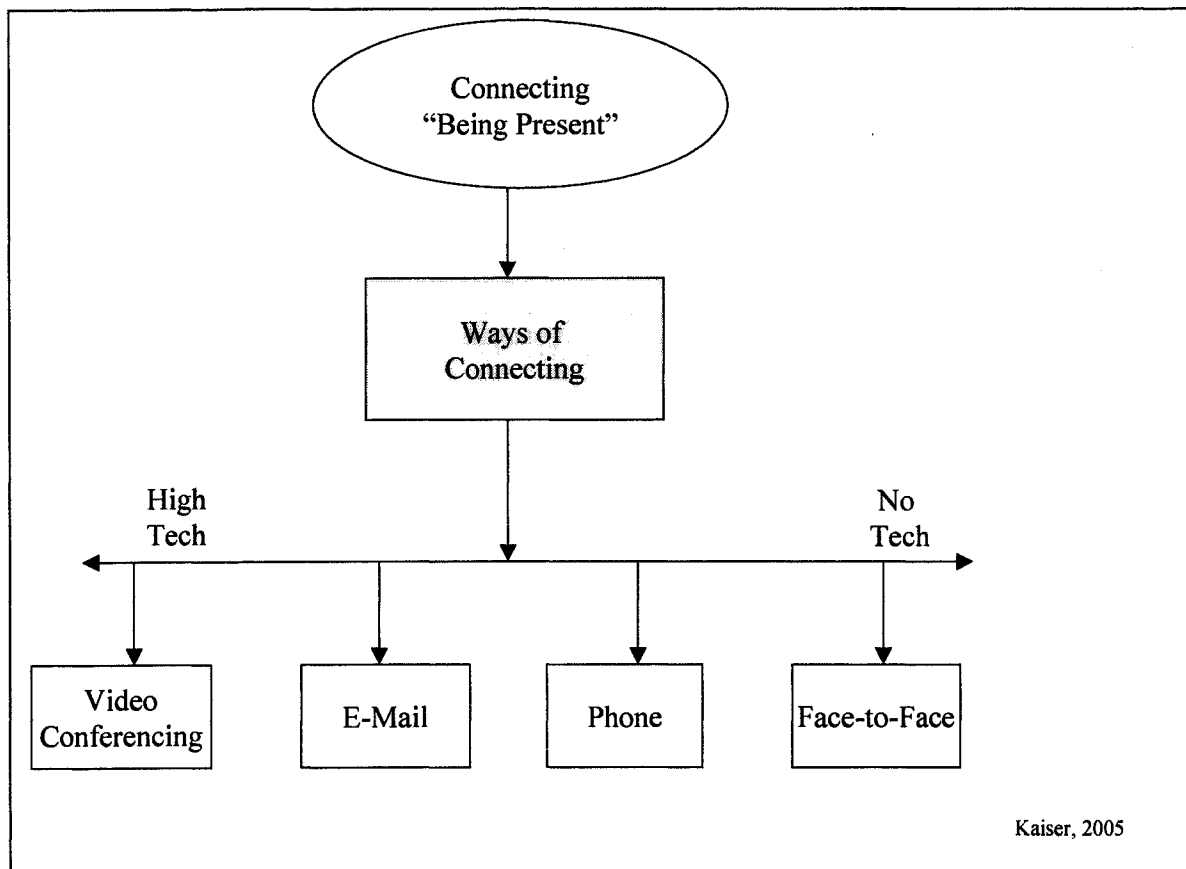
Students that participated in the blended courses found value in the occasional

face-to-face class meetings. Considered *no-tech*, live interactions represented the opposite end of the range of types of connection. Some courses are structured to meet live at the beginning and at the end of the course; others meet monthly in the live classroom. One faculty stated, “And what a challenge conveying presence is in the usual online course. I think starting with a face-to-face session is a good idea if it is realistic and feasible. This adds ‘warmth’ to future interactions.”

Summarizing student benefits of a blended approach to online learning one student shared, “We usually have an orientation class on campus and sometimes the course will conduct the mid terms and finals on campus, which gives us an opportunity to know the instructor and some of the classmates.”

The previous section highlighted the various ways that connecting with others occurred in online nursing courses. Summarizing, these connections occurred using both in- class means to out-of-class connections. These connections ranged from *high-tech* to *no- tech* in nature. Figure 6 depicted ways of connecting in online learning environments.

Figure 6. Ways of Connecting.



### *Establishing and Maintaining Presence*

Presence in online courses was a process that was initially established by the faculty member. Both faculty and student participants stated that establishing presence was done through *humanizing activities* or attempts to recreate the *real world* such as traditional campus settings and live classrooms. Examples of these humanizing activities included; sharing introductions, using personal greetings, adding photographs, self-sharing and disclosure, using humor, utilizing live, or synchronous chats, creating and using *emoticons*, and providing a private place for students to chat about non-course issues and *real-life* topics. One expert shared,

It is a problem delivering an online course when you do not actually see your students. I have taken pictures of my students at the beginning of the semester and am able to see who I am talking to. It seems to help among the students also.

Another faculty participant spoke about a style of sharing with students, "...to give students the chance to see that you are human, let them know occasionally that you've had a busy day, you are also studying, whatever..." Another expert shared her attempt to humanize the cyber class by establishing a "Coffee Shop",

I have had a 'Coffee Shop' section of the discussion for students to share non-course information, as they might talk about on a break. One semester a student's husband was seriously ill and the other students chimed in with a great deal of support. They have also shared the birth of many babies.

Student accounts of humanizing their interactions to enhance presence vary as widely as did their views related to the value of presence. One student described, "I find myself being more candid than I would probably be face to face. Also I take the time to respond to everyone and by doing that learn more about their ideas than I would in a class room."

One faculty participant said that using humor as a way of humanizing communications should be used cautiously, "humor or sarcasm can be very dangerous online." In a text-based environment without the benefit of typical embodied cues such as facial expression and tone of voice, humor can be easily misjudged. One faculty member shared the following experience with humor,

In the introductions last week one of the students used a humorous way of saying



she is a mother of three teenagers. I responded that it took me a minute to realize she was talking about the role of mother. Another student responded that she had been in the dark too!

Faculty and student participants reported that individuality and personalities emerge by creative use of these strategies. One faculty member who described interactions in the student lounge shared, “Students feel very free to express their ideas, thoughts, frustrations in the lounge. Lots of exclamation marks, emoticons, they’re very creative.” One student said, “I think that one’s individual personality will come through” when they referred to frequent contact with others in the online course.

Using personal greetings adds depth and a human element to computerized communications in online courses. One student shared, “I think it is important to call each other by name...for clarification of who you are talking to, but also adds the personal touch.” It could be said that this student was creating a reality that reflected human, face-to-face interactions found in the traditional classroom setting.

Establishing presence was time sensitive and varied among individuals. Over time, levels of connection grew and one faculty expert stated that, “I am very responsive to students as the course begins and as they mature in the connection I may be able to do less in communication and support for some.” Another expert concurred, “over time I am easily aware of my students and their needs comparable to a classroom situation.” Adding to the discussion another faculty expert stated, “Yes, over time students seem to form bonds among themselves as they would in a classroom...”

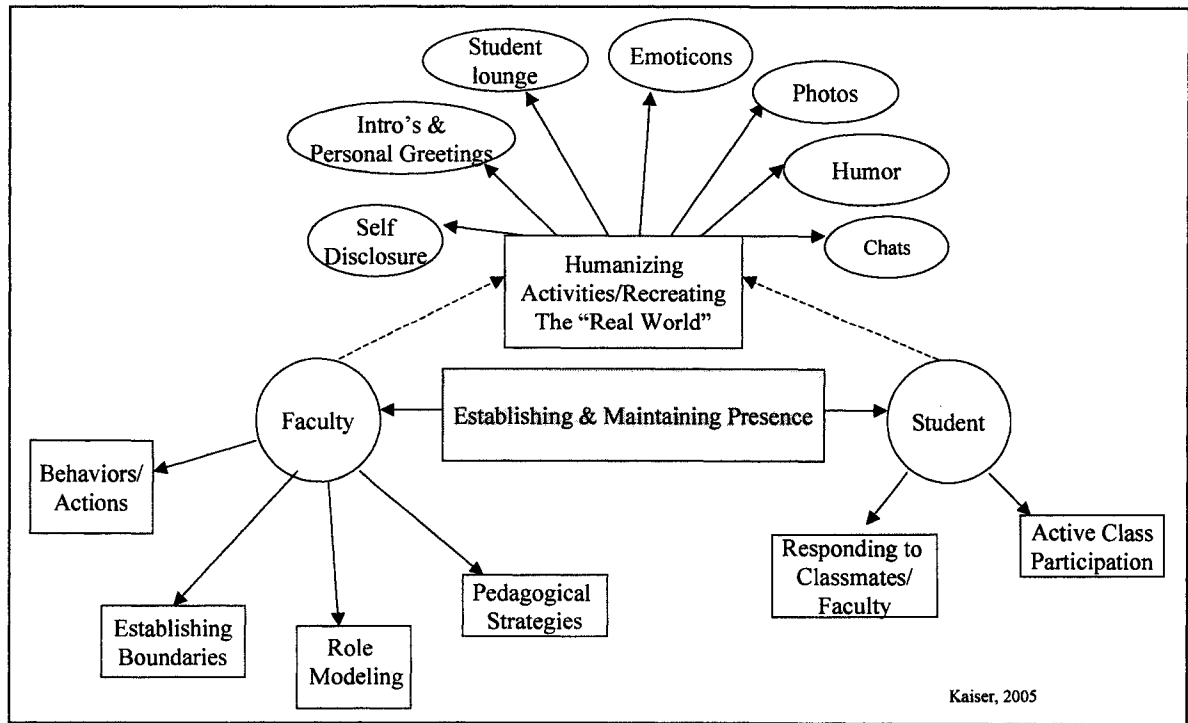
Faculty identified some course activities or pedagogical strategies that were

perceived as helpful in establishing presence such as; (a) structuring assignments into group work, (b) requiring a set number and quality of responses to the discussion boards, (c) controlling class size, and (d) creating online office hours. One faculty discussed her rationale for using small groups in online courses, “I also try to set up the class with ‘small groups’ in which they do discussion of various questions. They seem to bond and start getting to know one another in the small groups.”

Specific behaviors and actions of faculty that helped to establish presence were identified as; (a) being timely with responses to students, (b) actively participating in the class discussions, (c) providing meaningful, substantive feedback, and (d) honing their skills as a facilitator of learning. Relating to the role of a facilitator one expert stated, “knowing when to step in and guide and when to let the discussion go” was a key aspect to the changing role of a faculty member from a live, in-seat class to an online format.

Students valued the humanizing efforts made by faculty as shared by one student, “One professor has online office hours via chat, which allows you to ask questions and be involved. It also allows you to see questions that others might have, which makes it more like a classroom setting.” Finding the similarities between traditional and online courses demonstrated that many bridges have been crossed using technology to deliver education. Based on the data, Figure 7 depicts the relationships of the various categories related to establishing and maintaining presence in online nursing courses.

Figure 7. Establishing and Maintaining Connection (Presence).



### *The Balancing Act*

Faculty struggle with determining how much presence was the right amount to relay in online courses. Establishing a *therapeutic dose* of presence was considered a balancing act. Presence could be viewed on a continuum ranging from too much to not enough. Citing literature, one faculty shared, “For example, I have read in the literature that too much presence in a forum situation does not allow for the student(s) to interact freely.” In describing the *right amount* one faculty shared the following,

Yes, a new online educator has to develop a sense of the right amount of interaction. When I taught my first course I was online every 5 minutes and responded to every posting. I have learned that the students need the chance to

interact with each other and receive timely interaction from me. A fine line between too much and not enough.

Another faculty participant shared, “Knowing when to be quiet and when to jump in helps as well.” One faculty added, “I used to answer students’ emails all of the time 24/7. But then I was exhausted and felt married to them!”

Student’s perceptions about the availability of faculty at all times provided them with a sense that the faculty was indeed present for them. One student shared, “He is constantly online anyway, so he is available via instant messaging, email, phone. I receive very prompt response. He advised us when he will not be available via email, so we know he will not be responding.”

A faculty member further developed limit setting, or establishing boundaries as alluded to in the above comment when she shared the following, “They understood me when I said.... OK.... I will answer email during business hours...it was a simple limit that they could relate to quite easily and did not feel put to the side.” Communications surrounding availability eliminated the potential of students wondering if they were being ignored, overlooked or forgotten. This was supported by the following,

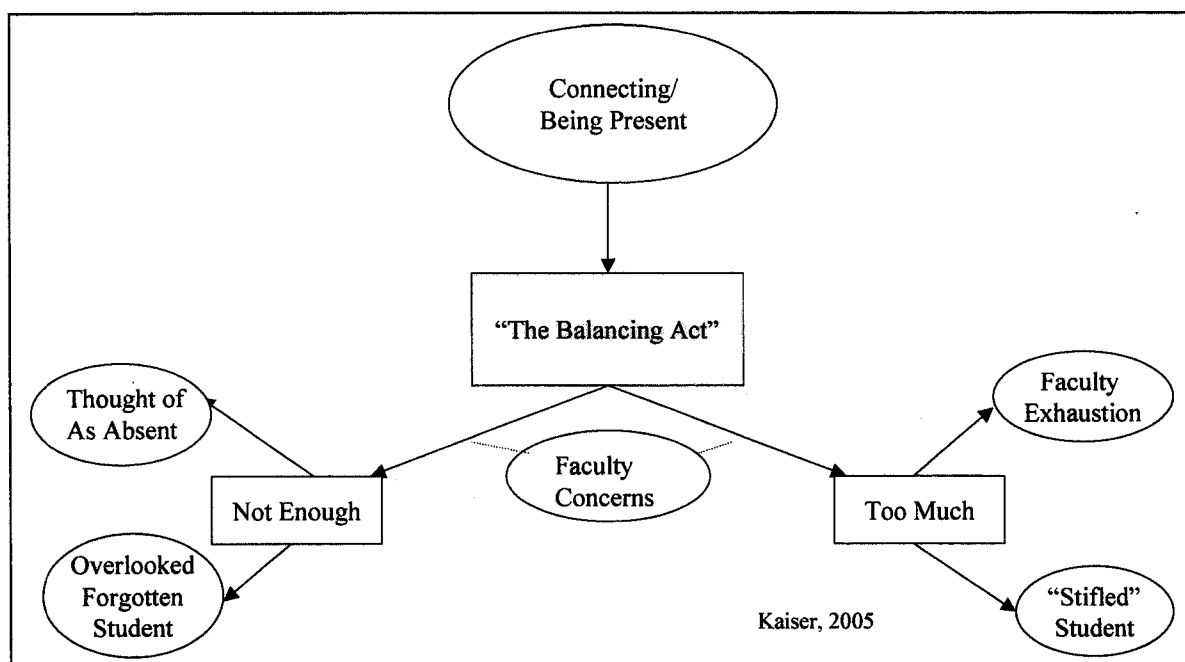
Yes – I tell them that I usually check my email once per day and not always every weekend day. They do understand that. But if you do not tell them that up front, they may think that you are not responsive.

Faculty shared the importance of *paying attention* to detail in the act of balancing their presence. One expert shared, “...Nothing is worse than overlooking a student’s question in a long topic discussion and having them point out to you that you

didn't answer their question.”

The following figure depicts the concepts associated with finding the balance with regard to presence in online nursing courses. Figure 8 was based on the study findings presented above.

Figure 8. “The Balancing Act”



### Consequences

Consequences of connecting or not connecting with others in the online classroom were identified by both groups of participants. Faculty reported that presence in online nursing courses was directly linked to positive course outcomes such as higher levels of learning, student satisfaction, and a lowered rate of student attrition. One faculty said the following, “...I do think presence is linked with reducing course attrition and promotes learning.” Another stated, “Connectedness leads to student

satisfaction and perceived learning.” While another concurred, “Presence is linked to satisfaction with online courses.”

Faculty in this study reported that presence was paramount in successful online teacher/student relationships and that successful relationships were key in leading to student success and learning. One participant captured this idea in the following, “I feel that presence is important for the student to feel a personal connection to the instructor and for the instructor to feel a connection to the to the student.” Without presence, one could surmise that the role of faculty would be diminished and learning equated to no more than an independent process for the student. One faculty shared the following with regard to the importance of responding to students in the online classroom,

...it behooves the instructor to respond to these comments, lest the students think of you as an absent instructor or one who is not interested enough to respond, or who didn't bother to read the comments in the first place.

Most students reported that *being with* and *connecting with* other classmates in the online classroom alleviated negative feelings of aloneness. One student shared, “I feel that is important because I do not live close to anyone else in school and sometimes I feel left out.” Presence allowed for student interaction that clarified course questions and provided deeper levels of understanding of material, which enhanced learning. One student offered the following, “We can discuss the issue of class assignments and see others insight if we have difficulty.” Students described that being able to *feel* faculty presence was an absolute necessity for student success. One student stated, “I took one class in which I had very little contact with the instructor...It was almost enough to turn

me off for good.” Having a connection with faculty validated their efforts, provided them with guidance, and urged their ongoing participation within the course.

An additional perceived positive consequence is that the experiences gained in online nursing courses may prepare nurses for future interactions with patients in disembodied environments of care. Several from both groups of participants felt that by participating in online courses, students were more prepared to practice in these environments. Looking toward the future, a final question posed to all of the participants of the study dealt with the care of patients in disembodied environments. Is it time to teach nursing students ways of being present to their future disembodied patients, and if so, how might one go about that task?

Educators conveyed mixed feelings when discussing whether it was time to start teaching students ways of being present to patients in disembodied places. Some were already addressing this future need in their current curriculum describing nursing courses that addressed tele-health and human technology interface. Faculty reported with mixed levels of enthusiasm about nursing moving in that direction and that yes, it is time to start teaching students how to be present to their soon to be patients in faceless environments of care. Faculty agreed that the time was upon them. One faculty, looking inward shared the following,

It’s hard to imagine health care in the future, but I’m sure lots of health care provider-client interactions will happen online. So I believe we are approaching a time when we need to address this with our students. But, we need to figure it out for ourselves.

Recognizing the value along with the challenges, one faculty stated, “I think it is important that we weave this into our nursing curriculum. However, I think our curriculum committee would be shocked if I proposed such a thread!”

Some faculty participants were already addressing this issue and shared their thoughts about what they were doing now.

Right On! We need to do this. In the undergrad program we introduce students to the concepts of telehealth and have them explore various telehealth applications. In the graduate clinical courses we introduce them to the telehealth technology and have them do a telehealth consult with a standardized patient (OSCE). Both students and standardized patients are excited about this.

Describing another telehealth course, one faculty stated, “In our telehealth nursing course they make heavy use of case studies to help students develop communication skills at a distance with patients.”

Another said,

I teach in a graduate course called Human Technology Interface. It is required of all MS students and one of the exercises is to participate in an interview with a future employer and speak to how they will transform and adapt their practice to accommodate the new information and communication techniques as well as the different ‘generations’ of patients such as Boomers, Net generation, and X-gen.

Linking online learning environments to this new skill one faculty shared the following,

Great question. I think online education prepares students for these



environments. I know when I took the course to become an online facilitator, I was very frustrated at first and nearly dropped out but by the third week, I was on track and in the groove. If a student is comfortable online, they recognize the potential pitfalls...”

One student made a similar connection,

When communicating via telephone or online, it is so important how you say things. Because you do not always have the benefit of inflection or tone, or even touch. You have to be aware of how your statements come across. I think the online learning experience gives you practice with the daily ins and outs of online communication and how to make it therapeutic.

Students had many ideas as to how they would interact with disembodied patients that would relay a sense of being present. Most comments were associated with skillful communication patterns such as; (a) immediate responses to patients, (b) care with wording, (c) frequent contact, (d) use of open-ended questions, (e) humanizing their interactions, and (f) taking time and being available. One student shared, “It’s important to reassure the patient that you are interested in them as a person so somehow you must convey that by using their name and identifying their problem.” Another student said, “As in real life, taking time to get to know them and really focus on their problems. By email we would probably have more time to get to offer the needed support.”

Another student addressed the importance of taking time,

I believe that taking the time to hear the patient and really listen to the problem is important. The patient then feels heard and supported. It is also vital

when the nurse does not have the sense of sight or touch to help with diagnosis.

Students addressed potential benefits of disembodied places of patient care.

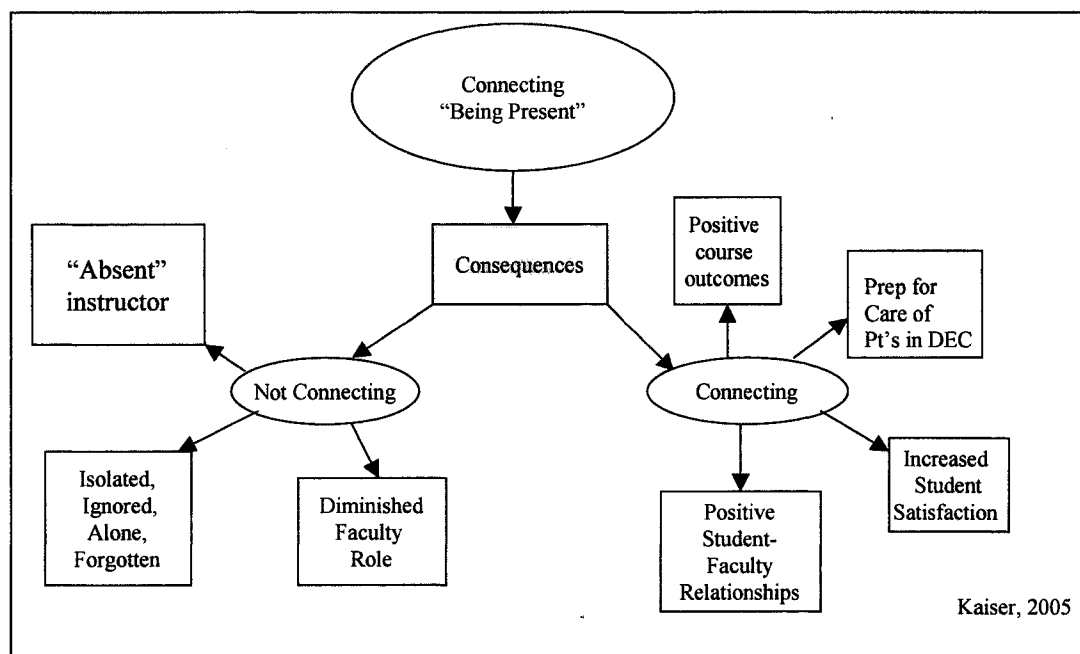
Among the reported benefits were; (a) avoidance of prolonged waiting times, (b) elimination of travel for homebound patients, and (c) providing a veil of privacy that might enhance patient disclosure. One student shared, “Also at our hospital there is a lot of waiting time in the clinics which angers and alienates the patients.” Another student spoke of a benefit to disembodied interactions, “Sometimes the lack of face to face is good because they can say what they really feel without embarrassment or the look of disbelief from the nurse.”

One student stated, “Health care is going by the way of telecommunication.

Online classes can teach and guide us into the world of technology.”

Summarizing student thoughts and looking toward the future, one student shared, “It is the way of the world these days and nursing needs to be in the leading edge of how to use technology in a positive, and caring way.” Universally it was thought that the future of nurse patient relationships and interactions would happen in faceless, disembodied places. Figure 9 illustrates the consequences associated with connecting or not connecting with others in online nursing courses based on the findings of the study.

Figure 9. Consequences



### Summary

This qualitative study examined presence in online nursing courses. Expert faculty and online nursing students were the study participants. Through the analysis of the data, the *Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses* was identified and described. The theory was situated within the context of online learning environments. Conditions and antecedents to the theory were identified and included components such as personal characteristics and attributes, actions and interactions taken by online course participants, as well as levels of technologic sophistication. Barriers to connecting with others were highlighted and included, (a) the gatekeeper phenomenon, (b) time management, (c) the digital divide, and (d) infrastructure. The core category of connecting or being present to others in online courses was developed.

Four key dimensions to connecting or being present to others were described as, (a) motivators, (b) ways of connecting, (c) establishing and maintaining presence, and (d) the “balancing act”. Individually, each of the dimensions provided detailed information of the theory components and together merged as an integrated whole. Completing the discussion of the theory offers views on the consequences of connecting or not connecting with others in online nursing courses. These consequences range from feeling alone and isolated to preparing for the future care of patients in disembodied environments of care.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

This chapter addresses several key features of this study: (a) the role of reflexivity in this study, (b) the meaning of presence in the interconnected contexts, (c) methodological issues, rewards, and challenges, (d) salient findings of the study, (e) redefining presence in technological places, and (f) recommendations for future studies.

### Reflexivity

Being reflexive during the course of this study was necessary so that personal experiences and beliefs would not unduly influence any aspect of this study. Those experiences and beliefs were considerable and served as the driving force that led to the selection of the study topic. Possessing an awareness of the potential for bias demanded that time was taken throughout the study to write extensive memos about the processes and decisions - questioning personal thoughts and assumptions along the way.

Moderating the online focus groups was one of the most challenging aspects of the study with regard to researcher bias. It was very difficult to not *jump in* and add personal experiences and opinions during the focus group discussions. The other

challenging piece to this study with regard to having experience teaching over twenty online courses left this researcher with very strong opinions. Trying to control the urge to draw rapid conclusions rather than delve deeper into the data was trying. Notes were made in a notebook separate from the data that outlined what or how this researcher would envision a particular situation. Returning to the data with that clarity assisted in keeping a fresh eye for what the participants were actually saying. This process helped to prevent *reading into the data* and allowed for the participant data to stand alone, clearly outside of this researcher's ideas or bias.

#### Presence in Three Interconnected Contexts

Exploring presence and its meaning across the three interconnected contexts of nursing, education, and technology called for discovering the meaning of presence in online nursing courses. This was the point of convergence for the three interconnected areas. Statistics demonstrated that more nursing courses were being offered online and predictions indicated the trend would continue to grow.

Both the nursing and educational literature conceptualized presence as a professional competency. Long recognized as a powerful therapeutic intervention in nursing, presence in nursing practice was typically associated with a physical component. Reluctance to view presence outside of the physical realm stemmed from the usual operationalization of the term that coincided with embodied, action-oriented behaviors that were commonly associated with presence as a therapeutic nursing intervention. Presence is considered a hallmark of the profession of nursing, capturing the caring aspects of the art and science. Because presence had been identified as a key intervention

in practice settings, discussions about presence and its direct link to clinical practice was an integral aspect of nursing education.

In education, presence was viewed as a teaching strategy. In the past, educators believed that their physical presence was the vehicle with which they were able to communicate their ideas to students. With the changing faculty role, due in part to distance and online learning opportunities, studies have demonstrated that *physical* presence was not as crucial as once thought. According to many studies however, *presence* of the faculty was as important as ever. The difficulty then, was to be able to demonstrate or relay presence to students without reliance on the physical self. Faculties were now taking on *ways of being* with their students in ways not previously described.

In the field of technology, teleoperators *strove* to achieve a sense of presence in their virtual environments. The more *real* a disembodied, technical place seemed and felt, the more apt the individual interacting in that environment would feel or believe that presence was being relayed. Although not considered presence in the true sense, technological advances such as streaming video and the ability to add animation to virtual environments tended to enhance the feeling and essence of presence by making the virtual environments seem, or appear to be more *real*.

### Methodology

Conducting synchronous, online focus groups as a means to collect data in this study generated many different topics appropriate for discussion. Among the salient points were the challenges and rewards of selecting this approach as well as issues related to rigor.

### *Challenges*

There were many challenges to overcome during the course of this study. These challenges included; (a) communications, (b) scheduling, (c) recruitment, (d) inclusion of international participants, (e) technology, and (f) disembodied interactions. Scheduling, clarifying, issuing *userid's*/passwords, and answering questions required an intense amount of e-mail communication back and forth. E-mail was checked 5 to 6 times a day to ensure that a participant was not being overlooked. Developing and utilizing a system to track contacts and communications was extremely beneficial. Tracking when *userid's* and passwords were sent to participants as well as logging the participants' name and e-mail address in this tracking system eased efforts during repeated contacts.

Scheduling the focus groups began the week after the Thanksgiving holiday nearing the end of the academic semester. This was problematic for many nurse educators who expressed a desire to participate but could not fit a group into their schedule until after the New Year. Being mindful of the needs of the targeted sample is important so that scheduling of activities won't interfere with known busy times in participants schedules.

Because of the limiting inclusion criteria for faculty and student participants, recruitment efforts posed more of a challenge. More participants might have been scheduled for focus groups if the inclusion criteria had been less stringent. Despite having contacted several universities that offered online nursing courses, only three requested a full packet describing the study. Ultimately none of the universities contacted followed through with allowing access to their online nursing student population so that invitations



to participate could be extended to them. This urges a discussion about the role and importance of research in nursing education. Did these universities fail to follow-up with this offer because the activities associated with doing so represented an additional amount of work that no one had time for? Or, was there a lack in the mechanism of institutional approval at some of these universities? One might ask, if there was a movement away from scholarly research in the area of nursing education? If so, why? In *NurseWeek* (2004) it was reported that the University of San Francisco was just awarded a 2.1 million dollar grant for an accelerated doctoral program to produce more nursing faculty. With this attention to the role and importance of nurse educators, should not scholarly research on issues surrounding pedagogies and nursing education be supported?

The synchronous nature of the method itself proved to be a challenge in recruiting and retaining international participants. Time differences between North America and many European countries made scheduling focus groups difficult despite having scheduled several that would have been in the late afternoon or early evening for many interested international subjects. The other factor that proved to be problematic was after hearing that the focus groups would be synchronous in nature, many interested international participants declined because they were not comfortable with the rapid paced exchange of a synchronous, online focus group in a language other than their own. Ideally there would be enough participants in every language that would eliminate this situation, but then translation of documents would add another dimension to address in accessing the data. Another viable option to ease the comfort of international participants would be to establish an asynchronous forum to allow for their input when they would

be able to carefully prepare responses in English.

Technology was a large stumbling block during the course of conducting these online focus groups. Various Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were not compatible with WebCT, requiring some participants to use other browsers to access the site. Others were unable to join due to firewall issues at their places of employment. Others had difficulty setting up their browser or enabling Java, a feature required to utilize the chat room technology. Some participants did not receive the attachments that they were sent describing how to access the site. Providing ample time prior to the scheduled focus group for participants to check out these technological nuances was an important consideration. However, many people were not interested in *jumping through the hoops* to assure that they were able to participate and therefore either did not show-up for their group or declined participation.

Some problems were identified with the processes of sending the e-gift certificates to participants as a thank-you. While the online bookstore was fast in sending the “e-certificates” to individuals via e-mail, a few people did not receive them. This required spot-checking and re-contacting participants to assure that they were received. Ultimately, a statement was added to the closing remarks of each focus group asking participants to contact me if they did not receive their gift certificate within 24 hours. Ultimately, two certificates had to be mailed using the regular postal service. This problem may have been attributable to the new anti-spam programs that prevented delivery of the certificates from unknown senders.

Perhaps the most interesting phenomenon that presented challenges in this data

collection method dealt with behaviors and actions of individuals in disembodied places. This researcher was quite amazed at the number of no responses to the “e-invitations” to participate. In fairness, many of these may have been due to erroneous e-mail addresses and technological difficulties such as downed servers. However, the more that this situation was considered the more it seemed like there was more going on than met the eye. Disembodied interactions allow for selectivity by the receiver. This gate keeping phenomenon was easier to enforce in faceless or disembodied interactions than in live, embodied interactions. Disembodied environments supported by technology offer individuals the opportunity to determine if and when one enters their domain.

#### *Rewards*

The rewards of this method outweighed the challenges described above. Examples of the positive aspects of this approach to data gathering included; (a) capturing a broad audience, (b) cost savings, (c) immediacy, and (d) data management.

Being able to connect with a group of experts from a variety of locations in order to discuss a topic added credibility, consistency and richness to the data obtained. The interplay and interaction among the participants enriched the data by taking some of the topics beyond some of the pre-set questions. Having the freedom to hold several groups in order to capture many experts’ thoughts added a distinct level of flexibility.

A virtual connection saved a tremendous amount of money related to travel, time off work, lodging, and meals. In the day of the shrinking dollar and increased work demands, many subjects might not have been able to travel to a central location to participate in a traditional focus group. Global concerns about traveling in a time of

uncertainty might have also limited the number of participants in this study. Without extramural funding this researcher would not have been able to fund travel, meals, and lodging for 33 participants. An additional cost-saving feature of this study was that there were no costs related to transcription of lengthy taped interactions.

Initially, immediacy was another satisfying feature of this approach. The course of action from initial recruitment activities to the completed data collection was a very rapid process. In retrospect, planning for more time between each focus group would have been beneficial as it would have allowed a more thorough review of each transcript which in turn would have potentially generated ideas about reworking or altering some of the questions posed to each group of participants that would have in turn enhanced the theoretical sampling.

Transcripts were sent to participants for their review and comment as part of an audit trail. For the most part, these transcripts were sent to all participants the same day as their focus group. This rapid turn around allowed for participants to have a fresh recollection of the discussion.

Within the structure of the course shell, all chat room activity was automatically archived. That tremendously simplified the management of data. This assured that all of the data were accurate in content. Chat room logs were accessed and then copied and pasted in to a word processing program. Data were then organized by question and copied and pasted into another document set with a numbered, two-columned format that allowed for initial coding activities and memo writing.

*Rigor*

To add credibility and validity to the study findings, a member check or audit trail was established. As noted previously, complete, verbatim transcripts were sent to all participants shortly after participating in a focus group. Participants were invited to review the transcripts for accuracy and to add any additional thoughts or ideas that they might have on the topic. These lengthy documents were sent as e-mail attachments. There was a poor response to this process. Less than 6% of the participants responded that they thought the transcripts “looked fine” and had no comment. This activity did not achieve its intended purpose. Reflecting on the reasons why this might have occurred the way it did led to the following conclusions; first, participants are too busy to read long, detailed transcripts, second, participants knew that the transcripts were accurate since they were archived within the chat room and last, there might have been a technological glitch in sending or receiving them. In an attempt to improve this process, there are a few suggestions to consider in the future. First, the researcher might choose to condense the transcripts and highlight the salient features or themes of each focus group. This would decrease the amount of material that the participant would have to read and would offer them a summary of the major perspectives. Since technological errors interfere with computer mediated communications, setting up a system to ensure that your e-mail was received such as automatic receipt verification would take the guesswork out of questioning whether the intended person received the document.

Discussing rigor in online research, Mann & Stewart (2000) suggested that one inherent weakness in online studies was the inability to verify who your participants

were. This position was weak because of the fact that no one knows who is at the other end of a computer terminal. In traditional research, one could question if any researcher can really verify who a participant was and what they were saying was truthful. In this study, purposive sampling was conducted and experts were contacted directly. Faculty members who had already participated in the study referred student participants. And other student participants were aware of the study through a posting on a nursing school listserv.

### Findings of the Study

The findings of this qualitative study suggest a *Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses*. The theory encompasses the initial phase of behaviors and actions, (conditions or antecedents), and the central category of connecting or being present in online nursing courses encapsulated various dimensions and properties. As a reminder, figure 2 depicts the theory in its entirety.

All of the findings of this study related to or hinged upon the central or key category of connecting. Connecting or being present was a difficult phenomenon made more complex when examining it within the context of disembodiment. Being present or connecting with others in online nursing courses required certain types of behaviors and actions by both faculty members and students. Certainly, degrees of these behaviors occurred, but the more optimal the behaviors and actions were, the greater chance that connecting with and being present to others would be apparent and felt. A main assumption of this premise was that these sophisticated behaviors and actions that nurse educators and students took were conditions or antecedents to the establishment and

maintenance of presence in online nursing courses.

A key finding relates to one of the positive consequences of making a connection in online nursing courses. Both expert educators and students reported that the experience of taking an online course provided invaluable experience and training with respect to understanding how to connect with others in disembodied places. Certainly this aspect provided only an experiential component to the care of these future patients, and experts reported several structured courses designed to address this growing practice area.

Beyond the discussion about the *Theory of Connecting/Being Present in Online Nursing Courses*, lies the interesting situation of the negative case that presented in the findings. One student participant did not value presence in online nursing courses. In fact, taking online courses was the motivation for avoiding “touchy feely” behaviors and the strain of having to listen to others “blab on and on.” Does this position represent a preferred learning style? Does it represent a personality trait? Taking the opportunity to explore this negative case more fully might have led to some answers to these questions.

Discussing the use of online office hours, one faculty participant reported that the Dean of the school did not recognize this activity as valid nor did it count toward the required number of office hours faculty were required to fill. This appeared to represent a failure to recognize presence in disembodied places as being *real*. This position was reflective of positions that require physicality be required to relay presence. The challenges that lie ahead in reconceptualizing presence in disembodied places were very apparent when examining this scenario. Faculty workload related to online courses has been well documented in the literature and generally is thought to exceed the workload

associated with traditional classes. If institutions of higher learning were expanding their online course offerings, reconsidering traditional values and expectations for faculty was indicated.

### Redefining Presence in Technological Places

The term *presence* fits many traditional contexts that were familiar and known to nursing and education. Since technology has entered both of these domains, the meaning *presence* has taken on a different dimension that needs clarification. *Presence* does not quite capture the entire meaning in technological, disembodied places. This study demonstrated the shortcomings of the term in online nursing courses. Data obtained in this study suggests that presence is different in today's online learning environments. Participants speak to the many ways that presence is changing. Proposing a new term to better encapsulate the meaning of *connecting with* or *being present* to others in a technological place is appropriate. *Technect* could be used and defined as to connect with or be in the presence of others in technological, disembodied environments. *Technecting* could be defined as the act of connecting with or being present to another in technological, disembodied environments.

### Recommendations for Future Studies

Studying presence in disembodied places opens the doors for many future studies. Continuing with the exploration of presence in online nursing courses would allow for a thorough examination of those individuals that did not feel that presence in online nursing courses was valuable or necessary. This would assist in delineating between the two opposite positions and aid in articulating the difference between the two.



Extending this study using a comparative design with two cohorts, examining individuals that are involved in online courses that do *not* have any live, or face-to-face meeting sessions to determine what presence means to them would perhaps produce clearer understanding that would further conceptualize this theory. Differences between the two if any would enrich and advance this study's findings.

Empirically tested, it is known that people learn differently. Using the work of Belenky et al. (1986) as a basis of exploration in future work would lead to studies that look at gender differences in online courses and the role that presence has in those situations. Belenky and colleagues identified women as *connected knowers* that relied on connections with others as a way of acquiring knowledge. Zukas (2000) also alluded to the gender differences when he suggested that being disembodied might not be so bad. Salmon (2000) suggested that shy students might not have to fight their way into online classes. Study questions could be, does presence play a part in learning? If so, how does it and to which type of learning does presence have an impact?

Additional methodological approaches could also be used in the study of presence in online nursing courses. Participant observation in online courses would be a viable option for exploring presence in online environments. Content analysis of text-based interactions gleaned from online courses would be an additional option for examining presence in online learning environments.

Conducting asynchronous focus groups would allow input from many experts from around the world in an environment that would be less pressured than the

synchronous approach. This format would allow for a longer period of time to consider responses to questions and thereby allow for a more thoughtful and complete sharing of thoughts by participants.

Extending the work of examining presence in disembodied places is important future work. As more patient interactions are occurring in disembodied places, determining how presence is relayed and received in these areas of care is paramount for the future of nursing. Addressing this concern to a variety of populations that nurses' deal with would add a tremendous body of knowledge to this growing phenomenon. Determining how to cross the *digital divide* to extend this type of care to disadvantaged populations such as the illiterate, incarcerated, rural populations, and other high-risk groups calls for careful consideration in planning for the future.

The future is upon us. As nurses, both care providers and educators, we must be prepared to learn and transfer those skills in a technological world. Meeting the challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires attention to and a willingness to embrace future research in these areas. Funding opportunities must be made available to support this type of research as nursing moves further into technological and disembodied spaces.

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## Appendix B

### *Presence in Online Nursing Courses*

#### Directions to Cyber Focus Group

1. Using Internet Explorer or Netscape type in the following URL:  
<http://homer.acusd.edu:9300>
2. Click on: Log into myWebCT
3. Enter your WebCT ID - **purple**
4. Enter your password: - **Nurse**
5. Then click on Presence: Cyber Focus Group
6. Then click on Focus Group dated **November 15, 2003**

## Appendix C

### Browser Set-up Information

Netscape Navigator & Communicator 4.7 (Java Script)  
Select **Edit** then choose **Preferences**

1. Select **Advanced** from the left-hand pane
2. Make sure the **Enable Java** and **Enable JavaScript** boxes are checked

Click **OK**.

---

Netscape Navigator & Communicator 4.7 (Cache)

1. Select **Edit** then choose **Preferences**
2. Click the + sign or arrow next to **Advanced** to view more options
3. Select **Cache**
4. Select the **Every Time** radio button at the bottom

Click **OK**.

---

Netscape Navigator 4x (Enable cookies)

1. Select **Edit** then choose **Preferences**
2. Select **Advanced** from the left-hand pane
3. In the **Cookies** section of the right-hand pane select **Accept All Cookies** or **Enable all Cookies**

Click **OK**.

---

Netscape Navigator 6x (Enable cookies)

1. Select **Edit** then choose **Preferences**
2. Click on the arrow next to **Privacy & Security** in the left-hand pane and then select **Cookies**
3. Select **Enable cookies for the originating website only**

Click **OK**.

---

Internet Explorer 4+, 5+ (Java Script)

1. From the **Tools** menu, Click **Internet Options**
2. Click the **Security Tab**
3. Click the **Custom Level** button
4. Scroll down to the **Java Permissions** and choose either **Low, Medium or High safety**

Click **OK**

---

**Internet Explorer 4+, 5+ (Cache)**

1. Select **Tools** then choose **Internet Options**
2. Select the **General** tab
3. Select **Settings** from Temporary Internet Files
4. Select the **Automatically** radio button

Click **OK**

---

**Internet Explorer 5+(Enable cookies)**

1. Select **Tools** then choose **Internet Options**
2. Select the **Security** tab
3. Click the **Custom Level** button
4. Scroll down to the **Cookies** section
5. Set **Allow cookies that are stored on your computer** to **Enable**
6. Set **Allow per-session cookies** to **Enable**

Click **OK**

---

**Internet Explorer 6+(Enable cookies)**

1. Select **Tools** then choose **Internet Options**
2. Select the **Privacy** tab
3. **Enable Cookies:**

If using a **default** setting, move the slider to select any of the following privacy settings:

- Medium High**
- Medium**
- Low**
- Accept all cookies**

If custom setting:

- Click the **Advanced** button
- Select the **Override automatic cookie handling**
- Select **Always allow session cookies**
- Click **OK** to return to the **Privacy Tab**

Click **Apply** then **OK**

---

If you use America Online for web access, you need to have AOL installed as well as IE or Netscape that you have downloaded and installed on your machine. **Important: Do not use the AOL browser! Connect with AOL, but then minimize it and use the other browser.**



## Appendix D

## “e-invitation”

Dear (name of invited participant)

I am a doctoral candidate at the University of San Diego Hahn School of Nursing and I am doing a study surrounding the notion of presence in online courses for nurses for my dissertation. You have been identified as a nursing scholar who has either addressed the notion of presence or who has delved into the many facets of online nursing education through publications or presentations.

With the increasing number of online courses in nursing, presence has emerged as an important topic to nurses and educators alike. Nursing has typically been known for its personal touch and human contact that includes relationship building. There are many new challenges for nurse educators in a cyber world. One challenge is to effectively impart ways of being with clients using methods other than the modeled behavior that occurs in face-to-face interactions. Nurse educators are now preparing nurses that will be having professional interactions with clients in various virtual environments of care. An additional challenge for nurse educators is to design and deliver online courses that support a sense of connectedness or presence with other students and faculty members. The model attached depicts the integration and synthesis of the existing literature based on this researchers understanding and provides a framework for developing lines of inquiry that will answer the study questions.

I would like to invite you to participate in a cyber focus group in order to engage in a discussion about presence and its importance in online nursing education. If you are

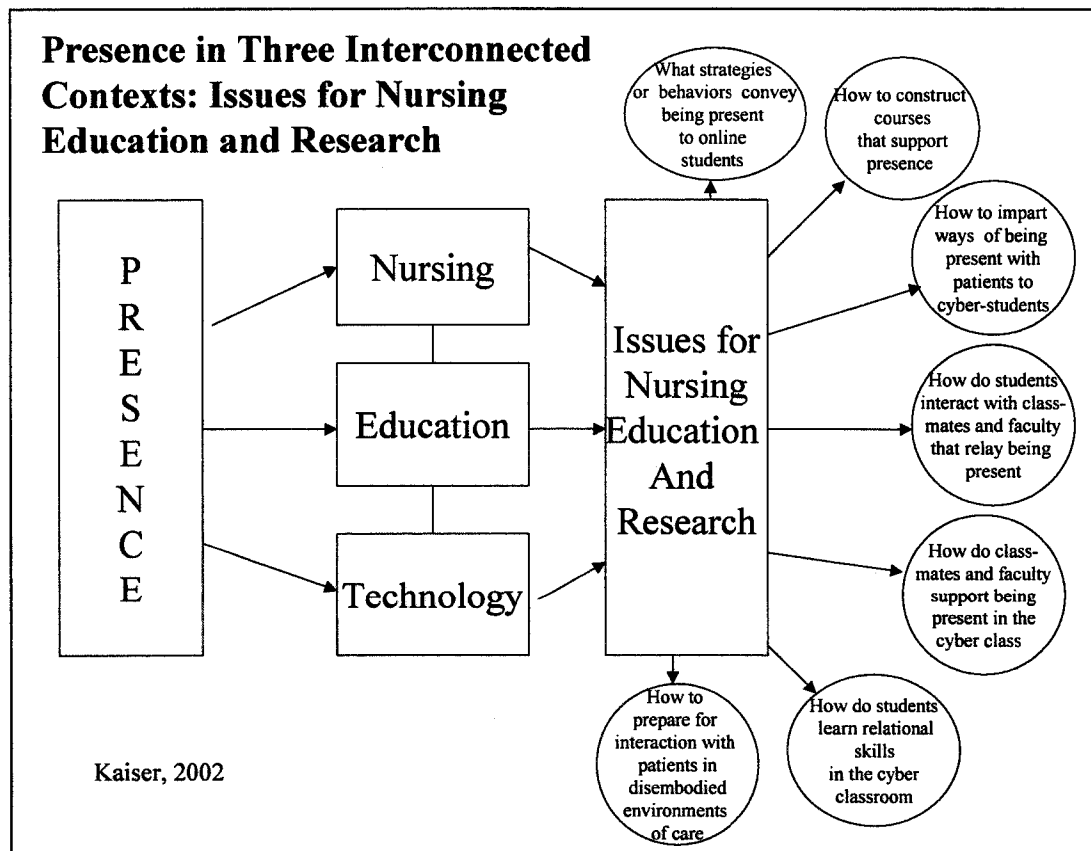
interested and willing to participate, please respond to this “e-invitation” to me at [USDPhDStudent@aol.com](mailto:USDPhDStudent@aol.com).

Upon receipt of your interest I will email you with four attachments; a) a consent form, b) a participant profile, c) a schedule of cyber focus group chat times, and d) instructions on checking your browser. I anticipate that the cyber focus group will run for approximately 90 minutes.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope that you will be able to join me in this high-tech discussion surrounding presence in online nursing courses.

Sincerely,

Lisa Kaiser RN, MSN, PhD(c)



## Appendix E

## Thank-you Follow-up Letter

I am delighted that you are able and willing to participate in a “Cyber” Focus Group on *Presence in Online Nursing Courses*. Currently there are enough interested participants to schedule 2 focus groups!!! Please select one of the following groups: **Thursday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003 @ 5pm PST , Saturday, December 13, 2003 @ 8am PST and Saturday, December 20<sup>th</sup> @ 8am PST**. If these dates/times don't work for you let me know, as I hope to be scheduling 1-2 more!

I am attaching the following in this email to you; 1) participant information sheet, 2) information about your browser and compatibility with WebCT, and, 3) a participant profile.

Please return the participant profile to me via email attachment. **In your email please let me know which group you can attend**. Upon receipt, I will send you the directions on how to get to the Cyber place (along with your userid and password).

Again, my many thanks and I am looking forward to this experience with each of you. I will send you a reminder a few days before your scheduled group!

Sincerely,

Lisa Kaiser RN, MSN, PhD(c)

[USDPhDStudent@aol.com](mailto:USDPhDStudent@aol.com)

## Appendix F

### Participant Information Sheet

This study is designed to generate a discussion utilizing a focus group approach in order to learn more about the concept of presence as it relates to online nursing classrooms. This study is being done as a dissertation for my doctorate in nursing at the University of San Diego, Hahn School of Nursing and Health Sciences. This focus group will be utilizing the Internet and will be held in an empty online course shell accessing the synchronous chat room feature. You will be provided an access code to enter the cyber place along with a procedure on gaining access to the site. The discussion generated will be archived and saved to hard copy for analysis.

The cyber focus group will last for approximately 90 minutes. Potential risks to participants include those associated with prolonged use at a computer such as fatigue, and eyestrain. There may be some discomfort adapting to this new approach in focus group methodology that requires comfort with keyboard entry and typing.

Benefits of participation include; a) participation in trialing an innovative use of the Internet in research, b) gaining insight into the role and importance of presence in online learning environments and c) garnering an understanding of the role of presence in professional nursing practice.

Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time during the study. You will be given a \$25.00 gift certificate to Amazon.com as a token of appreciation for your participation.

I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have. I can be reached at

760-436-4522 or via email at [USDPhDStudent@aol.com](mailto:USDPhDStudent@aol.com). Dr. Diane Hatton, my dissertation chairperson can be reached at 1-619-260-7481 or via email at [hatton@sandiego.edu](mailto:hatton@sandiego.edu).

Your participation in this study extends beyond the focus group. About one week after your focus group I will contact you via email to see if you have any additional thoughts or comments. After the data from your focus group has been summarized I will send you a copy for your review and comment. You may withdraw from the study at any point in time.

While you may be recognized within the focus group setting itself, your name and personal details will not be disclosed in the findings of this study. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants. Confidentiality will be maintained in any publications that may be generated from this study. There will be no random sampling of data from other Internet sources, nor will there be any mining of data from other sources.

All data generated from the cyber focus group will be saved in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to the principal investigator. After 5 years, the data will be destroyed.

There is no agreement, written or verbal, beyond that which is expressed in the participant information sheet. I understand the above explanations and on that basis, by attending the cyber focus group my consent to participate is implied. It is recommended that you print a copy of this information sheet for future reference.

## Appendix G

## Sample Schedule of Focus Groups

Please choose which focus group you would like to attend. Place the number 1 next to your first preference, the number 2 next to your second choice. You will be notified as to which group you have been assigned. Remember, if these don't work well for your schedule, please let me know what would!

\_\_\_\_\_ Monday, December 1, 2003 - 6am Pacific Standard Time

\_\_\_\_\_ Tuesday, December 2, 2003 - 11am Pacific Standard Time

\_\_\_\_\_ Thursday, December 4, 2003 – 7am Pacific Standard Time

Appendix H  
Nurse Expert Profile

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Educational Preparation/Degree(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Years teaching experience \_\_\_\_\_

Online teaching experience? Yes No

If yes, how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

what platform or software was used? \_\_\_\_\_

what type of course is it? \_\_\_\_\_

what type of program is the course you teach in? \_\_\_\_\_

how much involvement do you have ie: course design, teaching, \_\_\_\_\_

How are you linked to the Internet?

Dial-up \_\_\_\_\_ High Speed Cable \_\_\_\_\_ DSL \_\_\_\_\_

Do you typically work from home or school? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever participated in an online focus group before? Yes No

If yes, describe your experience briefly:

Have you ever participated in a traditional focus group before? Yes No

Does your place of employment utilize online education for nurses? Yes No

What degrees are offered? \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix I  
Student Profile

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Educational Preparation \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently taking courses to obtain a degree? Yes No

If yes, which degree: \_\_\_\_\_

Is this your first online course you have taken? Yes No

If no, how many have you taken? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, what was your primary motivation in taking an online course?

Geographic \_\_\_\_\_

Time flexibility \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer online format to traditional course \_\_\_\_\_

What software or platform is your course delivered (ie: WebCT, Blackboard,  
eCollege) \_\_\_\_\_

Do you plan on taking more online nursing courses? Yes No

If no, explain why:



## Appendix J

## Sample Emoticons

Smile	:)
Frown	:(
Hug	()
Kiss	:-*
Wink	;)
Angry	(:~&
Wide-eyed	8 )
Shouting	:-V
High Five	^5
Empty Glass	\_/\
Glass half full	~/\
Long stemmed rose	@>--->-----
Laughing	:-D
Face to Face	}}
Wizard	==#:-)
Confused	:~/
Angel	0 :-)
Santa Claus	o<:-)
Shocked	#:-o

Retrieved [www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/emoticons.html](http://www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/emoticons.html)