PREPARING LEARNING COMMUNITIES TO THRIVE

BEYOND BLENDED CLASSROOMS: A LONGITUDINAL CASE STUDY

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DEDICATION

Sometimes life throws curve balls at you. Unpredictability is just a fact of life. Ain’t that right? Setbacks are too. I mean, we all have ‘em. Life ain’t always a walk when the bases are loaded, now is it?

I don’t know about you, but when I struck out, no matter how I felt on the inside, I tried as best I could to keep my composure. That’s half the battle won, I thought. Just don’t look like you feel miserable and no one will ever know.

So as I walked back to the dugout, I always held my head high, pulled myself up by the seat of my pants, dusted myself off, ready for my next turn at bat. There ain’t nothing wrong with that, is there?

As long as nobody figured me out, then I could always get by…and prove over and over to myself that I am strong and can handle anything. If it don’t kill you, be grateful because you’ll be even stronger next time…

And always, always, always get back in that game because that’s what life is…a game. You play it. Sometimes you lose. But…sometimes you win. And I used to think that some of the sweetest moments in life were when I was winning. Heck, why wouldn’t I? It was those times when I felt invincible.

So why did I always feel miserable again the next day?

It was because I woke up and still had to face myself in the mirror every day. These were the times when I never had a chance to win. I always lost. Because I knew I was playing a losing game where joys were always temporary and shallow. And my life had no direction and I felt meaningless.

I’m not sure exactly what I did…but a miracle happened one day and you came into my life. I tried playing the same old tired game, but you saw through it. You didn’t make fun of me for being so ridiculous. And you didn’t abandon me because I was hopelessly defective.

Instead you offered me smiles and encouragement and you showed me by example what poise and grace are really about. Joy is definitely not about showmanship or window dressing. It’s about integrity and giving. Courage is not about never giving up no matter what. It’s about giving up and letting go. It’s about accepting help from others along the way and knowing in our hearts that our perceived weaknesses are actually opportunities for us to connect with others who love us.

This manuscript is only one example of what I’ve been able to accomplish with your guidance and support. To my dear father, Themis Tocles Psomas, the man who I’ve become is a testament to your constant nurturing, faith and unconditional love. And I will be grateful to you and love you for the rest of my existence.
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A dissertation is not a journey one undertakes alone. It’s a team effort and the final manuscript is a product of the work and commitment of many people. My collaborators and co-conspirators include people who, no matter how much distance separates us, are always close to me.

When I tell stories about the natural disasters occurring on March 11th, 2011 and the devastating impacts they have had on the lives of people in Japan and across the globe, I also talk about another force to be reckoned with in Dr. Ellen “Tsunami” Hoffman. When I felt at a loss for ideas, she “flooded” me with possibilities. When I lagged behind, she swept me up with waves of enthusiasm and encouragement. The threat of obstructions or impossible circumstances were no match for her unwavering momentum to keep me moving forward until I reached the ultimate destination – completing my dissertation so I could move on to “more important work.” I will be forever grateful and indebted to you, Ellen, for your mentorship, scholarship, and, most importantly, your friendship.

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ABSTRACT

We don’t have a lot of evidence of what people see and think about communities after the fact. What are their worldviews when they look at experiences in blended learning communities in retrospect? Which elements do they find most meaningful?

This study explores the character, meaning, and impact of community using the lived experiences of three blended learning community members who successfully completed a two-year undergraduate education degree and teacher certification cohort program. Their perceptions, sense-making, and culture were compiled into a case study that describes the lasting effects of their learning community subsequent to completing their program and four years after their entry into the workforce as teachers.

Because perceptions and opinions were reported in hindsight, participants were able to describe aspects that have endured over time. This extended “snapshot in time” offers a more holistic picture to help uncover some of the intricacies and complexities of the term community as well as the people who comprise and experience it.

Using the lens of adult learner theory and recent literature on communities as well as a Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000), the results of this study show that learning community models and practices need to be reconsidered. While there is support for current models of learning communities, they tend to be over-simplified to the point that critical variables are often missing.

For example, in current learning community models, lived experiences of students reveal a missing critical technology component that links affordances and limitations to impacts on community members in both the near and long term. Models also tend to
ignore environmental contexts of students even though we know from adult learner
theory that it affects their commitment and participation within learning communities.

Finally, looking at learning communities from a time-limited, narrow perspective
instead of taking a wider systemic view may inhibit the sustainability of communities
over time and limit the longitudinal value of educational practices. Findings from this
study, however, can help educators adopt more “transcending blending” practices as they
plan and foster learning communities to endure beyond blended classrooms.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Distance educators are increasingly acknowledging that a sense of community among online learners enhances their online learning experiences (Burniske & Monke, 2001; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Goodson, Knobel, Lankshear & Mangan, 2002; Shea et al., 2010; Watts, 2003). Smith (1992) describes these types of virtual community member benefits in terms of goods that are “produced and consumed;” they include immediate and direct connections to others with useful skills and similar interests (social network capital), an expansive intelligence base (knowledge capital) and broad psychological support from others whose experiences are often similar (communion).

For blended learning courses, that is, courses that combine predominantly online with occasional F2F (face-to-face) sessions, helping students develop a sense of community is critical because robust learning and knowing result from the informal, frequently improvised interactions among participants (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L. & Cocking, R.R., 2000; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Geer, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Snyder & Wenger, 2003; Wenger, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). The online paradigm marks a departure from the traditional view of schooling in F2F settings, which frequently emphasizes individual knowledge and performance and the expectation that students will acquire the same body of knowledge at the same time.

Thus, an important design goal and outcome of blended learning courses is to encourage students to develop a sense of community, where relationships with others foster and support learning.
Yet even with a growing body of research, discussion and testimonials, a comprehensive definition about what constitutes an online community still does not exist (Carroll, 2001; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Johnson, 2001; Kim, 2000; Preece, 2000; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005; Werry & Mobray, 2001;). What is it? Where are its boundaries? What are the differences between online communities and groups of students who share the same virtual space? How would educators recognize that their classes feel a sense of community if they don’t quite know what they’re looking for? If educators sense that students are not on the right path towards a thriving learning community, what kinds of changes might they make and why? When students meet predominantly online with occasional F2F sessions (i.e., blended learning), how might strategies change for building a sense of community among students with each other and with the instructor? What impacts, if any, do communities have on students after courses disband? For educators these ambiguities can create fundamental problems for conceiving, setting up, managing and reckoning the worth of blended learning courses.

**Definition of Community**

One of the problems with definitions is that we tend to seek one that fits all situations. As the literature review describes in detail, *community* is an extremely diverse concept. Wittgenstein’s ideas on “the problem of universals” (as cited in Bambrough, 1968) helps uncover the complexities involved when attempting to define explicitly what a community must and must not be. In this work, Wittgenstein discusses how broad terms (e.g. *communities* or *families*) imply commonalities. Yet upon closer scrutiny, we find a “complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (p. 188-9), without one particular feature or characteristic common to all.
For the purposes of this research, however, the definition offered by Barab, Schatz and Scheckler (2004) is closest in approximating this researcher’s own ideas of what constitutes a community:

A persistent, sustained social network of individuals who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history and experiences focused on a common practice and/or mutual enterprise (p. 238).

The idea of shared goals is an especially important feature of learning communities. Barab, et al., (2004) probably consider “common practice and/or mutual enterprise” to imply common goals. It is these shared goals that are often the foundation upon which communities, especially learning communities, are built. Lipman (2003) qualified this type of social and educational context that leads to “questioning, reasoning, connecting, deliberating, challenging, and developing problem-solving techniques” referring to it as a “community of inquiry” (pp 111-112).

**Problem Statement**

Recent educational literature calls for researchers and online educators to shift their focus from supporting “usability” to supporting “sociability” (Barab, MaKinster, Moore & Cunningham, 2001; Barab, et al., 2004; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; Preece, 2000, Swan et al., 2008). Preece (2000) defines usability as the efficiency of a socio-technical system that allows certain functions to be carried out and goals to be met with a minimum amount of effort. Barab, et al., (2001) describe sociability as “those social policies and technical structures that support [and maximize a] community’s shared purpose and social interactions among group members” (p. 83). In essence, this shift
would mean that when the instructors or instructional designers are setting up a blended online course or reckoning its worth, they should focus their attention not merely on the electronic tools available to learners but also on the learners themselves and the individuals with whom learners interact and transact learning.

Communities are often referred to as organic systems because of the diverse and often unimaginable ways in which they develop (Barab, et al., 2001; Barab, et al., 2004; Wenger, 1998). Interactions among community members shape the communities, not the instructors or course designers (Barab, et al., 2004). Schwen & Hara (2003) believe that it would be ethically and conceptually appropriate for online instructors to negotiate the interventions required to build a community with the students.

The central goal of this dissertation was to begin a dialogue involving actual members of a blended learning cohort that met together for predominantly online courses and occasional F2F classes for about two years. In education, a cohort is a group of students who begin a program at the same time and remain together throughout all courses and for the duration of the program. Although the students who were a part of this cohort may or may not have felt that they built a community with their classmates and instructors. I surmised from the outset that many of them developed some sense of community with their classmates for the sheer reason that as a group they had all been challenged and, for the ones who endured the challenges to make it to the point of being one year away from graduation, they could all see “the light at the end of the tunnel”. In any event, whether students felt a part of a community or not, this study allowed them to describe what they believed constitutes a community within a blended learning setting and decide for themselves if they felt this cohort did or did not meet those criteria. It also
allowed them to describe any lasting effects that their learning community may have had on them after they completed their program and had been in the workforce for four years.

Furthermore, there are multiple definitions of community, and there is uncertainty about how the concept applies to blended classes. Various ideas have been proposed but not enough is known about how members perceive community. Therefore, I used interviews with members to explore their perceptions, sense-making, and culture. Their reflections and personal anecdotes on community are potentially useful information for instructors who teach blended online courses (especially novice instructors) as they focus on sociability and community-building in the online portions of their courses.

**Purpose of Study / Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study using virtual ethnographic methods was to explore the character, meaning and impact of community from the viewpoint of three undergraduate students who participated in blended online and F2F courses as part of a cohort at a research one university in Hawai‘i:

**RQ1:** Based upon their personal experiences with taking blended learning courses, how would students personally define community within predominantly online educational settings?

**RQ2:** How does current research on blended learning communities compare with the descriptions given by members of this study?

**RQ3:** Which activities or events fostered or hindered the forming of meaningful and enduring relationships with their classmates?

With an estimated 96% of public and private colleges now offering online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2006) and with online course offerings now being greater than that for
the corresponding F2F offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2009), there are a lot of reasons to believe that blended and online learning communities will continue to play a key role in the future of education. Online learning is still fairly new and educators really must have a better understanding of how students perceive community in online educational settings so that instructors can do better in teaching in these modes. This study adds to that body of literature.

**Methodological Framework**

Blended online and F2F learning communities are often complex and ambiguous. To understand how they work and how to foster them, I needed perspectives and first-hand experiences of the participants. A case study allowed me to look intensely at a small participant pool and draw conclusions about this group and within a specific context of their online community. The cohort of students and the two-year program formed the boundaries of time and place for this case study (Stake, 2003). Specifically, I chose to use an exploratory case study for two reasons: (a) to seek answers to questions about how students felt about and defined their blended learning community and (b) to discover and generate more questions that we educators might need to be asking ourselves as we seek to foster effective and enduring learning communities.

With the understanding that no single concept or method would be sufficient to provide a complete picture of community as described by the student participants, I chose to use a model that helped illuminate how intricately and manifestly learning and community are integrated within a community of inquiry. The purpose and value of a community of inquiry is to provide opportunities for self-directed learners to be open and to draw from communal knowledge and the experiences of others. Instead of merely
amassing and assimilating information, learners who are members of a community of inquiry have opportunities to construct meaning and confirm understanding interactively.

Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) devised one model of a community of inquiry depicting the interaction of social processes and cognitive processes in learning: 

- **cognitive presence**, 
- **social presence**, and 
- **teaching presence** (see Figure 1). 

The first element in this model is the development of **cognitive presence**, which Garrison, et al., (2000) define as “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (p. 89). The second element is **social presence**, defined as the ability of learners to project themselves “as real people” who are socially and emotionally invested in the community of inquiry. The third element is **teaching presence**, which involves designing and managing learning sequences, providing subject matter expertise, and facilitating active learning.

In this model, the supportive and facilitative nature of the social processes ultimately leads to the primary goal of a community of inquiry, which is **learning**. For example, as interactions among learners become more appealing, engaging and intrinsically rewarding, both affective and cognitive objectives are met. Similarly, through sustained dialogue with other members, learners are able to construct and verify meaning. For more details about this model and how it works, please see a more thorough discussion of it within the review of literature section in Chapter 2 as well as a model devised by the authors for coding data within the methodology section in Chapter 3.
Guided by the model of a community of inquiry as presented by Garrison et al., (2000, p. 97), the present study investigated the contribution of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence to the formation of community as perceived and experienced by the participating community members. This model provided me with a guide as I analyzed, coded and interpreted data from student interviews.

**Summary**

Instructors who conceive of online courses typically reflect carefully on ways for their students to interact with the instructor, with other students, with the course content and with technology (Moore 1989; Wagner 1994). Student perspectives are also valuable to educators to help them further reflect upon how profoundly their teaching practices
impact the lives of their students (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Listening to and encouraging student narratives and personal anecdotes is a serious attempt to discover and appreciate the significance and meaning found in their individual lives.

One way to explore the notion of community in blended learning settings is to document the perspectives and experiences of its members as a community of inquiry. Understanding student perceptions of how successful and personally satisfying online communities are formed could enhance the imagination of instructors to see beyond their own limitations of personal and professional experiences as well as technical expertise or lack thereof. This study used a purposive sample of three students along with interviews to explore perceptions and meanings of community within a blended learning cohort. It allowed student voices to be heard as they shared their own opinions, experiences, and personal anecdotes.

In order to see how other educational researchers have dealt with my topic and to make better sense of it for myself, in the next chapter, Chapter Two, I reviewed current literature about community cultures that involve learning communities as well as communities beyond education.

**Definitions**

To assist readers with distinctions among terms that frame the discussion about blended learning communities, I offer the following definitions:

- **Asynchronous vs. Synchronous setting** – an asynchronous setting doesn’t allow real-time interactions among users, whereas, a synchronous setting does.

Examples of online asynchronous settings where people do not need to be present online at the same time to receive communications would include electronic
message boards, email and online listservs. Examples of online synchronous settings where people must be present online at the same time in order to communicate would include electronic chatrooms, instant messaging, online whiteboards and webcams.

- **Blended learning** – a thoughtful integration of F2F with Web-supported learning opportunities to realize the strengths of both settings. Blended learning helps mediate the shortcomings of online instruction to achieve increased learning outcomes as well as learner satisfaction. Although online learning preceded the development of blended course delivery, blended learning is emerging as a preferred mode of delivery (Bersin, 2004; Eijl, Pilot & Boogd, 2005).
- **Blogging** – online journals or web logs.
- **Cohort** – in education, a cohort is a group of students who begin a program at the same time and remain together throughout all courses and for the duration of the program. Although the research on cohorts is mixed, many researchers find that cohorts allow students to build the types of relationships to help them feel satisfied and successful in their learning (Barnett & Caffarella, 1992; Basom, 1995; Graber, 1996; Teitel, 1997).
- **Community of Inquiry** – a social and educational context that provides opportunities for self-directed learners to draw from communal knowledge bases and the experiences of others. Members construct meaning and confirm understanding through questioning, deliberating, connecting and problem-solving.
- **Cyberspace** – an online or virtual environment accessed via the Internet.
• **Distance Education** – teaching and learning that is neither time- nor place-specific and may use audio tapes, video-conferencing, satellite broadcasts or other online technologies as a means for interaction, communication and delivery of instructional content.

• **E-learning** – learning that is facilitated by the use of digital tools and content.

• **Fieldwork** – collection of raw data in a natural or “real world” setting as opposed to research done in a laboratory under a controlled or quasi-controlled environment.

• **Field site** – the actual location or setting where raw data is collected.

• **Learning transaction** – a constructivist idea that learning is a holistic process involving discovery, construction, negotiation and ultimately transformation requiring active individual and collaborative inquiry.

• **Online courses** – courses where instruction is delivered entirely via the Internet.

• **Real time** – a timeframe so short that it is seems immediate. For example, a real time online conversation with another person would mean that both people are physically using the Internet at the exact same time to interact in a virtual “live” situation.

• **Social context cues** – indicators people use for interpreting appropriate behavior in various social circumstances. For example, in F2F situations, people use facial expressions, body language and voice intonations to communicate and clarify communication.

• **Social networks** – allow people who share similar interests and/or activities to build relations and share ideas across political, economic and geographic borders.
Similarly, online social networks allow participants to interact in meaningful ways using digitized networking systems.

- **User** – any person who uses a computer system. Most people are familiar with this term as it refers to a person’s *username* (also known as *screen name*).
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This chapter discusses ambiguities of the terms *community* and *blended learning*. It also reviews the various types of communities found online and in blended learning settings. It describes the feelings of community among people who have built relationships and have invested much of themselves as members of computer supported communities. It lists conditions found to foster and hinder adult learning within online and blended learning communities of practice. And it presents diverse examples as well as the results of various studies that address why community is vital yet delicate, conditional and often elusive.

Additionally, since feelings of *social presence* is determined to be so critical to learners who take blended and online courses (Dreyfus, 2001; Garrison et al., 2000; Johannsen et al., 2000; Polhemus et al., 2001; Russo, 2000; Shea et al., 2010; Steuer, 1992; Walther, 1992), this chapter explores the nature and differences of online identities as compared to those established in F2F situations and further discusses their meaning and importance in educational settings. It also presents three stories to give insight into the potential impact that *disembodiment* may have upon the types of relationships that people can build online as well as morality issues that arise there.

Finally, this chapter discusses measures that we as instructors might consider taking to encourage ethical behavior among our students who take online and blended learning courses. It also offers ideas for ways online course designers and instructors can promote unity and reciprocity among our online and blended learning class members.
Introduction

Communities abound on the Internet. Or do they? Going online usually means being bombarded with advertisements for various types of communities including ones for shopping, social networking, finding love, gaming, role-playing, discussion, blogging, support groups (e.g. politics, religion, illness, etc.) and plenty of other special interests. A review of current literature, however, reveals a growing sentiment among scholars and philosophers that the term community is vastly overused and in many ways meaningless when it comes to describing most online gathering places (Graham, 2001, p. 131; Hafner, 2001, p. 179). For example, Hafner (2001) chastises Internet entrepreneurs who “brandish the term community-building as if it were a simple matter of putting up a chat space on a website” (p. 179). Furthermore, as Graham (2001) asserts, a man who finds that he belongs “to a local community, the gay community, the scientific community, the business community, the rural community and even the international community” all at the same time, may not value his membership in any of them and thus the significance of the term is lost (p. 131).

Visions of Community

Like snowflakes, no two communities are identical. Interestingly, however, when people speak of communities, they usually speak in terms of similarities and not differences. For example, the term community usually connotes a group that shares warm, caring and reciprocal relationships among its members. Kling and Courtright (2003) refer to this type of description as aspirational, based on an ideal or a desired state of affairs instead of an existing reality. The purposes of aspirational uses of the term community are
often to provide a goal for people to strive to attain, to motivate change from a current set of conditions and to make recruiting community members easier.

One problem of such a definition is that it has no empirical grounding and this omission leads to false perceptions of what is actually involved in developing a sense of community among a group of people. For example, an agreeable person is not necessarily an asset to a budding community just as a disagreeable person is not always a burden. Members who comprise warm and caring communities must undergo several complex yet vital processes such as building communication, building trust, resolving conflict, and reaching consensus (Napier & Hasler-Waters, 2003).

John Dewey (1916) had similar views of the relationship between education and society in his vision of the Great Community that some people might consider aspirational. In Dewey’s view, education is a social structure. Any social structure (indeed democracy itself!) depends upon people who are exposed to the diverse viewpoints of others and who negotiate shared knowledge. Thus, knowledge is a by-product of living in communities with other people.

Citizens have dual memberships in their communities: one is based upon “like-mindedness” among people (e.g. a book club or religious groups) and the other is based upon “broader civic obligations” along with a sense of common interests (e.g. nations who wage war on terror).

Dewey’s vision of a “Great Community” causes disagreement among some people because it describes community in terms of the ways people are included and does not address ways people are excluded. This same argument also fits the debate described earlier concerning aspirational communities. On one hand, Dewey defines communities
in terms of commonalities. He believed that differences between people are diversity issues that have “a potential for fruitful engagement” (in Burbules, 2000, p. 2). On the other hand, Arendt (in Burbules, 2000, p. 2) defines communities in terms of “pluralities” that cannot always be “articulated, compared, judged, negotiated or combined to allow compromises”. In her view, membership in some communities is based upon sentiments of affiliation and others are ascribed, meaning they function as merely labels because membership is not voluntary. She asserted that the dynamics of exclusion in communities are as vital and defining as those of inclusion.

The ambiguities involved with the term community (e.g. commonalities vs. pluralities; inclusion vs. exclusion, and others) have made it just vague enough to encompass almost any type of gathering among people. Burbules (2000) warns that this type of random and convenient use of the word hides important differences, intentions and group dynamics to make everyone appear similar. As a descriptive and analytical term, however, community continues to be used with increasing frequency among educators (Barab et al., 2004; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Kim, 2000; Preece, 2000; Werry and Mowbray, 2001).

I believe it is important for us as educators to recognize the ambiguities inherent in the term, community, when conceiving, setting up and managing our own courses. Understanding that our perceptions and interpretations may not correspond with our students will allow us to be open to possibilities for the diverse and often unimaginable ways which communities can develop.
Conceptions of Online Communities

In an attempt to develop a “useful” meaning of community, Graham (2001) begins by differentiating among communities, enclaves and interest groups. Essentially, he perceives a community as a body of individuals who share the same interests, who are affected by the same things, and who are subject to specific rules which determine what their common objectives are and what subjective interests they should have. He believes that these rules result in an effective way to determine membership in the community and to ensure that the rules are followed. He describes an enclave as a type of pseudo-community without rules, and an interest group as a collection of individuals who are bound only by common, shared, subjective interests.

In a discussion of ways to design virtual learning communities, Barab, Kling and Gray (2004) describe four features that they say are consistently present and requisite of all communities:

1. A significant history - common cultural and historical heritage
2. A shared cosmology - especially related to shared goals, practices, belief systems, and collective stories that capture canonical practices
3. A part of something larger than one member - various members form a collective whole as they work toward shared goals
4. A cycle that constantly reproduces itself - new members contribute, support, and eventually lead the community into the future; new members move from peripheral participants to core members through a process of enculturation
Likewise, Ford (2003) describes the conditions he feels are important for community to arise in computer mediated environments (CMEs) as including “reputation, a communal me (emphasis in original), efficacy, trust, history, dynamic/spontaneous interactions, and common interests. These elements lead to providing the circumstances for investing self and developing significant community.”

If we used Ford’s description as measuring stick for community, Dreyfus (2001) believed it could never come to be realized. He voiced his doubts about building community online very powerfully when he stated, “Whatever hugs do for people, I’m quite sure telehugs won’t do” (p. 69). In other words, Dreyfus asserts that it takes the “direct engagement” and the spontaneous reactions of our physical bodies “to make people and things matter to us” (p. 72).

In contrast, Burbules (2000) sees no difference between online and F2F communities. He believes that both possess “real” and “imagined” qualities and that members in both must work constantly to maintain the type of cohesion to provide themselves with a sense that they are indeed a community. Fernback (1999) argued that people are the key constituents in online communities and that they support and oppose each other in the same ways they would in any social situation (whether online or not).

Palloff and Pratt (1999), however, distinguish between what they call traditional (face-to-face) and virtual communities. Besides being place-based, traditional communities establish norms that help determine membership, preclude individual expression in favor of group dynamics and clearly define who are members and who are not members.
Squire and Johnson (2000) expand upon the differences between online and F2F communities asserting that virtual communities extend the parameters of what is known as a community. For example, virtual communities exist because of an idea or a task rather than a place. They are fluid because they purposefully have no official boundaries. Furthermore, since members don’t see each other, community norms do not preclude self-expression and individual control.

The ensuing controversy over the term *community* when it is applied to an online environment is not surprising to me. I believe it is a carry-over from the ambiguity of the term, community, as applied to F2F situations. Following Burbules (2000), I do take issue with the argument that some communities are perceived as “real” and others as “virtual” or imagined. It is this line of thinking, I believe, that ignores what is imaginary in all communities and what is “real” even in online communities. Such “black and white” distinctions, if accepted as true by community members, can only limit the possibilities or potential of any community.

No matter where researchers fall in the F2F versus online communities debate, most would agree that *complex* and *multifaceted* are two characteristics describing any conception of community (Wenger, 1998; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Job-Sluder & Barab, 2004). Herring (2004, p. 355) advanced the following six criteria to demonstrate the presence of community found within any group of people:

1. Active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants
2. Shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values
3. Solidarity, support, reciprocity
4. Criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution
5. Self-awareness of a group as an entity distinct from other groups
6. Emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals

Similarly, people who describe the outcome of membership within a community speak of their experiences as developing a sense of community (S.O.C.) among members. Often, a S.O.C. is taken as the definition for community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002). McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe four dimensions of a S.O.C.:

1. Feelings of membership
2. Feelings of influence
3. Integration and fulfillment of needs
4. Shared emotional connection

Blanchard and Markus (2002) used these four dimensions as a guide for researching and interviewing members of an online community called MSN (Multiple Sports Newsgroup). Participants in this study described themselves as having a S.O.V.C. (sense of virtual community), but they did not report themselves as having “feelings of influence.” The researchers felt that group norms may have been so internalized within members that they were no longer aware of influencing others or being influenced themselves.

Otherwise, the researchers were able to elicit specific examples from participants (community members) showing instances of the other three dimensions. In addition, the researchers described several member traits that they found among online community members: recognition (of other members within community), identification (understanding who members were), support (informational and socio-emotional), relationship (development of personal friendships), emotional attachment (beyond
individuals, a connection to the community as a whole) and obligation (needs to “give back”).

Just as F2F communities differ from other F2F communities, the researchers found that virtual communities also differ from each other. In fact, they proposed that individuation of identity and relationships may be more pronounced in online communities than in F2F communities because there is an added layer of separation due to a heavy reliance on technology (2002).

In their review of research on online communities, Vrasidas, Zembylas and Chamberlain (2003) declare that although there is no specific scientific formulae or algorithms for building successful online communities for education, educators can benefit immensely by reviewing what others have done before and learning from them. They offer the following list as characteristics found in successful online communities:

- They consist of people who can’t meet F2F because of place/time constraints and who meet online to work together on a shared task.
- The tasks and sub-tasks on which members work online are clearly defined and participants have a clear understanding of the expectations.
- A common sense of responsibility exists among participants towards the assigned task and peers.
- Easy access to technology and Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW) tools is available to all members.
- The tools for communication are accessible and usable.
- There is good leadership and co-ordination of online activities.
- There are capable moderators who provide facilitation, help, guidance and support as needed to the members of the community.
- Ongoing interaction among members is based on constructive dialogue.
- A joint vision, control and ownership of the community, its goals and artifacts are equally shared among members of the community.
- There is mutual support among members and sub-groups.
- The rules that govern participation in the community are clearly defined.
- A system is in place monitoring member participation and behavior along with a system to sanction certain inappropriate behaviors.
- It is a safe environment where participants can freely express their opinions and ask questions without fear of being ‘attacked’ by others.
- Activities completed are evaluated regularly and feedback is provided in a timely manner.
- There is a certain degree of structural dependence that establishes the need for members to interact and share resources.
- Smaller groups within the community provide a peer-support group smaller than the larger community.

**Online Learning Communities**

From the perspective of learning as a social endeavor, an online learning community can be defined as a shared online space that is not bound by time or space where people come together to define problems that affect them, decide upon solutions,
and act in ways to implement those solutions. Learning is achieved as people gain new knowledge and skills and progress towards their goals (MacNeil, 1997).

Many characteristics of online learning communities are identical to conventional online communities. For example, people with common interests and occasionally common goals often gather together in a virtual environment with boundless access (in terms of time and place) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) to share information and support one another.

There are several aspects of online learning communities, however, that set them apart from conventional online communities. For example, people in learning communities do more than simply share information; they apply information that is used for knowledge construction (Schlager et al. 2000; Tu & McIsaac, 2001). Also, although many successful online communities are user-centered utilizing a facilitator to encourage interaction among members, a thriving learning community is not only learner-centered but it is, indeed, learner-driven usually with an instructor in the role of “guide on the side” (Solloway & Harris, 1999).

Harasim (1987, 1995) advocates strongly for the benefits she judged online learning affords students. She believes that the very nature of the “anytime, anywhere” medium provides access to educational opportunities to people who otherwise would be excluded; the text-based nature of online learning allows everyone to express his or her findings, opinions or beliefs.

Dede (1996) describes benefits to online learners in terms of networks. Having an extended support group fosters commitment to group goals, encouragement to learn and motivation to acquire and share knowledge. Wellman and Guila (1999) assert that online
communities create networks that provide members with a greater sense of satisfaction in addition to an extended support group in times of need.

Conversely, Borthick and Jones (2000) describe a “politeness syndrome” where students use positive language during online interactions at the expense of constructive, honest interactions. They attribute this situation to etiquette among people who do not know each other well. Vrasidas and Zembylas (2003) describe social challenges faced by online communities including access to technology, equity issues, gender issues, morality issues and dehumanization issues.

Similarly, Dreyfus (2001) cautions that online interactions should never replace F2F interactions, especially in teaching and learning situations. In his controversial book, *On the Internet*, he describes learning online as a disembodied experience that produces “fragmented, fractured selves.” Basically, he argues that our physical beings respond, react and learn in ways that can never be reproduced in an online environment and when we try to simulate these experiences online, we have compromised our learning and ourselves because we lack a full experience. He believes that the Internet as medium for interaction removes the immediacy and the risks inherent in F2F encounters. Fears of disappointment, failure or rejection by others are practically removed when we meet online and he believes that it is precisely these fears that make learning meaningful.

As made evident earlier in the debate about *commonalities versus pluralities* that are inherent in communities, it is imperative for us as educators to examine all aspects and possible ramifications of the medium and environment in which we choose to teach. It is the interactions among members that shape communities, in my opinion, not the
instructors or course designers. Thus, as educators we must be prepared to negotiate the interventions required to build community with our students.

Furthermore, I believe it is important that we recognize that physical beings are on the receiving end of any online exchanges with our students, students with each other, students with subject matter (Moore, 1989), or students with technology (Wagner, 1994). I’m not so sure that Dreyfus’ objections to learning on the Internet are mitigated simply because we change the mode of instruction. Are these problems really caused by the Internet? I believe that awareness of possible problems, honesty when dealing with them and reflection on outcomes is much more practical than simply abandoning a means of instruction and meaning-making that so many people value and sometimes desperately need.

**Blended Learning**

There is a growing convergence of online education and F2F classrooms in higher educational institutions within the United States referred to as “blended learning” classes or communities (Connolly, 2005; Garrison et al, 2004; Lim, 2002; Young, 2002). Similar to the controversy surrounding the term “community”, the phrase “blended learning” has also caused some confusion and debate among educators.

For example, in a discussion of various meanings for “blended learning,” Oliver & Trigwell (2005) describe it as an *amorphous* phrase, lacking any clarity. Most definitions or interpretations that the researchers considered were so vague that they could apply to anything. Other definitions describe perspectives of the teacher, which the researchers believe calls for a name change to “blended teaching” instead of “blended learning.”
The thesis of the researchers’ argument was that “blended learning” means different things to different people, suggesting its “widely untapped potential.” In the end, the researchers reconceptualized “blended learning” emphasizing the learner, the pedagogy and the learning experience, but they never offered an all-encompassing definition. Since descriptions and definitions for the term vary, for the purposes of this study, I define “blended learning” as web-enhanced courses where instructors and students meet predominantly online and occasionally F2F. Sometimes F2F sessions are replaced with electronic real-time classes.

**Blended Learning Communities**

Obvious benefits of blending online with occasional F2F class settings include greater time and place flexibility. Educators are also pleased to find that the fundamentals for trust in online groups are easier to develop when class members meet F2F initially and then continue groupwork online. Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) described an online master’s degree program at the University of Illinois that required each new cohort of students to visit the campus and study together for one week. Interviews with students during their work in the program indicated that the ties developed with classmates that first week were extremely helpful after the students dispersed and continued their online studies.

Studies dealing with issues involving the importance of F2F contact consistently find that initial contact is desirable and necessary among members of an online learning community (Borthick & Jones, 2000; Fischer, 1998; Hammond, 1998). Borthick and Jones (2000) found that students fared better in terms of learning in synchronous online environments than they did in either asynchronous online environments or traditional F2F
classrooms. Fischer (1998) believes that F2F contact is critical for rapport among students. Hammond (1998) advises educators to mix learning experiences to include both online and F2F interactions among students to encourage learning communities.

I agree with these findings of the research regarding the benefits of blending online and offline interactions among learners. One instructor that I worked with to help teach an online class remarked that she prefers “to smell her students.” Sensory reactions and stimulations are a daily part of life for all human beings. The latest development toward blended learning classes, I believe, is a natural progression of teaching online that recognizes and honors our humanness and natural desire to socialize.

In order to understand and gauge the impact and potential of blended learning systems, we educators often look for ways to increase our awareness of the various purposes and needs they satisfy. Graham (2004) describes three different categories of blended learning systems: a) enabling, b) enhancing, and c) transforming. *Enabling blends* are used largely to deal with access and convenience issues (e.g. offering different modalities for a course so that learners at a distance can still participate). *Enhancing blends* are used to augment courses (e.g. making additional online resources available to learners who are members of a F2F class). *Transforming blends* are deliberate efforts to produce manifest changes in pedagogy (e.g. allowing “learners to actively construct knowledge through dynamic interactions. These types of blends enable intellectual activity that was not practically possible without the technology”) (p. 31).

Both educators and students alike are presented with new challenges as we renegotiate our roles and responsibilities in transforming blended learning environments. Thus, course design and access are important issues for us as educators to consider.
(Jeffrey & Mark, 1998). For example, what is the balance between too little and too much technology? In what ways can we as instructors maintain a teaching presence in computer-mediated environments? In my opinion, however, the most pressing question that we educators need to be asking is how can we facilitate complex, critical, creative, reciprocal and transferable thinking skills among all members of blended learning communities?

**Adult Learners**

Drawing on recent research about adult learning, many educators believe that at least part of the answer to my last question lies in expanding the social constructivist notion that thinking and learning are social activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McMahon, 1997; Piaget, 1977; Robey, Khoo & Powers, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this viewpoint, interactivity and context are important elements affecting the learning process. In essence, adult interactions with the learning setting and all other contextual elements give meaning to everything that is learned. In this way, knowing and doing are inextricably joined to create authentic learning activities.

Contextual elements that affect adult learner motivation can also be negative, however, such as external environmental factors involving schedule conflicts, family issues, financial problems, support network breakdowns, and personal issues (Bean & Metzner, 1985). For example, when learners have heavy workloads and little time for family interactions or other domestic responsibilities, they are less likely to be motivated or successful in their classes (1985). Bean and Metzner (1985) describe students who enroll in distance learning classes as “nontraditional” and assert that they are more affected by their external environment than “traditional students.” Indeed, studies reveal a
higher dropout rate among students who take online classes as compared to students enrolled in F2F courses (Hiltz, 1997; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999).

Yet social constructivist practices do help to mitigate some of these negative contextual elements through the use of effective course design and suitable technology (Park & Choi, 2009) as well as learning networks that transcend the learning capabilities of individuals (Davis, Sumara, Luce-Kapler, 2000). For example, in social settings where learners construct meaning and knowledge, learning communities emerge that are defined by joint interests, shared understandings and reciprocal support networks. Learning opportunities increase even more when learner-teacher roles are flexible (Coats & Stevenson, 2006), allowing community members to assume greater autonomy and control. Two such learning communities that educators believe hold promise in today’s increasingly connected, technology-enabled society are Communities of Inquiry (CoIs) and Communities of Practice (CoPs).

**Communities of Inquiry**

John Dewey (1938) believed that improved learning opportunities could be achieved when the individual learner’s interests were integrated with those of society so that individuals and society members could actively explore and construct personal meaning and shared understanding. Foundations of a community of inquiry are built upon discourse and the security to explore and challenge ideas (Lipman, 1991). A community of inquiry provides opportunities to alternate between the personal and private reflective world of the individual and the shared world of society. Its purpose and value is to allow self-directed learners to be open to and to draw from societal knowledge and the experiences of others.
Blended learning, then, by its very format, sets the stage for developing and sustaining communities of inquiry. F2F meetings allow learners to meet, interact and build relationships with peers and with the instructor, which aids in the development of a sense of community. The Internet provides learners with limitless access to information and open communication, which provides or complements the substance from which reflection, sharing, dialogue, debate and peer-mentoring result. Coats and Stevenson (2006) further assert that both teachers and learners are socially mediated roles that all community members assume at one time or another. Thus, instead of merely amassing and assimilating information, all members of a community of inquiry have opportunities to construct meaning and confirm understanding interactively.

**Community of Inquiry Model**

A nineteenth century philosopher named Charles Sanders Peirce first used the phrase “Community of Inquirers” to describe scientists who employ both individual and collective understandings of the world to help them sort out ideas about what is “real” and what is “truth”. John Dewey championed this fusion of two independently powerful perspectives of community and inquiry that allow individual and collective experiences to develop higher order thinking skills through social activity.

In 1991, Dr. Matthew Lipman, a renowned philosophy professor introduced the notion of a Community of Inquiry (CoI) as a teacher-facilitated, but student-directed learning environment (1991). According to Lipman (2003), within a CoI, “students listen to one another with respect, build on one another’s ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another’s assumptions.”
A little over a decade ago, Lipman's and Dewey's ideas were expanded and applied to online learning contexts when a group of educators/researchers developed an instrument to help them assess the efficacy of new partly online / partly F2F graduate program and thus the CoI Model was born (Garrison et al., 2000). In a series of articles, the framework for it was introduced as a conceptually and empirically driven model.

Essentially, the CoI Model asserts that there are three critical elements present within any educational transaction - cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Indicators (i.e., key words or phrases) for each of the three elements emerged from the analysis of computer conferencing transcripts. These indicators were used to create a template or tool for researchers to analyze written transcripts as well as a heuristic guide for educators to optimize computer conferencing with learning (see Table 1).

Ongoing research continues to suggest that computer conferencing has considerable potential to create a community of inquiry for educational purposes (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010; Barab & Gray., 2004; Burniske, 2004; Burniske & Monke, 2001; Garrison et al., 2000; Fahy, 2001; Hammond, 1998; Rubin et al., 2010; Swan et al., 2008) and the CoI Model has since been “adopted and adapted” by educators worldwide to “define, describe and measure the elements of a collaborative and worthwhile educational experience” (Garrison et al., 2010, p.6).

**Communities of Practice**

In 1991, Dr. Jean Lave and Dr. Etienne Wenger, two cognitive anthropologists, unveiled the concept of Communities of Practice (CoPs). Inherent among CoPs are social arrangements where individuals learn through participation in tasks or activities with
members who are both novices and experts. A key concept in CoPs is “legitimate peripheral participation” where experts and novices learn from each other. Novices linger at the periphery of CoPs, but as they become more knowledgeable, they move to the center of the community with the experts (Wenger, 1998). Thus, learning is conceived as an “evolving, continuously renewed set of relations” instead of simply “learning-by-doing” or experiential learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Another key concept of CoPs is situated learning, that is, learning that takes place at the time and place where one is performing a task or participating in an activity (Robey, Khoo & Powers, 2000). These tasks and activities create peer interaction, which produces shared histories and artifacts among community members (Wenger, 1998), and, in turn, results in negotiation and co-construction of knowledge among members of CoPs (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999; Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011).

CoPs have roots in constructivism (Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Oliver & Harrington, 2000), that is, the belief that reality is constructed in people’s minds. With this notion in mind, Palloff and Pratt (1999) urge us as instructors to take on more of a facilitative role or “gentle guide” allowing learners to take control of their own learning.

Wenger (1998) asserts that virtual communities and virtual CoPs (VCoPs) differ in that the former is a designed community and the latter emerges from a designed community. Legitimate task-oriented reasons need to exist for VCoPs to emerge (i.e., online content defines practice and practice defines VCoPs). For example, apprenticeships demanding hands-on practical skills (such as for potters or basket weavers) are probably not fertile grounds for VCoPs to develop (at least not initially). For more complex, professional skills (such as for physicians or educators), however, VCoPs
can help to provide a sense of identity and a means to sustain practice among members of an online community.

For example, in a study of law firms in rural and urban settings that subscribed to a professional law listserv (Hara, 2000), a VCoP did emerge for small county law firms that managed to find an identity with others based upon a collective perception of themselves as underdogs compared to the larger, more affluent law firms. People in the larger law firms, on the other hand, did go online seeking some communion and sharing of information that was missing in their primary practices, but members reported that these substitutions were not enough to get them to use the listserv more frequently or to develop closer bonds with other listserv members. In other words, attorneys in the smaller firms practiced knowledge and relationship-building in order to compete against the larger law firms while the larger law firms didn’t seem to have enough incentive or compelling reasons for a VCoP to emerge.

*Fading back* or *withdrawing* is one of the greatest problems hindering the development of CoPs, experienced especially by students who feel isolated from peers and instructors while sitting behind a computer screen. Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins & Shoemaker (2000) recommend using multiple communication technologies such as email and synchronous and asynchronous electronic discussion boards to thwart *fading back* among students in an online course by providing them with several channels for communication and participation.

I don’t particularly agree with Wenger’s assertion that communities are *designed*, but that CoPs *emerge*. I tend to agree more with Barab, Kling and Gray (2004) that all communities are *organic* because they grow in unique and inconceivable ways. I do
believe though that CoPs “emerge” over time under proper conditions. CoPs seem especially suited for online learning because students must find ways to construct their own learning and meaning-making through interactions with others. Correspondingly, as instructors we are encouraged to use constructivist approaches when teaching online classes and to support networking among our students who are usually physically separated from their classmates. In my opinion, fading back or withdrawing is less of a problem for CoPs as technology continues to advance and provide more ways for us as educators to engage students. For example, social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, and Ning) are becoming more prevalent in education while sharing personal information online is easier and more routine for many people. As opportunities increase for students to integrate this technology into their personal and professional lives, they are also more likely to feel comfortable in their academic endeavors when participating, developing relationships with peers, and building a stronger sense of self online.

**Defining Identity**

Online social networks are a relatively new development for online communities. It was not so long ago when people spoke about identities as being forged. This vision of identity as a solid metal-like core is useful imagery to describe the value that human beings attach to a stable identity and an unwavering character (i.e. really knowing someone and feeling confident we can trust him or her). Yet, over time, many people have questioned the validity of this image as truly capturing the stages or development of identity. Alternatively, they posit that individuals develop their identity or persona as a function of interaction with others.
For example, Erving Goffman (1969) used a theatre metaphor to describe interactions among people as “performances” that are shaped by their “environment” and their “audiences.” Individuals (actors) construct identities purposefully and often deliberately so that others (audience members) perceive them in ways that correspond to their own personal goals. A performance is not entirely open to conscious control because one inevitably reveals more or less than one intends. Yet even in pretending or when actors are unaware or indifferent to the details of their performances, they wear a “face” that is consistent with their own conception of their role as themselves. This conception of themselves is shaped by experience and by pressure from others to conform so that the credibility of their entire performance is not destroyed. Thus, the behavior of actors before an audience is different from the behavior of actors when they are alone. Consequently, as actors perform their parts for different audiences, their roles and performances change accordingly. Actors consistently present what they perceive as an “idealized” version of their character, which they believe will correspond to the norms and mores of their audience.

In this viewpoint, Goffman joins other sociologists, educators, psychologists and philosophers who have similar views of identity or self as a “realm of discourse rather than as a real thing or a permanent structure” (Turkle, 1995, p. 178). The descriptors that one overhears today in discussions about human identity include words like multiple, heterogeneous, fluid, flexible and fragmented (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1996; Dreyfus, 2001; Burbules, 2002). The topics of discussion about human identity today inevitably revolve around questions of proximal versus virtual (dis)embodiment, identity play, and questions of what it means to be alive (ibid).
Identity and Technology

Turkle (1995) contemplates the complexity of identity as human beings and technology become progressively more intertwined. She considers what computers do *for* us and *to* us as well as how they affect our relationships with others and the ways we think about ourselves. She ponders: “Are we living a life *on* the screen or a life *in* the screen?” (p. 21).

Stone (1996) also asks related questions about the boundaries of where a person ends and technology begins as she contemplates the identity of Professor Stephen Hawking, a world-renowned physicist who has a motor neurone disease that requires him to use a wheelchair, a speech synthesizer and a computer microchip that is implanted inside his body: “But a serious part of Hawking extends into the box in his lap…a serious part of that silicon and plastic assemblage in his lap extends into him as well…No box, no discourse…with the box his voice is auditory and simultaneously electric, in a radically different way from that of a person speaking into a microphone. Where does he stop? Where are his edges?” (p. 5).

As Turkle and Stone’s reflections imply, the knowledge that we have about the identity of others is mediated using cues gathered from their external appearances and actions. Simmel (1910-11) notes that without access to the inner minds of others, the categories that we place them in and images we create based upon external appearances and actions are inevitably distorted. Simmel does allow, however, that empathy permits insights into the thoughts and feelings of others. Regardless, in face-to-face encounters, people rely on visual cues to convey elements of identity including gender, age, ethnicity
and disability. Rightly or wrongly, these cues strongly influence how we perceive each other.

By contrast, in cyberspace, identity cues are sparse. Many people contend that markers of identity that often prejudice opinions in F2F situations such as expressions of race, gender, and age are transcended in online text-based settings. They describe their online experiences as transcending and even liberating because they feel that they are judged more fairly—based upon merit rather than physical characteristic traits: “Because we cannot see one another in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance [many of the markers we use to determine identity] are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public” (Rheingold, 1993).

Similarly, Burbules (2002) describes the Internet as a “fascinating zone of experimentation [where] people can move beyond embodied physical facts [i.e. physical appearance, disabilities, etc.] not for the sake of ‘escaping’ them or denying them, but for changing what they mean to us and to others” (p. 393; emphasis in original).

An important aspect of online identity is the ability of people to interact from different positions of power or even to experiment with alternative personae. Turkle (1995) believes that such practices encourage human beings to reflect on and possibly reconsider the expectations that they place on others based on stereotypes or prejudices. For example, she describes how gender-swapping enables people to learn more about the experiences of the opposite gender and also to discover more about themselves (pp. 212-213). Yet she also warns that even though people who engage in online gender-swapping may not be in danger of physical harm, they still take emotional risks that could prove
more damaging (discussed more in-depth in *Online Identities – Tales from the Field*, p. 47).

Identity cues, however, are not completely missing online. For example, people use signature blocks, signature files with a quote or pun at the end of the message and descriptive email addresses to represent themselves online (Donath, 1998; Burbules, 2000; Blanchard & Markus, 2002). Similarly, Burkhalter (1999) describes how racial identification is implicitly evident (and *desired* by participants) through the tone and perspective of posted messages of chatroom discussions as well as more explicitly in the discussion topics or “subject lines”. In one example, he describes how a reply to a discussion topic about “women not properly appreciating ‘men who treat them right’” was titled “Sisters, please explain” (p. 65). In this instance, the term, “Sisters,” was used specifically to elicit the opinions of African-American women. In the same vein, O’Brien (1999) describes how gender is perceptible online through *gender performance*: “Men tend to post in an adversarial, competitive voice; women seek consensus and are mutually supportive of one another” (p. 91).

Language, then, is an essential component of our virtual identities because it is predominantly through our online textual expressions that we perceive others and they perceive us. Ultimately, language shapes and constrains *who* can participate in cyberspace as well as *how* they participate. In this context, Burbules (2000) notes that the very structure of the Internet privileges English-speaking users. For example, HTML code and software applications used to access the Internet are predominantly written in English. This situation means, “English speaking users are privileged to have more access
to more resources and more avenues of interaction,” (p.16) thus limiting access to the rest of the world.

Other identity markers of community members that are exhibited in online environments are mediated through several filters such as the computer they are using, the websites or online environments where they choose to interact with others and any other peripheral equipment (such as cameras, microphones, etc.). Thus, establishing a sense of identity online is relative to the degree that people are able to connect with others through technology.

**Group Identity**

Shared perceptions of identity are obvious indicators of bonds among community members. In an earlier discussion of “Visions of Community,” a point was made about the importance of examining the dynamics of exclusion as well as those of inclusion among communities. Sumner (1906) referred to this type of delineation as “in-groups” and “out-groups”. Communities are defined as much by their sense of “we” as by their sense of “they.” Common traits that are recognized among members of a group promote group cohesiveness and a “we-feeling” identity (Jeffrey & Mark, 1998). Similarly, how participants in online discussions refer to others outside their group provides a basis for comparisons between groups and clues to whether or not a sense of a shared identity is present. For example, words or statements that members use to refer to “them” can help to ascertain moral, social and political values important within the “in-community” (Job-Sluder & Barab, 2004).

Job-Sluder et al. (2004) describe two types of discourse used to describe a shared identity within online groups. Firstly, *contrasting identity* are statements made by
community members that define clear boundaries for what is and what is not part of their community. These statements also provide a useful means for community members to describe their own distinctive group behaviors. Secondly, linking identity are statements made by community members that describe what they believe are “points of commonality” between them and the community at large. These statements help provide a personal context for community members so that they situate themselves within the larger community.

On the other hand, in a study of teachers using an electronic discussion forum, Selwyn (2000) found that the statements teachers made in the forum were incongruent to the actual relations among them. In other words, in reading online transcripts, one would think that students built closer bonds with peers than they actually had. Perhaps these inconsistencies can be attributed to the “politeness syndrome” described earlier by Borthick and Jones (2000).

Burbules (2000) believes that the mere act of choosing a community defines who one is and that seeking out new communities is a process of experimenting with a new or unexpressed self. Thus, the “selves” expressed online can be multiple and adaptable. Understandably, people who communicate with others online are often concerned whether the others are actually representing themselves truthfully (Blanchard & Markus, 2002). Yet, according to Burbules (2002, p. 389) “the relative anonymity of online interaction can suppress the effects of prejudice and discrimination. Others are forced to deal more with the content of what one says, not necessarily with what one looks like.”
Social Presence

One of the ways people construct their online identities and build relationships with others who gather online is through social presence. Walther (1992, p. 54) defines social presence as “the extent to which communication is perceived as ‘real’ and stems from an attempt to determine the differential properties of various communication media, including mass media, in the degree of social cues inherent in the technology.” As a medium for online education, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is often described as lacking in nonverbal cues and social context cues. CMC includes all forms of electronic communication including but not limited to email, online social networks, electronic discussion forums, virtual chatrooms whiteboards, computer conferences and blogs (a.k.a. online journals, weblogs or simply “blogs”).

Since most modes of CMC are text-based, user messages are often described as impersonal and task-oriented (Walther 1992). Gunawardena (1995), however, found that CMC users do develop ways to express missing nonverbal cues in written form. Some strategies that she suggests to optimize online communication include: a) prefacing electronic messages to others using first names to simulate eye-to-eye contact (Barker, 1982), b) using *emoticons*, that is, symbols to represent nonverbal gestures such as :-) for a smile or <<hug>> for an embrace, to create a sense of warmth and closeness that is lacking within an electronic community (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999), and c) using predominantly lower-case spelling in electronic exchanges to indicate a conversational or relaxed speaking tone, or, alternatively, using upper-case spelling to denote anxiety or yelling (Barker, 1982).
In a five-week online graduate course, Rovai (2001) found that a stronger sense of community, satisfaction and perceived learning developed among students who used an online course discussion forum to engage in *socioemotional discourse*—that is, communication conveying praise, encouragement, and support. Through the use of positive, motivational messages, students were able to get to know their classmates and build meaningful online relationships with them. Rovai believes that as instructors we should take note of these results and find ways to provide *all* learners in our online classes with opportunities and models for such expression.

Similarly, in a study of an asynchronous graduate level course, Polhemus, Shih, and Swan (2001) found: a) the use of affective language created a more trustworthy and reflective community with a high level of social presence; b) students who felt that their personal contributions were vital to online discussions rated themselves high on “perceived learning”; c) instructors who use affective language in their responses develop a closer relationship with students; and d) social presence increases the cohesiveness between students and instructor.

Based upon their experiences of working with students using asynchronous CMC, Polhemus et al. (2001) created a list of student behaviors that they believe help to indicate occurrences of social presence:

1. **Personal response** – prefacing response with the name of person to whom you are responding.
2. **Acknowledgment** – restating another person’s response or agreeing or disagreeing with another person.
3. **Closing signature** – signing the end of response with a name.
4. Feeling – using words that are descriptive about how one feels (e.g. love, hate, ludicrous, absurd).

5. Paralanguage – using relaxed language styles that convey personality and/or feelings (e.g. emoticons).

6. Humor – using appropriate jokes, sarcasm, plays on words, funny stories.

7. Social Sharing – sharing information that is non-related to the discussion, yet with the purpose to enhance communication.

**Social Presence and Online Learning**

Dreyfus (2001) maintains that people will never be able to achieve social presence as defined by Steuer (1992) because they are not physically invested in any of their experiences in cyberspace. He claims that the type of social presence we experience online is “making our lives worse rather than better. Living one’s life on the Web is attractive because it eliminates vulnerability and commitment…[and] this lack of passion necessarily eliminates meaning as well” (p. 102). Supporting this claim, Dreyfus cites a two-year, 1.5 million dollar study (Kraut et al., 1998) involving 169 people in seventy-five households during their first one to two years online. Participants reported “declines in communication with family members in their household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness” (p. 3). Additionally, Dreyfus (2001) cites a New York Times article (Gabriel, 1996) where teacher union members complain that the increasing trend toward online courses isolates students from each other at a time when they really need to be connected: “…teaching and learning in shared human spaces of a campus are essential to the undergraduate [learning]
experience” (p. 32). Thus, Dreyfus concludes that online interactions lack meaning, inhibit learning due to a lack of physical practice or supervision and undermine relationships.

Yet several philosophers and educators reject Dreyfus’ argument on the basis that it hinges upon subjective meanings that he ascribes to us, to others and to technology. They submit “learners can interact ‘with’ technology, ‘through’ technology, or ‘within’ a technological context,” in ways that allow their “meaning-making abilities and embodied lives [to be] central” (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2004, p. 117). Burbules (2000) notes that there are myriad ways of being online:

It is a mistake to draw the line too sharply between the literal and the imaginary, as if there were nothing performative or imaginary even in ordinary F2F interactions, or as if a person is not in some sense ‘really’ representing who they are even when they create an imaginary persona to stand in for them (pp. 18-19).

Furthermore, instead of leaving our bodies behind when we go online, Burbules (2002) contends that our bodies continue to impact the way we experience our online interactions. He allows that our online experiences will be different, but that they will not necessarily be inferior. Burbules believes that the critical point to understand is that people interact online as a supplement to their lives, not as a substitute for them. Instead of worrying about whether or not individuals will prefer virtual interactions to F2F encounters, he is far more concerned about the Net loss people will experience if they are deprived of interactions that bring meaning and creativity into their lives:
“…I feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that’s a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I’m just hoping that F2F I can find a way to spend some time being the online me” – Excerpt from an online interview (Turkle, 1995, p. 179).

Range of Selves

Perhaps the biggest current concern on the minds of parents, educators, legislators and philosophers is the possible ramifications of the “range of selves” that is achievable online (Marx, 1999). A useful image to envision the expanse of the range of selves is a line with two distinct ending points. At one end, there would be the almost empty state of anonymity. Further along, moving toward the opposite end, there would be incrementally different levels of an invented self, which represent pseudonymity. At the extreme end of the line, there would be identity as it is presented in “real life” (or as close an approximation as possible because the mediating technologies invariably limit the number of social cues and other stimuli).

Anonymity

Anonymity allows the identity of a person to be hidden. Issues that surround anonymous communications in cyberspace are complex and contentious. For example, Dreyfus (2002) argues that anonymity leads to a life without meaning because there is no real commitment or risk-taking among people who do not take responsibility for their words or actions.

In a keenly informative discussion of anonymity, Lee (1996) focuses on three key issues currently under debate. First, identity has an informative aspect that others use to form opinions about us. For example, a person’s credibility rests upon prior knowledge of
her or his reputation or known expertise on a particular topic. Yet knowledge of an individual’s personal or cultural background (e.g. gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc.) introduces the probability that stereotypes and/or prejudices will diminish a person’s credibility. Second, identity is in part a social construct that is susceptible to social pressures. Anonymity allows a person a degree of freedom to express unpopular opinions or to question conventional wisdom without fears of retribution. Uninhibited speech is valued in a democracy (and in the American system of education) because it functions as an agent of change. Yet a person who is not associated with her or his words and ideas may feel released of the responsibility to be truthful, which could promote blind attacks against others (e.g. flaming—that is, hostile, offensive and provocative writing directed at others online). Finally, anonymity is a means to prevail over censorship and thus promote democratic discourse. Yet it may also engender unlawful speech practices such as libel, obscenity, false advertising and copyright infringement, which the researcher notes are already rampant on the Internet.

**Pseudonymity**

Literally translated from Greek, *pseudonym* means “false name.” However, pseudonyms are typically fashioned after one’s own image. In an investigation of ways that “nicks” (pseudonyms) are used among members of online chatrooms, Bechar-Israeli (1995) found that they reflected some personal trait associated with their owner’s “real-life” identity. For example, almost half of the chatroom members disclosed information about themselves, such as their appearance <handsom>, profession <pilot>, character <shydude>, or relationships <bfiance>. Also, members of the chatroom deemed borrowing some else’s nick as a form of identity theft. Bechar-Israeli reported that
members valued their nicks so much that eventually they developed software to prevent others from *impersonating* them.

Research in education indicates that students who are allowed to use pseudonyms find the experience liberating and engaging. For example, Chester and Gwynne (1998) conducted an online course with only one F2F meeting scheduled at the very end. Students were allowed to create a pseudonym for themselves and it was up to the individual students to decide how much or how little personal information they would disclose to their peers as the class progressed. By the end of the course, several students had disclosed a lot of personal information about themselves. Two-thirds of the class reported, however, that pseudonyms allowed them to feel more confident and to participate more in this online class than in their F2F classes. The researchers/instructors observed that this type of class structure encouraged informality, multiple interactions across all cultural groups who were represented in their class and a thriving learning community.

**Online Identities – Tales from the Field**

A few years ago, a New Yorker cartoon depicted two canines at a computer with the caption: “On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog!” These two dogs making light of this situation or plight or perhaps even *conspiring* to misrepresent themselves exposes how deeply our collective insecurities about online identity run. There is no doubt that while on the Internet, one’s identity could easily be manipulated or disguised. As mentioned earlier, in one sense, the idea of transforming one’s self into anything one wishes is liberating and empowering. In another sense, it is troubling to consider that others also have the same power and could use it to deceive, swindle or even hurt us.
Online identities are haunted by issues of honesty and deception. It is important for us as educators to recognize that all learning situations are marked by power relations and morality issues that affect our students, ourselves and our pedagogical practices. The following three stories provide context for understanding impacts and transformative possibilities of online identities extending from virtual to proximal reality.

**The Alex Affair**

Julie Graham befriended several women within a “Women Only” online discussion group hosted by CompuServe. Over a three-year span, Julie revealed herself to others as a mute, paraplegic, housebound woman who often had suicidal thoughts. Several women who participated in this community were drawn to Julie because of her plight as well as her sensitivity and intellect. Over time, Julie and many of her circle of friends exchanged intimate details of their lives. At one point, Julie informed the others that she was critically ill. One of the women made a special effort to find Julie in her proximal world to physically comfort and support her. To her surprise, however, Julie turned out not to be ill, not to be disabled, and not even to be a woman. Julie Graham was a male psychologist named Alex who, as part of his research, impersonated a woman in order to become an accepted and trusted member of the online community. None of the women in this community had ever met each other F2F, but after hearing how they had all been deceived, many described their personal experiences in terms of feeling “foolish,” “used,” “hurt,” and eventually feeling “outraged” (Stone, 1996).

**Mr. Bungles**

A similarly offensive incident occurred on LambdaMOO that continues to reverberate around its electronic hallways. LambdaMOO allows people to meet together
online and develop electronic objects that can be manipulated electronically and are limited only by their imaginations and technical expertise. Thus, it would not be surprising to “see” friends float by or to “watch” cars take flight—all described lyrically by the people who had conceived the idea. Everyone who joins a MOO community is relegated some power to create and manipulate objects. As time goes by and as technical knowledge increases, people request more power from the MOO administrators (wizards).

One member of LambdaMOO, Mr. Bungles, had very technical knowledge and was granted powers to become a wizard. Mr. Bungles created a voodoo doll, which is an electronic object that can be made to “appear” to others online as an actual person whom they usually know and have befriended within the community. Mr. Bungles decided one evening to bring out his voodoo doll in the presence of several other members and perform several so described “sexually repulsive” actions on the doll. Although members present in the room demanded and even pleaded with him to stop, Mr. Bungles continued to “violate” the doll for several minutes and laugh at the people who were in the room watching. Finally, one wizard who was logged on at the time and who had the technical expertise to deactivate Mr. Bungles’ doll took control of the situation.

Despite the fact that this incident had not physically taken place, people who were in the same room at the time of this incident described their personal experiences in terms of feelings of “being violated” and “being victims of assault.” Mr. Bungles was eventually expelled from the community, but there was still much debate among members about how culpable he was for his actions since no one was physically hurt. To this day, members continue to discuss this incident as a “rape in cyberspace” (see latest
In her book, *The Well*, Hafner (2001) begins with a story of a man named Tom Mandel. He had been a member of a famous online community called *The Well* for almost a decade. He must have found great inspiration and kinship with the thousands of people who frequented there because he spent a lot of time online posting literally thousands of messages. Of course, just as human relationships tend to evolve or disintegrate in a proximal world, Tom had made and broken many friendships on The Well. He even had a very public love relationship that other online community members had followed closely. He was a very passionate man and spoke fervently about his personal views and was very quick to criticize the views of others. Without overdramatizing his situation, Tom Mandel was indeed a prominent and controversial community figure.

Of his thousands of postings, one of his last continues to reverberate around the “electronic hallways” of *The Well* even today. It was time for Tom Mandel to die and he wanted to say goodbye to his family, his friends, his people. He wrote the following message on March 25, 1995, after being he told he had a mere few weeks to live:

> It’s bad luck to say goodbye before it’s time to do so and there’s no point in embracing death before one’s time, but I thought I’d sneak in a topic, not too maudlin I hope, in which I could slowly say goodbye to my friends here, curse my enemies one more time <well, not really worth the trouble,
actually> and otherwise wave a bit at the rest of you until it’s just not time to do so any more.

I could start off by thanking you all, individually and collectively, for a remarkable experience, this past decade here on the Well. For better and worse—there were a lot of both—it has been the time of my life and especially a great comfort during these difficult past six months. I’m sad, terribly sad, I cannot tell you how sad and griefstricken [sic] I am that I cannot stay to play and argue with you much longer. It seems almost as if I am the one who will be left behind to grieve for all of you dying.

So, thank you all, my best wishes and prayers to each and everyone of you. It’s been a fabulous life and it wouldn’t have been the same without you (Hafner, 2001, pp. 1-2).

How could one person affect and be so profoundly affected by the people he met within The Well online community? If, as Dreyfus (2001) asserts, our sense of self and others is so lacking in the virtual realm, what keeps people looking online for fellowship and meaningful relationships?

**Freedom versus morality in online settings**

What is it that governs people’s behavior in online settings? For example, what did Tom Mandel find online in *The Well* that engaged him daily for hours at a time? When does experimentation in identity become abuse as demonstrated in “the Alex affair”? Why did Mr. Bungles behave in the “perverse and hurtful” ways he did on that fateful night in LambdaMOO? Or, more importantly, why did community members have such a difficult time assessing Mr. Bungles’ culpability? As Burbules (2004) intimates,
people often forget that there is a live person at the receiving end of their electronic communication, so they say and do things they wouldn’t dream of doing in real life.

Dreyfus (2001) brandishes the term “disembodied” to describe how people interact online. He insists that a lack of physical presence results in impoverished interactions among people leading to a drastically diminished sense of connection or bonding as well as a minimized sense of moral and social commitment or responsibility to others as demonstrated in the ‘Alex’ affair.

This compulsion to act with careless abandon, however, predates the Internet; it has been around for millennia. In Greek theater, plays were typically extremely violent because playwrights, actors and audience members agreed that affording this type of aggressive and brutal expression on stage, released spectators from acting upon these innate tendencies in reality. The Greeks referred to this type of purging or emotional release as *catharsis*.

Similarly, several people who take part in various types of online communities do so as a form of therapeutic outlet. Some describe their aggressive online actions or behaviors as a form of “venting,” while others take on various personas or identities. Gender-swapping and even species swapping are daily occurrences in online communities (Turkle, 1995; Dreyfus, 2001; Graham, 2001). For example, some men assume female identities and some women assume male identities and why should anyone need to know the difference? Some men and women assume neutral identities that are neither male nor female. Similarly, some people take on characteristics of their favorite pet animal or even inanimate objects with which they identify.
The Internet offers a welcomed exploration of self because it allows people to leave behind their bodies and their cultures to experiment with their wildest desires and dreams. An added bonus that was discussed earlier is that online personas also transcend or are liberated from age, race, physical appearance, disability, social status, and other characteristics through which the physical self is bound and frequently measured. In essence, on the Internet, the self can be made up as one goes along and this personal freedom also frees the people one encounters along the way from making discriminatory or unfair judgments.

**Online Morality**

The ability of people to present a range of selves or to manipulate their identities raises questions about appropriate behavior and morality in online settings. Wolf (2003) maintains that the Internet and other developing electronic technology is far from being neutral and transparent. He urges us educators to take the time to reflect upon and to ask tough questions about the “moral and ethical dimensions” of new media so that we can protect ourselves. Turkle (1995) anticipated Wolf’s appeal, asking several years earlier: “What will computer-mediated communication do to our commitment to other people? Will it satisfy our needs for connection and social participation, how will it further undermine fragile relationships? What kind of responsibility and accountability will we assume for our virtual actions?” (p. 178).

On the other hand, what stops people from abusing the anonymity that the Internet affords? What of the “ambiguity, misinterpretation and unintended side effects” of electronic communications? Wolf (2003) cited three criteria identified by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas that provide a measure for morality: 1) “Knowledge (one must have an
understanding of the rightness or wrongness of one’s actions); 2) Intention (one must freely choose to do what one does, with full consent of the will); and 3) Action (one must actually do or attempt to do the act being considered” (p. 6). Wolf then went on to apply these criteria to online settings. Essentially, he believed that making people cognizant of their responsibilities as online community members is one way to influence their online behaviors.

However, the rules of social conduct are so complex that knowledge of a person’s social identity is essential in order for us to know how to act towards her or him (Holland & Skinner, 1987; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). We also need to know the people with whom we socialize if we are ever to build a functioning community with them (Rheingold, 1993). Finally, we need to know something about the identity of those from whom we get information so that we can assess its veracity (Donath, 2000). Thus, an essential means for building mutually trusting relationships online is through telepresence (aka social presence)–that is, the degree to which people feel a mutual awareness of others and a sense of presence in an electronically mediated environment (Steuer, 1992). As previously discussed, social presence encourages spontaneous communication and recognition of others and reduces the impact of physical separation (Johannsen et al., 2000). Conversely, an indication of social presence deficit is flaming.

Similar to Harvey’s (2006) description of “disoriented, isolated and disembodied” students when they first begin an online course, in my experience of teaching and taking online courses, one of the most important, and perhaps the hardest, lessons learned among students is how to present themselves to others online. Unlike F2F classes where conflicts are usually obvious, online classes can have hidden problems that undermine
their success. Since students usually take a while to “warm up to each other” in online classes, a misunderstood or offensive comment may not be addressed and corrected, which could set the tone of the course for the duration. Students can learn appropriate online behavior very quickly, however, when we instructors remain alert and proactive or when other students in class are outspoken. Following Mesh & Zanca (2005), I believe that rules of conduct spelled out by the instructor at the very beginning of courses helps to create a “safe” environment where members learn to respect and honor each other’s opinions and differences and where trust among students can grow and is reciprocated.

Who we think we are, how we wish others to perceive us, and how they actually do perceive us are all parts of the complex social construct we call identity. The Internet allows us to discover, create and recreate, challenge, and play with many parts of our identity. In the process our experiences online are changing the ways we think about ourselves and the ways we perceive the world. Although the media have changed and the questions have evolved, the role of educators in this process of discovery will always be the same: to help others make sense of themselves and to find their place in the world.

**Faulty Assumptions**

Can we assume that the online behaviors and values of an individual or even a large group of individuals are representative of the communities and culture of which they are members? Unfortunately, many people do. For example, several researchers studying the effects of conflict and trust among online teams recommend the golden rule, “treat others as you would like to be treated” (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1994; Dee, 1995; DuBrin, 1995). Yet given that values, desires and beliefs vary among cultures and indeed individuals, it is a mistake to assume that what one person finds important or polite will
be equally important and/or inoffensive to others. Kezar (1998) and Manz, Neck, Mancuso and Manz (1997) suggest a “modified golden rule” that embraces the diversity found in online communities. They urge members to discover how other people want to be treated and then act accordingly.

After launching several online educational initiatives and projects, Burniske and Monke (2001) reflected on their personal experiences and the experiences of their students in a book entitled, *Breaking down the digital walls: Learning to teach in a post-modern world*. In one chapter, Monke described *Project Utopia*, a project that he and Burniske had initiated that allowed students from two separate and distinct communities and cultures (one from Iowa and one from Kuala Lumpur) to research various aspects of society, design their version of a utopian society and then share their versions with each other. Although from vastly different parts of the world, the similarities of the students’ visions were striking. Both versions included: “governments that were democratic; economies that exhibited strong centralized controls; a heavy emphasis on environment protection (recycling was big in both utopias); free education and health care; and further development of high technology” (p. 132). A student who evaluated the value of the project noticed the similarities, too, and remarked: “Through this project we learned the ideals of the other cultures. But obviously, most people’s ideas will be somewhat similar” (p. 132).

Not long after this project was completed, Monke attended a workshop where a teacher was describing an online project that her class of fourth-graders in North Carolina had engaged in with another class of fourth-graders from Alaska: “What struck these students most was that students in Alaska eat at Pizza Hut just like them (p. 132).”
According to Monke, the point the teacher was making and that other teachers in the room seemed to be agreeing with was that “such exchanges are often valuable not so much for discovering the cultural differences in people from different parts of the world but in helping students see similarities” (pp. 132-133).

Unknowingly, however, the student from Iowa and the teacher from North Carolina had struck upon a phenomenon that neither of them realized. In Monke’s words:

Telecollaborating students do learn that they have a surprising amount in common with children from other cultures, and in fact, that all cultures are far more similar than they are different. They learn this for the simple but generally obscured reason that the cultures of students who have access to the ’Net, regardless of where they are in the world, share a common techno-culture that subsumes whatever local culture may exist (p. 133).

The point that I believe Monke is making here is that in some ways the Internet homogenizes cultures, but a large part of humanity cannot participate in the process. Would they even want to participate? It is shortsighted for us as educators to consider the types of people who do have access to electricity, a computer and the Internet without considering the types of people who do not. After all, people who do not have access outnumber by far the people who do and yet their voices are not heard. As online instructors we should not assume or allow our students to assume that persons who have computers can speak for others who do not.

**Fostering Dialogical Relationships Online**

In a discussion of Utopian Visions '97, a telecollaborative learning project spanning eight countries, Burniske (2004) described how "technological, linguistic,
sociocultural, and curricular differences" could become barriers to the realization of a community of inquiry among the secondary school student-participants (p. 101). As a participating teacher and one of the project facilitators, Burniske had to find ways to bypass or at least to mitigate the problems that these differences would likely engender in order to salvage the core components of a community of inquiry. As an instructor of blended learning courses, I found several of the precautionary measures and alternative solutions that he and his co-facilitator worked out are useful to consider when designing learning activities for the purpose of fostering dialogical relationships and a sense of community among members.

For example, the initial application filled out by teachers who wished to participate in the project requested a "profile of students, school, Internet access, and previous tele-collaborative experience" (p. 101). This information provided a means to develop a realistic project plan based upon the needs and limitations of the participants. Similarly, blended learning facilitators should perform a student needs assessment or have a "minimum skills and equipment requirement" so that limitations and expectations are known early on.

In Utopian Visions '97, the facilitators devised telecomputing activities using electronic mailing lists and a system for submission so that students and teachers who had little or no access to the Internet could still participate. In other words, instead of excluding people who were "technologically underprivileged," an essential feature of the project was to value the voices of a diverse group of people. Similarly, instructors in blended learning classrooms must use inclusive practices and universal designs as they develop learning activities. Universal design is defined as a standard of usability for "all
people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized
design" (Mace, 1970's). From students with limited access or proficiency using
computers to students with physical or mental disabilities accessing physical and
electronic course sites, a universal design would allow all members to actively
participate. And just as curbcuts and ramps provide access to many more people than
those using wheelchairs, accessible design techniques benefit everyone because people
understand that their contributions to the learning community are desired and valued.

In Utopian Visions '97, the facilitators instructed participants to use descriptive
message labels within the subject lines of emails. This practice facilitated dialogues and
supported exploratory discourse among participants helping them to identify, organize
and archive email messages. Similarly, blended learning activities should provide several
modes for interaction among students that limit “chaos” so that members can have
meaningful experiences. For example, within electronic chatrooms, instructors must
establish rules of conduct and limit the number of participants so that the threads of
conversation are not lost as people "talk over" each other (Hasler-Waters & Napier,
2002).

In Utopian Visions '97, the types of questions that students were asking each other
were important to determine if the project enabled reciprocal, exploratory and meaningful
discourse. In order to distinguish different stages of dialogue, student messages were
analyzed chronologically and contextually using four levels or generations for messages.
For example, a message coded as 1st-generation indicated that it initiated a new message
thread or topic for discussion. A message marked as 2nd-generation was a reply to the
initial message. A message marked as 3rd-generation was a reply to a second-generation
message. Finally, a message marked as 4th generation indicated a meta-level response that synthesized previous replies. Messages that moved beyond 2nd-generation indicated to the facilitator/researcher that reciprocal correspondence or an electronic dialogue existed among students.

Similarly, activities for blended learning courses must encourage formal discourse and informal dialogues among students. For example, a common practice in online educational discussion forums is to require students not to simply read the postings of their peers (lurking) but also to reply to them. As a way to encourage reciprocity among students, as instructors we could require that students pose one or two questions in their replies to the original author. The original author, in turn, should reply to the questions and perhaps pose a few of her or his own questions. These types of discussion patterns that go deep and not necessarily long are known as “sequential threads” and they are a good sign of interactivity (Fahy, 2001). If facilitators want more interaction and less control of the discussions, then sequential threads should be encouraged (2001). Without regulating every interaction among our students, as instructors we also need to set guidelines (e.g. requiring timely, civil, thoughtful, and more substantive replies to peer postings in addition to simple messages of encouragement or "cheerleading" responses) to encourage useful and relevant discussions among participants (Hasler-Waters & Napier, 2002).

Discourse, curiosity and community cannot be imposed or designed into a learning activity or lesson plan, rather they develop or evolve over time around the particular needs and purposes that students and instructors value as meaningful. With this in mind, Burniske (2004) proposes four fundamental principles that as facilitators we
should consider when designing activities to foster exploratory discourse: a) Provide time for reflection, b) Cultivate student-generated questions, c) Nurture student dialogues, and d) Establish and maintain a community of inquiry (pp. 110-112). He also recommends "... faculty coordinators [must] understand the significance of student inquiry, nurture that inquiry by facilitating student dialogues, and encourage a serious and sustained commitment to an online community of inquiry (1994, p. 110).

**Blending Strengths of Online and Face-To-Face Interactions**

As facilitators who conceive and design activities to foster dialogical relationships and community in blended learning courses, we must make ourselves aware of the affordances of technology and the needs of students to physically interact. For example, as mentioned previously, at the beginning of the course, having students meet F2F may be more conducive to building community (Garrison et al., 2000; Kling & Courtright 2003). Additionally, when discussing a complex issue, having students post reflections within an asynchronous online discussion forum may allow for more thoughtful and insightful responses (Polhemus et al., 2001). An asynchronous online platform also allows students to focus more on issues because students have more control over noise and other distractions as well as a permanent record of discussions to consult and review. Meyer (2003) found that student responses in online discussion forums were more thoughtful, reasoned and supported by references to research. Finally, reticent or shy students may find a voice in online asynchronous environments that they perceive as less threatening (Burbules, 2002; Warschauer, 1996; Kern, 1995; Chun, 1994).

Yet F2F discussions can be more lively, full of energy and enthusiasm, spontaneous and contagious, or "off the hip/lip" (Meyer, 2003). Students who are "quick
thinkers” and are vocally assertive enjoy and actively participate in live discussions. Clearly, both asynchronous and synchronous discussion activities are complementary in a quality learning environment, and if creatively conceived and effectively designed, can be achieved through blended learning.

In her book, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Stone (1996) discusses how human beings develop interactional skills primarily through activities of play. She draws on a description offered by Andy Lippman (an early researcher at MIT) to serve as a definition for interactivity: “interaction [i]s mutual and simultaneous activity on the part of both participants, usually working toward some goal, but not necessarily” (p. 10). From this definition, Stone drew five corollaries that she believes are implicit in any meaningful interaction: a) *mutual interruptibility*, that is, interaction implies conversation in which participants are bound to interrupt each other mutually and simultaneously and they should value and, indeed, capitalize on that right as much as necessary because “… there is a complex back-and-forth exchange, the goal of which may change as the conversation unfolds” (p. 12); b) *graceful degradation*, which means that the continuity of a conversation is not lost because one of the contributors asks a question that, for whatever reason, is unanswerable; c) *limited look-ahead*, which means that none of the contributors to a conversation can know how it will wrap-up because each of them is free to interrupt the other and change its course; d) *no-default*, which means that the conversation develops as the participants speak; it has no preplanned course; and e) *infinite database*, which means "that an immersive interactional world should give the illusion of not being much more limiting in the choices it offers than an actual world would be" (p. 11). In other words, context is
important. Ideas and opinions offered by the contributors should be relevant and appropriate to the conversation as well as familiar to them. She also warns that interaction facilitated through technology must be comfortable, without the Spock effect, "... in which more information is sometimes offered than is conversationally appropriate" (p. 11).

The fluid, back-and-forth interaction and conversation that Stone describes are an excellent example of a dialogical relationship. Students who model these types of behaviors online are engaging in a dialogue that is not constrained by technology. In this sense, computers have become a prosthetic or an extension, discretely assisting human beings as they interact with each other. As a result, students have transcended that amorphous "place" in cyberspace and unconsciously asserted their presence. As Stone puts it, there is essentially a "... breakdown of boundaries between [at least] two systems of agency and ... that transformation affects the play of power within [the] field of social action" (p. 13). Yet computers are not merely tools because they afford interaction, they are "arenas for social experience."

Another implication evident in Stone's corollaries of interaction is that of safety. For example, students who engage in dialogue also take risks (Kling & Courtright, 2003). The very act of interrupting another person to interject one's own ideas or opinions is risky. Additionally, students who feel safe are more open to risks such as discussing delicate topics or making statements of which they are uncertain. Within a community of inquiry, as facilitators we can help to foster a climate of safety by identifying, acknowledging, and controlling to the extent possible the contextual factors that make a topic more/less dangerous for some participants (Anderson, 2004).
In a study of a blended learning language course, Mesh & Zanca (2005) describe how a facilitator (in this case a tutor) used several strategies to develop a safe learning community among beginners to pre-intermediate level English learners. One technique the facilitator used was scaffolding of support and learner tasks. Oliver, Omari, and Herrington (1998) describe scaffolding as providing increased support at critical times, such as at the beginning of instruction when students must learn new information or skills, and tapering off as students become more experienced. Another technique the facilitator used was to model texts. Similar to modeling behavior, when we teachers model the kinds of feedback or responses that are appropriate and coach or reword comments that might be hurtful or ineffectual, students begin to understand and follow our example.

To illustrate, grounding a discussion in the close reading of a quality text models for students that discussions are about ideas and issues, not personalities. At the same time, we as facilitators must acknowledge that students' personalities and feelings are relevant and connected to the issues of the course. Providing opportunities for students to learn about and practice online collaboration skills with peers will help lay the groundwork for inquiry and help students engage in meaningful discourse that meets their basic emotional and intellectual needs (Napier & Hasler-Waters, 2003).

Students also have a role to play in building the community in a community of inquiry. For example, Mesh & Zanca (2005) describe how students were responsible for actively participating in the online discussions, providing both practical and affective peer support, using inclusive pronouns (e.g. we, us, our, everybody) to indicate group identity and attempting humor in the second language.
Discourse that is reflective, spontaneous, candid and collaborative is the hallmark of a community of inquiry. A sense of community is what unites members so that they develop the trust and motivation to engage in higher levels of thinking. Rovai (2002) put it this way: "... students with a stronger sense of community tend to possess greater perceived levels of cognitive learning" (p. 330). Garrison and Archer (2000) describe the discernible phases of critical thinking as: a) a triggering event, b) exploration, c) integration, and d) application. Students who feel a sense of community are more likely to develop the confidence and commitment to move through these progressive phases that the researchers outline.

Finally, David Benyon (1998) notes, "[An] environment is not some physical structure to which humans must adapt. People play a role in producing the space, through their activities and practice ... There is context to space which needs to be communicated, negotiated, and understood by people" (p. 34). Educators and students alike have important roles in shaping learning environments.

Conclusion

As this review of the literature makes clear, the nature of online educational communities and the relationships among the participants within them are extremely complex and ambiguous. Although an analysis of the relationships among students who take online courses as part of a blended learning cohort may uncover further complexities, we are just as likely to further our understanding of these intricacies and leading us to improve strategies and make blended learning communities of inquiry more meaningful and productive for all who participate in them.
In the next chapter, Chapter Three, I present the research questions that guided my study as well as the plan or methodology I followed to implement it. I describe how I obtained data, the participants who agreed to become part of my research, and the procedures I used to analyze data. Finally, I give an account of the limitations of my research as well as the actions I took to maintain the rigor of my work and the trustworthiness of my findings.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter describes the methodology used for this study, which includes the research design, my role as a participant/observer, participant descriptions, ethical considerations, data collection, data analysis, and the measures I took to ensure the trustworthiness of my findings. It describes how student interviews became the basis for an exploration of the notion of community. It also provides details on how the perspectives and experiences of three members of a blended learning community were documented using an exploratory case study using virtual ethnographic methods in efforts to provide a more “holistic picture” to help uncover the intricacies and complexities of the term community as well as the people who comprise and experience it.

Research Questions

Current literature in distance education is calling for full participation of learners in determining the design and the goals of online coursework (Barab, et al., 2001; Schwen & Hara, 2003; Barab, MaKinster & Scheckler, 2004). The purpose of this study is to begin to answer that call by allowing three former undergraduate students who were members of a blended learning cohort to define what community meant to them, to describe the shapes that it took and to articulate ways they felt it was encouraged or discouraged and supported or not supported. Because perceptions and opinions were reported in retrospect, the three former students were also able to describe aspects of their learning community that have endured over time.
Three questions guided my research:

**RQ1:** Based upon their personal experiences with taking blended learning courses, how would students personally define *community* within predominantly online educational settings?

**RQ2:** How does current research on blended learning communities compare with the descriptions given by members of this study?

**RQ3:** Which activities or events fostered or hindered the forming of meaningful and enduring relationships with their classmates?

**Methods**

Methods are a set of recommended practices, procedures and rules used to engage in formal inquiry. I like to think of methods as a set of tools that allow researchers to do their jobs properly. When they use appropriate tools that “fit” the situation and the data, researchers are likely to get more useful results. When they use inappropriate tools, researchers can spend a lot time trying to make the tools “fit” the situation and the data, which often results in wasted time and effort. In other words, the appropriate methods tools get the research job done “right” the first time. The “tools” I used for my research fit the methodological framework of a qualitative exploratory case study using virtual ethnographic methods. Each method is described in detail below.

*Qualitative research*

My research questions required me to learn about and attempt to understand the worldviews of my participants from their recollections of experiences they had as members of a blended learning cohort for two years. The process of discovery and thoughtful analysis is fundamental to qualitative research, which eventually led me to
discover patterns of meanings that I present in this study for others to explore.
Specifically, I was interested in exploring which factors influenced community member
behaviors in ways that I found constructive and that I thought may be useful to me and
other blended learning instructors as we design our own courses to foster desired learning
and social behaviors among students. In other words, following Bogdan & Biklin (1998),
I sought answers to the “what” and “how” questions: a) “What” kinds of events happened
in this particular community? b) “How” have these events continued to affect the
individual learner and the collective community years later and, finally, c) “What”
lessons can be learned and applied to other blended learning communities of inquiry even
though other communities will inevitably be different?

Qualitative research is an *umbrella term* that includes various approaches in
research design, data collection and data analysis (Tesch, 1990; Miles & Huberman,
of qualitative research as follows: “One undertakes qualitative research in a natural
setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or
pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes
a process that is expressive and persuasive in language” (p. 14).

Following Gergen and Gergen (2000), I believe that qualitative research is about
meaningful dialogue – dialogue among participants with themselves and each other,
between participants with the researcher, the researcher with her or himself, and the
researcher with readers. This dialogue “undergoes continuous change as it moves through
an extended network”, but it is the researcher who bridges the gap between the
participants and readers, providing readers with opportunities for insight into the sense-
making of a particular group of people (p. 1042). The present dialogue includes three student voices and their views about community in blended learning settings.

Traditionally, qualitative research has avoided why questions that seek to explain and predict behavior. Questioning “why things happen the way they do can lead to inferential leaps and empirical speculations that propel qualitative analysis far from its stock-in-trade” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, p. 502). In the present study, I am not interested in trying to answer “why” the blended learning community took the shape that it did because I understand that communities are made up of individuals. All members bring to the community their own personalities, expectations, desires, values, experiences and beliefs. These individual characteristics and dynamics become an intrinsic part of the community that make it unique and unpredictable. Thus, as an instructor of blended learning courses, I recognize that a community of inquiry can never be wholly replicated from semester-to-semester.

Alternatively, my goal as a qualitative researcher was to seek answers to what and how questions so that I could understand what was going on and how things took shape. In other words, I was more interested in process and meaning rather than “cause and effect” (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). A basic premise for me as a qualitative researcher was to understand that “objective reality” is an abstract goal that can never be accomplished and that we can only know something through its representations. Thus, my job was to edit, stitch, and piece together a “set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 2).
**Exploratory Case Study**

I use the term *exploratory case study* to describe the component of my research design that involved identifying and seeking to understand the worldviews of three members of a cohort of students who had graduated from a two-year educational degree and certification program. Stake (2003) and Yin (2002) relate that a case study is not defined by the methods of inquiry used, but by the interest in individual cases. Creswell (1998) describes a case study as a detailed investigation involving multiple sources of information that is bounded by time and place and is “rich in context.” The cohort of students and the two-year program formed the boundaries of time and place for this case study (Stake, 2003).

A case study’s goal is to make sense of existing complex social phenomena. Thus, Yin (1994) relates that case studies are observations of real life events. An exploratory case study using virtual ethnographic methods held the promise of providing rich, detailed, thick and personal descriptions of *community* from the perspectives of blended learning community members, which I found was lacking in current literature.

**Virtual Ethnography**

I use the term *ethnography* to describe the central component of my research design that involved the description and interpretation of a cultural or social group (Creswell, 1998) and their activities (Stake, 2004). My role as teaching assistant (T.A.) immersed me in one blended learning community and allowed me to participate and get to know student participants for one semester, which allowed me as a researcher to build trust with community members.
As T.A. and an active contributor for one semester, I fully participated and immersed myself as much as possible within the community of inquiry. One caveat of becoming immersed in the community of research participants through the extensive fieldwork that is required by ethnography is what Stake (2003) describes as “thinking like the people with whom we are spending the most time” or having “gone native” (p. 123-4). I felt that the predominantly asynchronous setting of the course, however, severely limited the threat of “going native” because I did not spend a great deal of online real-time in the presence of any particular student or group of students.

Because this blended learning cohort met predominantly online, I used a virtual ethnography, also called a netnography and, more recently labeled a webnography (Puri, 2007), which is basically an online research method that maintains the values of a traditional ethnography, but relocates the field site to an online setting and replaces co-located F2F interactions with technologically mediated interactions.

In “Getting the seats of your pants dirty: Strategies for ethnographic research on virtual communities,” Paccagnella (1997) describes many advantages and limitations of virtual ethnographies. For example, on one hand, they allow a far less obtrusive method of observation in a context not fabricated by the researcher. They are also usually less costly and more convenient. They do not require the researcher to transcribe the interview, survey or online chat. However, for this study, I used current audio technology software to create an audio file of each interview in its entirety that I transcribed and then sent to participants for member checks. With their input and consent, I then used the “corrected” transcriptions to reference and code data.
At this point in time, virtual ethnographies cannot offer the rich detail of lived human experiences. They require greater interpretive skill of the researcher because social context cues are lacking, which could possibly limit the applicability of the findings beyond the online sample. For example, during my research of this blended learning community, I often wished that I could actually see the faces of the participants as they were talking on the phone to me so that I could receive a “more complete picture” of what they meant to communicate to me. I often found as the interviews progressed that I used a lot of follow-up questions to help me clarify statements that I believe would not have needed to be explained during a F2F situation. I also found that there was a delicate balance between my clarifying statements made by students and them becoming resistant to answering what they probably considered to be too many follow-up questions. In these instances, I opted not to probe further, but to move along and perhaps hit the topic later using another approach.

In summary, I believe that using an exploratory case study using virtual ethnographic methods was most appropriate for answering my research questions dealing with the worldviews of my participants. The ethnographic method allowed me to participate in and get to know student participants in what is increasingly considered to be a natural learning setting. The case study bound my research in place, time and number of participants. Using this combination of qualitative research methods allowed me to focus on “discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied” and offered the “greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education” (Merriam, 1998, p. 1).
Researcher

Professional experiences that affected my role as a researcher included: a) I have participated as a student in three strictly online courses and one blended learning course, b) I have taught four strictly online courses, ten blended learning courses and co-taught three strictly online courses, and c) I have attended several workshops to develop my skills as an online and blended learning instructor. Merriam (1998) describes a qualitative research investigator as “being able to tolerate ambiguity and [as] being a sensitive observer and analyst and a good communicator” (p. 23). I would add to the duties of my role as researcher the overriding responsibility to be respectful of my participants’ feelings, time and privacy.

Since I have had a lot of experience with online learning communities, I believe that I was in a much better position to truly empathize with the student-participants. As a student of online courses, my experiences have run the gamut from extremely satisfying to terribly frustrating. The courses where I felt the most satisfied were the ones where I experienced a sense of community or connection with my classmates and my instructor. Conversely, the courses where I felt the most dissatisfied were the ones where I felt disconnected and often isolated from my classmates and my instructor.

As an instructor of online courses, my experiences have been extremely rewarding for me. I feel that I was able to learn from my unpleasant online student experiences and use them as “non-examples” of how to run my own online courses. For example, to combat feelings of disconnection and isolation as much as possible among students in the course where I was the T.A., I set up specific online discussion forums to promote social, learning, and support networks. One discussion thread allowed students
to send important personal messages to classmates such as “So-and-so had a family emergency” or “So-and-so has had her baby.” Another discussion thread labeled “Homework Help” allowed students to pose questions about assignments. Students could earn a couple extra points toward their final grade by helping me to monitor and respond to peer questions within this online forum.

The combination of my teaching and learning experiences have led me to conclude that building and sustaining a community of inquiry within a strictly online course is almost impossible (Cummings et al., 2002). Thus, I specifically chose to research students who were members of a blended learning cohort because they had had opportunities to meet each other, work together and develop relationships in occasional F2F situations.

Finally, in my role as a researcher, I realized that promoting close ties among student participants with their peers provided an excellent tie-in to my topic on community. As T.A., it was important to me that students understand that they were entering a profession where networking and community are essential components for success. In both of my roles as researcher and educator, I saw the benefit for students to view their peers as possible future resources providing them with teaching strategies and/or tips about job openings. Essentially, I viewed this two-year blended learning program as a potential beginning for students to build lifelong personal and professional relationships.

Setting

The present research began in 2005 at a research one institution with students enrolled in a blended learning degree and teaching certification cohort program. As a
T.A. for one of the required courses of their program, I was able to get to know and build trusting relationships with students. My research eventually culminated into a phone interview with three members of the cohort four years after they had completed their degrees.

At the beginning of the course where I was a T.A., students were at the midpoint of their cohort experience. By the end of our course, students only had one more semester together before they graduated. Thus far, students had had many opportunities to meet with each other and with many of their professors in both online and F2F settings. Several instructors also taught multiple courses in the cohort allowing for even further familiarity and relationship-building.

Participants

This exploratory case study using virtual ethnographic methods involved a purposive sample of three students enrolled in a two-year teaching degree and certification cohort program. Following Creswell’s (2002) recommendations, I chose at least three cases to examine for my case study research. Also, since the ratio of female-to-male students enrolled in this blended learning cohort was four-to-one, I chose two female participants and one male participant. All three participants were members of the blended learning cohort of education majors and had been taking mostly online courses together for more than a year before I got to meet them. Students usually met F2F for four weekend classes during each semester.

The goal of the three participant sample size was to achieve data saturation, that is, reaching a point in data collection when the researcher is no longer hearing or seeing new information (Morse, 1995). As a qualitative researcher, I analyzed data throughout
the study instead of just at the end of my research. Upon reflection, I believe the sample size of three participants I chose to interview for my research was not too small so that it was difficult to achieve saturation and not too large so that it was difficult for me to undertake a “deep, case-oriented analysis” (Sandelowski, 1995).

As a qualitative researcher, I also understand that the feelings, experiences, thoughts, and opinions expressed by the participants I interviewed can never be fully representative of all students enrolled in the cohort (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Yet I specifically chose three participants for the following reasons: a) To present as full a picture of the cohort experience as possible, without too much redundancy or overlap; b) To be as representative as much as possible of the gender ratio within the cohort; and c) To capitalize on the relationships I had already developed with students and use the knowledge I had about them to guide me in my selection. The first female I asked to become a participant in my research declined. All of the other former cohort students I asked responded positively and enthusiastically to my request for them to participate in my research.

Finally, the three students who participated in the post-cohort telephone interviews were all in their early thirties and had all retained positions as teachers for the four years since graduating from the teaching program.

**Human Subjects Approval / Ethical Considerations**

I followed all guidelines and rules to protect student rights of privacy set forth by the Department of Health and Human Services. Approval (IRB certification) for the original study design and revised study design was obtained from my university’s
Committee on Human Studies (see Appendix B). Additionally, participants signed consent forms (see Appendix C).

Student participants were apprised at the beginning of the course of my intentions as a researcher to get to know them and eventually choose three students to participate in a post-cohort telephone interview for my research.

**Data Collection**

The post-cohort telephone interviews took the form of a narrative. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe the central purpose of narrative as a means “to render life experiences, both personal and social in relevant and meaningful ways” (p.10). Devault (1990) maintains that narrative is not a transparent medium, however, and she warns researchers to watch out for how their writing, “constructs and controls meaning and interpretation” (p. 110).

**Interviews**

The interview process, according to Cooper and Heck (1995), is a “shared construction of both researcher and participants, one in which a portion of the reality of the other is apprehended through story” (p. 200). Interviews were an important means for me to learn more about individual participants, to clarify meanings and to validate my own opinions and findings so that I could better reconstruct for readers what I found to be important portions of participant worldviews. Although I created an interview guide (see Appendix A), I followed it loosely. This semi-structured format allowed for “the emerging worldview of the respondent and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74).
To accomplish my research, I held post-cohort telephone interviews with three students who had graduated from the blended learning cohort and who were willing to participate to see if participant perspectives about their blended learning community experiences had changed or become enhanced as they looked at their experiences retrospectively. The post-cohort telephone interview conversations lasted approximately one hour per interviewee and were conducted more than four years after students graduated from the program. I believe that this lengthy interval between the course and post-cohort telephone interviews was useful. For example, it allowed the students to speak freely about their experiences without worries of possible negative consequences because they had already completed the course and their degree. I chose participants for my study and developed the guide used for the post-cohort telephone interviews using notes I had taken earlier during the online course when I was T.A. Besides recording our conversations to be transcribed, member-checked, corrected (when requested) and then analyzed, I also took brief notes during the phone interviews that I elaborated on once we hung up the telephone indicating that the post-cohort telephone interview was completed. Finally, I did contact all three participants once more via email when I began my data analysis in order to get clarifications of answers they gave during the phone interviews.

**Analysis**

The interview data gathering sources used for this exploratory case study using virtual ethnographic methods provided a vast amount of data to be analyzed. I used a *template* by Garrison et al (2000) to help me discover meaningful themes or corroborate existing themes and patterns. I also relied on *general qualitative procedures* to sort through, organize and reduce data.
Template

To begin the analysis, I used the model presented by Garrison et al., (2000) and depicted in Chapter One (Figure 1, p. 7). They also provided a useful template to code data from student interviews as well as researcher journal entries (see Table 1). In this template, Garrison et al., (2000) break down the common characteristics they find inherent in communities of inquiry (cognitive, teaching and social presence) into distinct categories and specific indicators. For example, a participant’s written statement that I believed illustrated “risk-free expression” was categorized as “open communication,” which, in turn, is an aspect of social presence. Similarly, a participant’s statement that I believed illustrated “information exchange” was categorized as “exploration”, which, in turn, is an aspect of cognitive presence.

Table 1: Community of Inquiry Coding Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Indicators (examples only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Presence</td>
<td>Triggering Event</td>
<td>Sense of puzzlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Information exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Connecting ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>Apply new concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Presence</td>
<td>Emotional Expression</td>
<td>Emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open Communication</td>
<td>Risk-free expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group Cohesion</td>
<td>Encouraging collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Presence</td>
<td>Instructional Management</td>
<td>Defining and initiating discussion topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building Understanding</td>
<td>Sharing personal meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct Instruction</td>
<td>Focusing discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table did not provide an exhaustive list of indicators; rather it allowed me as an individual researcher to code participant responses according to the particularities of
my collected data. I used this template as a guide to code the data gathered from the post-cohort telephone interviews.

**General qualitative procedures**

Data collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process. When data analysis is ongoing throughout the research endeavor, data is much less likely to be “unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming” (Merriam, 1998, p. 162). Thus, my goal was to collect “parsimonious and illuminating” data (p. 162). Upon careful review of the purpose of my study, I began my analysis of data using the recommendations of Bogdan and Biklin (1998), which involved “working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important, what is to be learned, and deciding what to tell others” (157).

Additionally, I followed the general qualitative procedures for data analysis of Miles & Huberman (1994) as described by Cooper & Heck (1995): a) *data reduction* – I read through the data several times and took notes in search of patterns; b) *data display* – I coded data to derive themes that compared each new element with previous-coded themes to create emergent categories or subcategories; and c) *conclusion drawing/verification* – I did a line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts to determine whether or not participant worldviews continued to support the model even though the program had ended four years earlier (p. 201).

I also found the three iterative processes described by Dey (1993) useful for my qualitative data analysis. These processes included: a) *describing phenomena*, b) *classifying it* and c) *seeing how the concepts interconnect*. 
The first step Dey describes is developing a thorough and comprehensive description of the phenomenon under study. Geerz (1973) and Denzin (1978) refer to this amount of detail as a ‘thick’ description. A ‘thick’ description includes information about context, intentions and meanings (Denzin, 1978). A rich, thick, description may also help with transferability of my findings to other settings because readers may discover “shared characteristics” that fit similar situations or contexts (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 32).

The second step in qualitative data analysis that Dey describes is classification. Without classifying the data, I would have no way of knowing what it is I was analyzing. I also could not make meaningful comparisons between different bits of data. Furthermore, the conceptual foundations used for interpretation and explanation are based on the classifications that I made. Description and classification were not ends in themselves, but were used to produce an account for my analysis.

Finally, the third step in qualitative analysis is to make connections among the building blocks or concepts of the analysis (Dey, 1993). Making these connections helped me to further discover meaningful patterns or themes as described earlier through the works of Miles & Huberman (1994) and Cooper & Heck (1995).

Limitations

This study was limited in several ways. First, the chosen environment limited this study. Since interviews were conducted via the telephone, I was not present to note participants’ physical responses (such as engaging in direct eye contact, gesturing and etc.) to questions that I posed. I had to rely on the participants’ communication and writing skills to provide me with a clear understanding of their thoughts and opinions.
Second, the retrospective self-report (RSR) data gathered from telephone interviews was subject to “the vagaries of memory and information-processing capabilities” of the participants (Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1991, p. 168). I provided a copy of the interview guide (see Appendix A) two weeks in advance of the scheduled telephone interviews so that participants had a reasonable amount of time to read through the questions and consider how they would respond to them. Occasionally, however, there were times during interviews when participants acknowledged that they could not remember details of events or conversations. Yet I felt that there were also benefits derived from the amount of time that had elapsed between graduating from the cohort program and the telephone interviews about it. Specifically, the four years that transpired since participants had graduated from the cohort program allowed them to speak from experience about which knowledge and practices taken with them from the cohort actually made a difference in their own classrooms. It also gave participants opportunities to reflect on and describe other enduring elements of community from the long since disbanded cohort. Finally, it allowed participants to feel freer to express observations and opinions without fear of reprisal from instructors or cohort program administrators.

Third, my role as a researcher may have caused students to “adjust” their interactions with me. For example, I believe that some participants felt that occasionally I over-scrutinized them. When I asked several follow-up questions to clarify meaning, some students responded to open-ended questions with only one-word answers. At this point, I moved on to other ideas and, when possible, I found other opportunities to get them to clarify earlier answers.
Finally, the limited number of students who participated in my study and their chosen field of study (education) restricted its findings. Indeed, the small number of viewpoints that I collected cannot be considered representative of the viewpoints of all students from all disciplines who take blended learning courses.

**Delimitations**

This study related to adult students aged 25-60 enrolled in one blended learning cohort at the University of Hawai‘i, a research one university. The viewpoints of three students after several years had passed and they had finished their studies and begun work in their chosen professions as teachers formed the basis of my research.

**Trustworthiness and Triangulation**

Triangulation, as defined by (Stake, 1988) is a technique used to “arrive at the same meaning by at least three independent approaches” (p. 263). Since I only used two data sources, participant interviews and researcher notes I took during the course where I was T.A., triangulation of my findings was difficult, almost impossible. Yet, as much as possible, I corroborated participant observations and descriptions with what I learned from other participants during interviews and from my own experiences as a T.A. for one of their courses in the cohort program. The CoI Coding Template helped me to find specific examples linking participant interview responses with similar instances I had described in my researcher notes as well as to current literature about learning communities. Although I was unable to use at least three different sources to increase the trustworthiness of my findings (Stake, 1988), I still believe there were instances where I was able to unveil “patterns of meaning” that Stake refers to as “sweet water” (p. 264).
Another research concern involved the Garrett, et al., CoI model (2000) being dependent upon the interaction of three presences (cognitive, social and teaching) to a greater or lesser degree: There was often overlap among them that was difficult to classify for analysis. To address the consistency of the rating system and enhance the trustworthiness of findings in this study, two raters sorted through interview transcripts to identify common themes. There was remarkable consistency between raters, but for the occasional differences in opinion, discussions led to agreement on emergent themes that both raters agreed were reasonable, consistent and appropriate.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, I allowed member checks of data gathered from transcripts of interviews. Students were allowed several weeks to read through, edit and add to them in any way they felt would report their viewpoints most accurately. As much as possible, I also allowed student participants to read through my interpretations of their writings to help ensure my results were plausible (Merriam, 1998, p. 204).

**Summary**

The goal of this chapter was to describe several of the processes involved in studying blended learning communities using the perspectives of students. Particular attention was given to discussions of methodological framework, design, participants, researcher, the course, the course instructors, ethical considerations, data collection, data analysis and, finally, trustworthiness and triangulation.

Chapter Four describes the blended teacher education cohort program in more detail as well as the types of students who enrolled in it. It provides an overview of program requirements and expectations as a means to provide context for my later
analysis of student viewpoints and experiences as they relate to building and maintaining a community within a blended learning cohort.
CHAPTER IV

FRAMING CHAPTER

Overview

This chapter describes the blended teacher education cohort program and the types of students who enrolled in it. It provides some specific details about context so that readers can understand the situation students were in and what happened during the two years they were actively enrolled in the cohort program. I believe the collective information presented in this chapter provides useful insights for what students said about the cohort during individual interviews four years after completing it.

Blended Learning Cohort

The students who participated in this study were members of the first entering class of twenty-eight students enrolled in a brand new statewide BEd program. It is a two-year, full-time program of study that included weekends and summers and served students who lived on the islands of Hawai‘i, Kaua‘i, Lana‘i, Maui, Moloka‘i and O‘ahu.

The blended learning cohort fulfilled the same requirements as similar campus-based teacher education cohorts. Students accepted to the program became members of a statewide cohort group and eventually earned a bachelor’s degree as well as a teaching certification after completing all program requirements.

Students were required to travel on approximately four weekends per semester to central locations for F2F (face-to-face) meetings. Stipends were provided to partially reimburse students for airfare and lodging for F2F meetings. Weekend classes included Friday evenings, Saturdays and Sundays.
The bulk of classes, however, were taught online during student non-teaching hours. The online classes resided on the campus edition of WebCT version 4.1.4.8. WebCT is an online learning management network that offers password-protected access to online discussion boards, whiteboards, email, chatrooms and other online communication and e-learning tools. Online social networking features and tools popular in many of the latest versions of these types of learning management networks were only just beginning to be developed and were not yet available to students enrolled in this cohort.

At a minimum, students were required to own a laptop computer, Microsoft Office software (which has since been changed to Open Office software), a printer and Internet access. Additionally, the nature of the program required a moderate amount of computer literacy and comfort as well as student self-discipline to keep up with the pace of courses between F2F and online meetings.

As pre-service teachers (i.e., teachers in training), students began with theoretical foundations classes in education and then advanced to more practical and hands-on classes aligned with the grade level and subject matter they would teach. This setup allowed students to continue daytime work schedules initially. As students progressed through the program, however, they were required to take three semesters of classroom field experience (two days per week) and one semester of student teaching (five days per week) on their home island.

The blended learning setup was particularly advantageous to members among this group who did not reside on an island where a combined teaching degree and teaching certification program was offered. However, all adult learners from any of the islands
who worked full-time jobs and had families also benefited from the flexible schedules of this type of program. For example, as mentioned in Chapter Three, the ratio of female-to-male students enrolled in this blended learning cohort was four-to-one. Parents among the group required a flexible schedule so that they could balance studying with caring for their families, especially the mothers with young children.

Another important advantage of this program was its cohort structure. Students began classes together and continued through their course of study as a single group. Throughout their classes and lasting through their student teaching practicums, pre-service teachers often worked closely with experienced teachers, observing firsthand the daily rewards and challenges of the profession.

Additionally, students collaborated regularly with other students to complete class assignments or projects within this program. Students were frequently grouped with others who were co-located on the same island so that they could potentially meet F2F if they felt it necessary.

**Summary**

The goal of this chapter was to describe the types of students as well as the program that form the basis of this study. Ostensibly, the flexibility built into this cohort program should produce favorable conditions for the development of a thriving community of inquiry among primarily married adult learners. It minimized student time away from work and families while maximizing opportunities for students to engage with subject matter, the instructor, and with each other in active learning pursuits.

In the next chapter, Chapter Five, I present an in-depth report of my findings, identifying themes and patterns that emerged and, much like a *bricoleur* or *quilt maker*, I
“edited, stitched and pieced” them together in a way that I hoped to help further the reader’s understanding of the intricacies and complexities involved in blended learning communities of inquiry.
CHAPTER V

RESULTS

Overview

This chapter uses three participant interviews to help describe various aspects of their experiences as members of a blended learning cohort. The emerging story that unfolds is one told by me as the qualitative researcher. Yet I have used the participants’ own words, as much as possible, to present their opinions and recollections of F2F and online experiences. Specifically, I chose participant quotes that I felt provided the richest descriptions to help the reader see the world through the eyes of those who were members of a blended learning community of inquiry.

Themes

Data are organized into themes based upon the community of inquiry model developed by Garrison et al., (2000). This model illustrates the dynamics of an online educational experience using core elements inherent in a Community of Inquiry: Social Presence, Cognitive Presence and Teaching Presence. For the most part, these themes were straightforward and easy to identify and classify within the interview transcripts. Raters discussed occasional differences of opinion about sorting and classification to reach a consensus.

The CoI model developed by Garrison et al. (2000) is partially based upon an earlier framework of interactions developed by Moore (1989) which delineates reciprocal interactions that take place in distance education courses between learners with other learners, learners with instructor, and learners with content. Wagner (1994) expanded upon this framework to include interactions between learners with technology. It became
increasingly evident to me as I analyzed data that participants in the blended learning cohort found interaction between the *learner with technology* to be important and so I included *technology presence* as an additional theme.

Additionally, within participant accounts of their community of inquiry, I discovered a fifth theme involving *learner with environment*. To describe *how* and *why* their community of inquiry existed, participants do not simply look at the community in isolation (Wu Song, 2009). For example, I found that family support, outside jobs, financial responsibilities and other external supports are important factors that define participant viewpoints of their community and their personal experiences within it. Thus, I included *environmental context* as a final theme in my findings.

Although I discovered that the five themes listed above were critical to forming a comprehensive picture of individual and collective experiences, I did not wish to unravel participant stories so much as to detach them from their tellers. Alternatively, I chose to tell the stories of participants individually and maintain the integrity of participant narratives. The themes within the narratives are useful as a means for “narrative inquiry” to show interconnectedness of events rather than separating storytellers from their stories (Polkinghorne, 1988). I also use pseudonyms to refer to participants to keep their stories “more lively and interesting” and to “not disturb the storyline” while maintaining research participant confidentiality (Holloway, 1997).

Finally, although gender differences may have played a role in the expressed different experiences or attitudes about social, teaching, cognitive, technology, or environmental context issues, I chose not to speculate because of the small number of participants I used as my purposive sample population.
Lani’s Story

Lani described herself as a student committed to getting her degree in any learning situation, no matter if it was F2F, online, or a combination of the two. During her time in the cohort, she was married with two small children at home. Beyond caring for her family, she did not hold an outside job while she was going through the program. In terms of age, gender and overall goals, Lani seemed to represent the average student enrolled in the blended learning cohort comprised mostly of females aged 25-to-35 years old seeking a degree in elementary education.

Four years after graduating and receiving a teaching certification, Lani is in her fourth year as a teacher. She taught middle school for three years and this is her first year teaching elementary school children. She likes her job even though she complains that the “administrative details” often get in the way of “good teaching.”

Overall, her impressions of the program and her experiences as a member of it were favorable: “I would rate it very highly. Very positive experience for me. I think it suited my lifestyle and my overall goal to go back to school to get my degree. It was a really good experience.”

When a formal definition of a community of inquiry (Garrison & Anderson, 2003:23) was presented to Lani during the interview (see Interview Guide, Appendix A) as a frame of reference, she determined without any hesitation that the blended learning cohort where she had been a member years before fit the bill: “To me, the formal definition of a community of inquiry really describes our cohort. We were definitely a community of learners.” She didn’t elaborate further at that point in the interview, but the
personal experiences she related later on as a member of the cohort did lend support to this assertion.

**Social Presence**

Lani’s responses to interview questions focused primarily on the social component of the program. Her first thoughts about her experiences as a member of a blended learning cohort involved people, social events, and emotions: “I see my classmates’ faces. I think about one of the trips we took to Kaua‘i. I think about having a good time. My first thoughts are of good times and feelings.”

Lani’s primary goals going into the program were “To get the skills and knowledge and the certification needed to become an elementary school teacher.” Initially she believed she would be making her own way through the program, but with time, she realized the essential role her peers would play in her own learning and development: “When I entered this cohort, making friends was not at the forefront of my mind. Actually, I thought it was mostly going to be me on my own going through it all.”

Lani reported that the type of program that she and others had enrolled in, however, helped them all to bond: “I feel like we bonded because we stayed together [for all classes in the program] the whole time [as a cohort]. Online learning was not a very common way of learning and we were the very first cohort so we were all experiencing this way of learning for the first time. We weren’t really sure about how it was gonna go, etc., so we learned very quickly to depend on each other.”

Lani also reported that she made friends as a result of the types of collaborative activities required in classes: “There were three other students who lived in the same town that I did and I actually worked with all three of them…We were grouped by region
so I got to do a group project and partner projects with them. We became pretty good friends.” In fact, Lani reported that she made “best friends” with a person who lived in the same town but she hadn’t met until they got to know each other and work together as team members enrolled in the same cohort program. Currently, Lani also works together with her best friend as teachers at the same school.

In spite of her initial notion about making it through the program on her own, over time, Lani realized that in order to succeed, she would need the help of her peers: “I think that getting to know my peers turned out to be really important. For me to be successful, I needed a lot of support and encouragement. It was a hard program. I wasn’t very technologically savvy when I started, so I was really insecure and worried about keeping up. I feel like getting to know the other people in the program helped me to realize that we all had the same kinds of concerns and stresses, and we were all going through many of the same things.” Further along in the interview, Lani related, “Getting to know my peers was really important because I could lean on them and it made me feel not so alone. Do you know what I mean? Once I met them, I didn’t feel like I was all alone in my office on my computer. I knew they were out there just like I was and this was a comforting thought for me.”

On the other hand, Lani also perceived a culturally conditioned willingness in herself and others in the cohort to build peer relationships that she believed was unique to people who live in Hawai‘i: “The fact that we were all people from Hawai‘i bonded us. I don’t feel like it would have been the same if we were all in California, or even in Los Angeles, California. I don’t think we would have had the same feelings of connectedness.
The type of community we developed in the cohort was unique. I believe we all already had a good sense of community when we went into it.”

**Technology Presence**

The predominate portion of student time in the blended learning cohort was spent online so technology had a major impact on student learning and experiences. An unexpected benefit Lani received from the program was technology skills: “Being proficient with technology wasn’t one of my initial goals, but it turned out to be a great benefit I received along the way. I am definitely happy to have tech skills. Before I started the program, I was really awkward on the computer. After being in the cohort a while, I felt much more comfortable and confident.”

The technology skills that Lani honed in the program have proven useful in her present position as well. “Since improving my tech skills, I feel much more comfortable as a teacher. I really believe that I would not use as much technology in my classroom had it not been for what I learned in the cohort. And I know that my best friend [from the cohort who is also a teacher] would probably say the same thing.”

Lani recalled using the following tools to participate in class activities throughout their program: online discussion forums, online class chats, email, student homepages, online search engines, word processing software, presentation creation software, online dropboxes (where students and instructors can access and upload assigned work) and online gradebooks. Lani reported finding the available online discussion forum tool as the most useful to her own learning: “The discussion forum was the most valuable tool for me. The interactive writing process involved helped me to learn subject matter better. I had a chance to read what my classmates wrote and then I could post my responses to
them at my leisure and they could respond to me at their leisure.” She elaborated on her experiences within the online discussion forums:

Any courses that used the discussion board and had threaded discussions were the most stimulating for me. I enjoyed them so much that I really would like to do something like that with my own classes one day. I really enjoyed the correspondence with my peers as we discussed relevant issues in education. That was one of the most meaningful activities for me. When we were reading something and we posted a response to it, then we were required to read our peers’ responses to the reading and post a response to them. Whether it was required or not, I would always do more than what was required because I really enjoyed getting other people’s viewpoints and hearing different perspectives and getting their reactions to my ideas and writings. I learned the most from my peers. Hearing about other people’s experiences was really valuable to me.

Lani also valued the asynchronous nature of the discussion forum because it allowed her time to think about what she wanted to say and how she wanted to say it:

“There’s a lot of different ways to say the same thing and each one has just a slightly different connotation. It takes me a longer than others to try and say what I mean to say. I feel compelled to get it just right so that my intentions are clear. People can be very sensitive. And that’s the reason I take a lot of care with what I write so that others don’t take what I write to them the wrong way.”

**Teaching Presence**

Lani recollects that even online, she felt her teachers were present to guide her:

“Probably all of them were accessible to me online. They were all good about
communicating, responding…not chatting necessarily…but when I posted things to the 
discussion forum, I felt like they read them. I can’t think of any teachers who frustrated 
me or made me feel like they weren’t there.”

Lani also described another aspect of learning relating to teaching presence: 
“Because we were a group of educators, everything that the professors did actually taught 
us what we could do ourselves. We were very attentive to more than just the content of 
the course, but also how it was delivered by the instructor. All of that was also part of our 
learning.”

**Cognitive Presence**

I found Lani to be an eager participant in the interview, but it was sometimes 
difficult to draw her out about her online experiences. Initially, she spoke only of her F2F 
experiences in the program. Eventually, however, she connected her F2F and online 
experiences to talk about how important the F2F meetings were to her as an introduction 
to her peers and course content: “Being able to meet my classmates F2F at the beginning 
of the cohort and several other times during our classes and seeing their faces, getting to 
talk with them in person, I think it really helped, especially with the online component.”

Lani described specifics of how meeting her peers F2F helped her relate to online 
course content: “Being able to put a personality and face with what I was reading online 
helped me to understand my peers’ responses better. When I’m reading a textbook, I 
might say that I disagreed with the author when he said this or that, but to have one of my 
peers share a different perspective helped me to validate for myself whether I was getting 
the correct message or not.”
Lani reported that she found both the online and F2F components of the blended learning cohort were complementary to each other and useful to her: “Both the F2F classes and online sessions were equally valuable to me. I would say that my learning was pretty much equal in both realms, but I learned different things in each one. What we learned online was very different from F2F sessions. For example, during the F2F classes, we capitalized on the physical presence of everyone. Professors designed very hands-on activities to help us envision our own classrooms. As teachers, we learned to work and collaborate with fellow teachers and with students. When we were online, we spent more time reading and writing papers and learning about academic theory. We also got to share our own perspectives with our peers, critique each other’s work, and collaborate online for group projects.”

Lani recalled that the curricula in the program were challenging, but she specifically remembered the courses she took in psychology and math as being rigorous. However, when asked about an activity that she remembered as being “least meaningful” she remembered participating in a group online chat: “It was my first time ever participating in an online chat where we met in groups of about a dozen people online at the same time. We were all typing at the same time, which made it very difficult for me to follow the thread of conversations. By the time I was able to type out my response, twelve other people had posted so I was off-topic already. Maybe I had problems because I’m not too familiar with it and I’m still not. The chat to me was like being in a room where everyone is talking at the same time. I really didn’t get anything out of that experience except for feeling very frustrated and confused.”
Beyond course specific subject matter, Lani also recalled that the blended learning cohort program emphasized developing “21st Century skills” important to life and work in our present society (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008). Some of these skills include communication, learning, teamwork, adaptability, thinking, entrepreneurship, and literacy skills. Lani felt she and her peers learned or developed further most of these skills throughout their time in the cohort:

I absolutely believe that our collaboration skills developed because of our work in the cohort. I got to know two people very well in the cohort and I definitely saw them change over time. For example, [one of my classmates] became more receptive to other people’s ideas, where he had not been as open to them earlier. I also witnessed [another classmate] learn to be a little more careful in thinking before speaking. She used to say all the time that she would ‘open her mouth and stick her foot right in it.’ She worked on that during our time together and I noticed that she continued to improve as time went by.

I know that my own collaboration skills improved by working with my classmates on class projects, too. Also, the online aspect of the cohort definitely helped me improve my writing communication skills. I learned that my word choice can have multiple meanings and that’s why I spent a lot of time crafting my words so that others would understand me better. I also paid attention to the type of tone I set in my emails to others. I mean to this day, it sometimes takes me half an hour to write an email because I’ll write and read, re-write and re-read to get it to say exactly what I mean. Sometimes it’s almost ridiculous.
Lani reported that the collaboration skills she developed and honed as a member of the cohort have served her well in her professional career. For example, in her role as teacher, Lani says she continues to monitor individual student and team progress to keep teams moving forward and to administer peer evaluations that help students be more accountable to teammates, a practice she adopted as a direct result of her experiences in the blended learning cohort. She also described specific ideas she learned from the cohort that continue to impact ways she collaborates with her students and her colleagues such as having student groups decide upon a “collective vision of the group’s purpose and goals before starting work” and “assigning specific tasks and responsibilities to individual [team] members while still allowing for and valuing their unique styles, ideals and creativity.”

According to Lani, however, the “administrative details” at her school that she mentioned earlier often prevent her from applying collaboration skills that she learned from the cohort with peers at her workplace: “It really upsets me that administrators are taking away the time I spend collaborating with my colleagues [due to state budget cuts]. To me, the insights, ideas and support I get from other teachers really makes a difference in my own teaching and in the way others teach, too. I really liked being part of a team. I believe that taking that time away from us inevitably affects our teaching in negative ways.”

**Environmental Context**

Environmental context refers to all of these intended or unintended factors that encouraged or discouraged community building among students. These factors include such things as family or at-home support, finances and student jobs and other
responsibilities outside the home. Interviews clearly showed that these outside influences and responsibilities had definite impacts on individuals who were members of the blended learning cohort.

For example, Lani described her personal environmental context as very positive: “Definitely my husband allowing me to quit working while going to school provided me the time to concentrate on my studies. His parents and my children all had to work together. Cohort demands took a lot of my time. My family had to make sacrifices as far as babysitting and having to live without Mom’s attention to everything and stuff like that. Their emotional support and practical support allowed me to participate fully both online and F2F, and was especially important to me when I had to go off-island [for F2F cohort meetings].”

Lani also mentioned that she ran ideas and course assignments by family members to get their opinions to help her understand things better. She even involved her children in her studies: “You know, actually, because it was a teaching program, I often used my children as guinea pigs. As I was learning things, I would test them out on my kids.”

Since most of the students were geographically dispersed among several islands, the environmental context also extended to peers in the cohort who lived in the same town. Lani described a very strong bond she formed with two peers: “We were all in similar circumstances - married with children, not working, about the same age - so I got a lot of support from them that I couldn't get from my family, simply because my family couldn't understand the stresses of the program the way my friends could who were going through it with me. Also, between the three of us, we were able to muddle our way
through working with all of the technological aspects involved in our coursework, since none of us was familiar with taking online classes.”

Lani remembered one of her peers, however, who lived in the same town who was very much impacted by technology presence and environmental context that proved so unfavorable for her going back to school that she dropped out of the program altogether: “She ended up leaving the cohort partway through. She was an older lady and I think the whole online experience became too much for her. And I don’t think she had a lot of support at home.”

**Stacy’s Story**

Stacy’s background coming into the cohort was very similar to Lani’s: She was in the predominate age group of 25-to-35 years old. While she was in the program, she didn’t hold an outside job. She was also married and the mother of an elementary-school-aged child who lived at home.

Stacy was interviewed four years after graduating and receiving her teaching certification. She is now in her fourth year of teaching the second grade (which she “absolutely loves!”). She did not enjoy working at the school where she was initially hired. After three years, she moved to the school where she currently teaches and reports that she is enjoying her new job very much.

Stacy’s primary goals going into the program were “to learn strategies and theories about teaching so that I could get a good job and become a great teacher.” Stacy’s overall impressions of the program and her experiences as a member of her cohort were favorable. “When I think back on my experiences, the first things that come
to my mind are friendship, hard work, support and *ohana* (family). I made some great friends with people whom I’m still close with today. I’m really thankful for them.”

Stacy agreed that her cohort met the criteria outlined in the formal definition of a community of inquiry (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 23). The features more important to her as a member of the learning community were feeling safe within the group and the longevity of the group. Following Anderson (2004), she said, “We felt eager and excited to learn and to try new things. Plus, we’re still connected! Some of us are even more connected now, long after classes are over, than we were during our actual classes.”

As the interview continued, Stacy elaborated further on aspects of the community of inquiry she was/is a member of, which included social, teaching and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000), as well as technology presence (Wagner, 1994) and environmental context (Wu Song, 2009).

**Social Presence**

Similar to Lani, Stacy felt very positive about the social component of the program, and that connections with fellow students greatly enhanced her learning experience. “Socializing was very important because we were able to bounce ideas off of each other, watch each other teach, and work together [on class assignments]. During long F2F weekends, we would sit together in the Jacuzzi in the evenings and talk about the classroom and school. It was these kinds of experiences that helped us get through all of the classes we took together...It was a tough program, but we had each other ... . Ohana describes how my classmates became like family to me.”

Stacy reported that the community they built as members of the cohort program continues to thrive: “Yes, one of the Molokai girls sends out an email twice a year to
everyone and then we all start to respond to each other, updating each other about where we’re at and what we’re doing…We don’t see each other all the time, but we definitely stay in contact with each other through email and for those of us who live on the same island, we bump into each other every now and again.”

Stacy offered two recent examples of how community members maintain personal and professional relationships: “A pedagogy class was offered this past summer and six of us from the cohort were there so we had this mini-reunion. We went out to the bar and had drinks and pupus (appetizers).” Stacy’s second example clearly showed how she and her students benefitted from the connection she made with another member of the cohort: “One of the girls from [one of the main outer islands] who was in the cohort taught second grade and I taught second grade so we had our students become pen pals. Unfortunately she started teaching a different level after three years of doing it.”

**Technology Presence**

Being able to share ideas and get feedback from her peers and teachers using online technologies was cited by Stacy as a key component of her educational experience. “What would we have done without WebCT?! It was almost addicting. I was checking emails and discussion forums at least two to three times a day. I felt like I went through withdrawal when I didn’t get to check in.”

Like Lani, Stacy appreciated the asynchronous quality of the WebCT discussions. “It was nice to read other people’s thoughts and reflections in the online discussion forums and to have time to think about what we read before responding. WebCT really made a difference in the quality of our communications and relationships.”
But, again like Lani, she was critical of the online chatrooms because she felt there were too many people present at the same time, “talking” over one another: “We had anywhere from ten to thirteen people at one time… By the time I’d get what I wanted to say typed, the others were already on another subject. It was too confusing. To me, it wasn’t very useful.” In addition, Stacy felt these online real-time interactions were “too restrictive in regards to time and individual schedules. We all had to be logged onto a computer at the same time.”

Yet Stacy acknowledges the importance of technology skills such as learning how to use a chatroom, upload documents to the Internet, collaborate with others whom she often didn’t get to see, and do research with them online. One prime example demonstrating how useful technology skills have been for her began when she learned how to use Google to help her with homework and research and that has since followed her into her own classroom. “Working in schools, I often learn right along with kids. During the first few years of my teaching, I was like, ‘I don’t know what’s going to happen if we do this, but let’s try it and see.’ I don’t know how many times a day students ask me a question and I’ll respond, ‘I don’t know. Let’s Google it!’

Cognitive Presence

Stacy felt that cognitive presence among many members of the cohort was tied to personal motivation to succeed. It was definitely apparent to Stacy that some members were more enthusiastic than others and some students, like herself, simply had more time to devote to studies because they didn’t have to hold down jobs while going through the program. “There was always one group of students who were not as ‘dedicated’ shall I
say as the rest of us. I remember thinking to myself, ‘How will they be able to catch up?’ because we always had to be very involved.”

According to Stacy, students were able to figure out who the “slackers” were early in the program. “We were required to respond to questions and most of us would make an effort to give ‘meat’ to our responses, unlike some of the others. This was my biggest clue. Once we knew who the slackers were, it was almost like we’d just leave them out because it was too much work to try and get them to do what they were supposed to do.”

Despite the challenges trying to collaborate with group members who were not as committed as she was, Stacy found the experience valuable in her professional life as a teacher. “The way we worked together in the cohort is kind of what is expected in the classroom of today. I almost feel like I’m a leader in my grade level in bringing our colleagues together and working collaboratively.”

The collaborative projects assigned with classmates also engaged Stacy cognitively: “Knowing that other people were depending on me for my input and work helped motivate me to do a good job. This is similar to a recent experience. Three of my fellow teachers and I took a professional development class last summer. We recently turned in our portfolios and we relied on each other to complete lessons for each unit. We all admitted that if we had been doing the project by ourselves that we would not have completed the course. It's just nice to know you have a back-up system.”

Along with learning how to navigate group dynamics, Stacy also was able to translate skills she practiced in the program into tangible results in her professional work:
“I remember this ETEC project we had to do in the cohort where if we were given $5,000, what would we do with it? We had to find all kinds of technology. I thought to myself how really cool it would be if we could actually do this in our schools. I was really engaged in finding the stuff I could buy for my classroom. I also remember thinking, ‘Too bad this will never happen!’ But, I actually wrote a grant this past summer and I got it! I got a $5,000 grant! I immediately thought of that class. It connected really big time with me after that! We got a new Mac with a built-in camera, sixteen cameras and a laptop. I’ll get to share this technology with other second grade classes, too!”

Stacy was clear about the frustrations and challenges of learning in groups, but she asserted her belief that almost all of the cohort members learned best in groups: “I think the majority of us enjoyed learning in groups. It was hard, especially with all of us not being on the same island or being stuck with the same person every time just because s/he happened to live on the same island that we did. I still think that as a group, most of us learned better together. We grumbled a lot, but in the end, I believe this is how we learned best.”

She also described a positive change in the group process over time, saying that she was better able to learn from others as members of the cohort became more familiar with one another. “Thinking back to the first assignment where we collaborated in teams, I remember it was a disaster. We ended up throwing things together at the last minute in order to complete that project. As we got to know each other better, we also learned how to work better together no matter where we were geographically.”

She offered a specific example of how the F2F group experience changed her understanding of the teaching process when the cohort went to watch its members teach
classes at their grade levels. They each taught the same lesson. “One of our classmates does sign language. He was trying to teach his lesson using sign language. We saw how demanding it was for him and students. I’ll never forget when he brought out this huge bag of M&Ms and they all just went flying everywhere! For how awful it was, it was those kinds of experiences that really connected us together because we were able to tweak the lessons for our own teaching based on what we saw. We all had suggestions for each other.”

Teaching Presence

Stacy had mixed reviews about teaching presence in both online and F2F environments. For example, she was very enthusiastic about the support she received from her mentor-teachers: “I had four very awesome role models and I was glad to have the opportunity to work with and learn from them.” Yet she also described distinct feelings of dissatisfaction with some instructors of online and F2F classes. She attributed the differences to the professors’ teaching styles, their deficient technology skills and the subject matter and activities of their classes: “It depended on the teacher and what we did in class. A lot of it, I felt, was wasted time. ...The F2F classes were exciting because we could see each other and the instructor and connect again. But depending on the teacher, it could really get boring or repetitive. Many times it was like, ‘Okay, here comes another presentation.’ Some teachers were really engaging though. For example, [during a F2F session,) our science teacher took us on a field trip to Haleakala and we got to see the telescope. The instructor had us using hands-on ‘manipulatives’ and so much of what I learned from those teachers are what I have incorporated into classes I teach now.”
Stacy also cited frustrations with some of the instructors who repeated the same information continually: “We had one teacher who, every time we saw her, she showed us the same book. ‘Okay, we’ve seen the important book. Is there anything else you can offer us?’” As a teacher herself now, however, Stacy says she also knows she sometimes makes that same mistake with her classes because she teaches so many students and sometimes forgets what she has said to them in earlier classes.

In general, Stacy felt that “all of the instructors had the goals of learning in mind, but some were better than others in implementing these goals” and that the teachers “who really engaged us in inquiry-based, hands-on learning were the ones who connected with us more.” She remembers feeling the presence of some of her instructors keenly at times during the online classes. An example she recalled readily happened during a Special Education (SPED) course: “Our instructor sent us videos to watch on our computers. For every unit of the entire course, we had some kind of video to show us examples of what we were learning and he spoke directly to us in the video. We actually got to see and hear people with disabilities tell their own stories. That experience was really powerful for me. It was almost like we were in the classroom with him because we got to see and hear our instructor. I can’t remember if we ever met that instructor F2F or not, but I think that just the way he presented his course to us really made his presence felt to me. I really felt like I knew that instructor while we were taking his class.”

Finally, once again like Lani, Stacy asserted that she picked up more than ideas of “what to teach,” as well as direct examples of “how to teach” from cohort instructors: “Actually, now that I think about it, [the way instructors taught during online and F2F sessions] has affected how I teach today because we ‘dance the water cycle,’ we draw
diagrams for insect body parts and all kinds of hands-on activities [in my classes]. I’m trying to get away from the direct ‘whole class’ instruction, even though classroom management wise, it’s hard to teach individually.”

**Environmental Context**

Stacy mentioned several factors outside of the cohort that affected her perceptions of and participation levels within the cohort community. For example, she didn’t have financial worries interfering with her studies: “I was able to dedicate most of my time to my classes and participate with my learning community 100 percent. I didn't have the burden of stressing over tuition, etc., like many of my classmates. My husband was also supportive in allowing me to be a full-time student. Of course he had his complaints about the time I spent hunched over my computer, but I know he was proud of my accomplishments...this had a HUGE impact on what I got from the program. College was my number one priority. Having financial freedom helped a great deal. I did it for myself, my family, and mostly in honor of my father. The day I was accepted and the day I graduated were very emotional and meaningful for me.”

Yet watching others balance jobs with school also impacted Stacy: “I remember being inspired by some of my classmates who were working full-time, having babies, raising small children, etc., and wondering how they managed to do it all. I admired them for juggling it all and I honestly don't think I would've been able to achieve all that I did and had such a good experience if I had been working. The quality of work for some of my classmates may not have been at the level that I deemed exceptional but they had other priorities.”
Although Stacy was justifiably proud of herself for all that she was able to accomplish during her time in the blended learning cohort program, she also feels she learned some valuable lessons from cohort members who were not as actively engaged as she was: “Looking back now, nobody cared about my 4.0 but me. I have a new motto, ‘B’s get degrees.’ The people who were slackers probably got hired the same day that I did. Why was I killing myself every night? In the back of my mind, I’m thinking about getting a masters degree. I spent eight hours in my classroom yesterday and school hasn’t even started yet! How could I go back to school now when I’m so busy?! I could only do it if I lowered my standards a little for my schoolwork because I wouldn’t want to let my own classroom go.”

Steve’s Story

Steve was 32 years old when he entered the program. With a spouse and a full-time job, he felt it would be impossible for him to pursue a degree from a traditional university because of his financial obligations and the time constraints of his home and work responsibilities. “The online learning environment made it possible for me to become a teacher,” he said.

Steve’s learning goal going into the program was to become prepared to teach upper elementary classes. He also said his aim was to “come out of the program confident and ready to enter the classroom.” After graduating, he has been teaching sixth grade in a “private, progressive school for the past four years.” He feels satisfied that he achieved his learning goals: “I entered the classroom with confidence and was prepared to succeed in the class.”
According to Steve, his cohort met the criteria outlined in the formal definition of a Community of Inquiry (Garrison & Anderson, 2003:23). A feature of great importance to him was being able to learn from the others in the cohort. “I learned much of what I use now in my own classroom from my classmates.” He also appreciated the personal connections he made with members of the cohort, some of whom he still has casual contact with within his small community.

**Social Presence**

While Steve expressed positive feelings about his cohort and their general cohesiveness as a group, he seemed to be less socially engaged with the others than Stacy or Lani, who cited making “best friends” in the program: “I keep in touch with the girls from my cohort who teach on the same island as I do. I still hear from the girls off-island, but mostly, as far as professional checking in, it’s with the people here on [the island where I live].” This situation might be attributed to the difference in gender, or perhaps because he held a full-time job while he was going through the program, Steve had less time to engage socially with other cohort members.

Having F2F interactions at the start of the program with other cohort members was “extremely important” to Steve to provide him with “a face and personality to picture the people I’m working with.” After this initial F2F meeting, he found that “meeting in online chatrooms worked best for me.” He was very positive about the overall quality of social interactions within the online chatrooms, but mentioned scheduling problems for some members of the cohort who were busy with jobs and family obligations. He also felt frustrated at times that “people didn’t stay on-task and they’d start chatting about off-subject material. Time is money, you know.”
Managing the logistics of his and others’ busy schedules was a recurring theme for Steve when asked about the social component of the cohort program: “One challenge I remember was creating a presentation for an upcoming F2F session. We had so many meetings online to get prepared for, but since we all had different schedules, only some members would be present. We rarely had the opportunity to all meet together at one time. We ended up having to go in early before the F2F session to meet before we presented. And we also ended up using the phone a little beforehand, too.”

Despite being less socially engaged with his cohort outside of the program, Steve repeated several times that his cohort was his learning community—he credited them more than the faculty with helping him to learn and improve his communication, leadership, collaboration and teamwork skills: “I think that if I didn’t learn most of those skills from the cohort experience, I definitely improved on existing skills. ... I think that I got better at communicating in writing with my classmates because we had to do it so much for our classes. My teamwork skills grew over time, too, because I learned how to work with others as I got to know them better.”

**Cognitive Presence**

Steve was very positive about the quality of learning he experienced in the program and his level of engagement with the material: “As far as my learning what the courses had to offer, I feel like I learned just as much as I would have if I were actually physically present at the university. It worked that well for me.”

Steve also reported feeling that his learning was closely aligned with the learning of other students in the cohort. He said that the class as a whole “learned best in groups because teaching inherently is a collaborative effort. And I feel like most of the
professors built their classes around group presentations and group learning. I think collaboration was naturally embedded into the teaching program.”

For example, the most meaningful assignment Steve recalled was in his Classroom Management class: “We had a regular online chat while we were all working in the classroom ourselves as student teachers. We would talk regularly once a week about things that were occurring in our classes concerning classroom management and behavior issues and how we either worked through them or our mentors worked through them. It was extremely helpful because every one of us was going through the same things dealing with classroom management, which I think is probably one of the most important issues, especially for beginning teachers. Talking regularly about what our peers were learning and what our mentors were sharing was extremely helpful.”

Steve also described the “very good repertoire of materials provided in the online classes” as “essential” in his cognitive engagement. Yet Steve also noted the “inadequacy” of being online to complete some collaborative projects. For example, in a language arts class, he recalled “a book resource draw and shuffle activity. Individually, we read books and responded to general questions the instructor posed to us about them. It was supposed to be a kind of literature circle where we were getting backgrounds and opinions about a bunch of different books. Online, I just didn’t feel like I had an adequate library of books from that activity. When we met F2F, it was much clearer what we were supposed to be doing and I learned a lot more.”

Steve reported that he found both online and F2F interactions valuable: “I think they balanced each other out. I learned a lot from both and I enjoyed both for some
reasons and disliked both for some reasons. Most of all, the F2F and online components were effective and useful to me as a prospective teacher.”

In his work life now as a teacher, Steve says he has taken the skills and attitudes about collaboration and teamwork with him into his own classroom: “I work at a progressive private school that teaches in units of inquiry and uses a lot of digital media. Within these units the students collaborate and work together in order to make projects for each unit. This year the class has kept a blog on Natural Disasters, created a digital photostory about Explorers, and developed a public service announcement about ocean preservation. A huge part of the success during these projects hinges on student collaboration. The students focus on working together, sharing ideas, researching using online resources, and communicating using digital media. My experiences in the cohort help me help them.”

**Technology Presence**

Steve’s experience in the cohort program was definitely shaped by his time limitations. As someone who worked full-time in addition to being a full-time student, time management was a key issue for him and it reflected in how he engaged with the technology aspect of the program: “I don’t want to spend a lot of my time behind a computer screen, so I learned quickly how to get info I needed from others and make the most of my own time.”

In addition to his need to streamline his learning process to get the most from it, he also felt there was a learning curve when it came to making the most out of technology for his online classes. “I hadn’t taken any online classes, so some parts were challenging such as feeling confident using the technology and some of the frustrations that go along
with that.” As an example, he offered: “Once I got confident in conversing using chatrooms, I learned to take my time and wait for other people to respond to me and share ideas.”

Unlike Lani and Stacy, Steve preferred the real-time interactions of the chatroom over the online discussion forums. Where he tended to dislike the asynchronous nature of the online forums, he found the live chats more expedient and engaging. Comparing synchronous chats to asynchronous discussion forums, Steve’s biggest complaint was that the forums “took more time to go back looking through everyone’s responses.”

Efficiency wasn’t the sole reason why Steve admitted preferring synchronous over asynchronous activities. He also preferred the “spontaneity” of F2F and chatroom interactions because “you get that immediate feedback on what’s going on to make it feel more ‘real’, so to speak.”

**Teaching Presence**

Having F2F interactions with his teachers stood out for Steve as most memorable during his time in the cohort and thus limited his responses to this topic during the interview. He did expound upon the experience he described earlier in his language arts class. Steve related that it was the teacher’s physical presence that made the assignment clearer to him: “It helped that the instructor was actually there to answer questions and that she was familiar with all of the assigned books and helped to give any background missing from student commentary.”

Steve also mentioned that he has continued to keep in contact with one of his mentors from the cohort program “because she works to stay in touch by always dropping by the schools”. It appears that Steve’s life continues to be filled with responsibilities and
commitments that limited his interactions with others in the cohort program several years ago as well as in his present professional pursuits.

**Environmental Context**

Steve was aware that his work and home/life obligations were a significant factor in the environmental context of his learning experience. “As I mentioned earlier, I got a lot out of the chats because they fit my schedule and helped me avoid having to read discussion posts for long periods of time. Some of us were kinda long-winded and I thought that held all of us up. I had a busy life then and still do. I liked to get right in there, do the job, get out and get back to my life. Kinda like that commercial about Remington College.”

Interestingly, while reflecting on the changes in the cohort during the course of the two-year program, Steve noted that although life-changing events occurred—such as the birth of children and deaths of family members—the learning community didn’t noticeably alter as a result of those incidences. “I think once we got to know each other, after about the first semester together, our community didn’t change too much... at least I didn’t notice any big difference.”

**Summary of Applied Themes**

Lani, Stacy and Steve, the three students who participated in this study are within the predominant 25-to-35 age group and they are all married. The two female participants raised young children at home while going to school full-time and did not work outside of the home. The male participant worked and went to school full-time.

Although the reported initial goals and motivations of the three participants going into the program were more self- rather that group-oriented, they all concur that their
cohort achieved the conditions of a thriving Community of Inquiry (CoI) as defined by Garrison and Anderson (2003, p. 23). Over time, they all learned to appreciate the benefits of belonging and participating collectively in the learning community. Lani says she could “lean on” and get the “support and encouragement” she needed from classmates to help her excel in the program. Stacy refers to cohort members as *ohana* (family) and remembers “feeling safe” as well as “eager and excited to learn and try new things” with them. Steve credits his classmates “for much of what I learned and now use in my own classroom.”

Each participant readily provided her/his perspectives that included statements relating to each theme, yet each made sense of the experience in a slightly different and individual way (see Table 2). Essentially, they all brought their own experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, and situations of their every day personal lives to the cohort and therefore the sense-making was similar yet individual along each of the theme axes.

In terms of *social presence* that participants describe within the CoI of their cohort program, they say it was cultivated by instructors using group projects as well as by students who looked to peers for support in overcoming anxiety caused from sheer workload compounded by the online and technological requirements of the program. None of the participants had taken online courses. Although this experience was new to them, the positive social interactions during the cohort experience have to some degree continued five years later. Lani and Stacy are best friends now after meeting in the program and they continue to “check in” and interact with former cohort members via email and at professional development workshops and conferences. Steve was not as socially engaged as the two female participants during or after the program, but he, too,
Table 2: Predominant impressions based upon student interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant name</th>
<th>Social presence</th>
<th>Cognitive presence</th>
<th>Teaching presence</th>
<th>Technology presence</th>
<th>Environmental context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lani</td>
<td>* Defines success in cohort based upon peer support</td>
<td>* Asserts initial F2F meeting vital to learning</td>
<td>* Describes teachers as accessible online &amp; F2F</td>
<td>* Prefers asynchronous communications over synchronous (“Frustrating &amp; Confusing!”)</td>
<td>* Defines self as married with small children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Defines majority of community experiences thru social interactions</td>
<td>* Maintains she learned mostly from cohortmates</td>
<td>* Identifies cohort teacher practices as examples for own teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>* Reports she did not work outside home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Uses collaboration skills on the job</td>
<td></td>
<td>* Uses tech skills on the job</td>
<td></td>
<td>* Reports family members involved in learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy</td>
<td>* Defines big part of community experiences thru social interactions</td>
<td>* Describes how teams dealt with “slackers”</td>
<td>* Gives mixed reviews on teachers</td>
<td>* Prefers asynchronous communications over synchronous (“Confusing!”)</td>
<td>* Defines success in cohort based upon family support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Describes cohort members learned best in groups</td>
<td>* Asserts cohort teacher practices as examples (hands-on activities) &amp; non-examples (repetitive, boring)</td>
<td></td>
<td>* Describes WebCT as “addicting”</td>
<td>* Defines self as married with small children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Says social component is even stronger now for some</td>
<td>* Describes instances of peer-mentoring (M&amp;Ms incident)</td>
<td></td>
<td>* Uses tech skills on the job (Google)</td>
<td>* Reports she did not work outside home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>* Admits he’s not as socially active or driven as others (“Time is money!”)</td>
<td>* Asserts initial F2F meeting vital to learning</td>
<td>* Describes one experience where teaching presence lacking online, but present F2F</td>
<td>* Defines success in cohort based upon early commitment to learn tech skills</td>
<td>* Describes self as married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Describes present social interactions as “professional checking in”</td>
<td>* Maintains he learned mostly from cohortmates</td>
<td>* Keeps in touch with one mentor teacher who comes to visit him</td>
<td>* Prefers synchronous communications over asynchronous (“Too time-consuming!”)</td>
<td>* Worked full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* Uses collaboration skills on the job (class blog)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>* Says he prioritized learning tech skills so he’d have more time to spend with wife</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
continues to maintain connections to some students and at least one mentor teacher. Perhaps his apparent disinclination toward full immersion in the learning community was his full-time work schedule.

*Technology presence* was a major component of the cohort program and had definite impacts on participants. Some of the technology tools students used included online forums, chatrooms, dropboxes and gradebooks, email, homepages, search engines, as well as word processing and presentation software. Initially, they all needed to take time to “build [self-]confidence” and learn how to use the technology. Lani describes herself as “awkward” and “not technologically savvy” at first. Steve says the technology caused him “frustrations,” but he worked quickly to become conversant with it because he knew he would not have the time later on to learn it. Eventually, after feeling comfortable using and navigating the cohort program’s online learning management network (WebCT), Stacy describes her experience as “almost addictive” and “going through withdrawals” if she didn’t get to check in often. Both Lani and Stacy champion the educative and reflective value of online discussion forums while leveling heavy criticism against the “chaotic” and “confusing” sessions in the online chatrooms. Conversely, Steve champions the “immediacy” of online chatrooms while fervently opposing the “time-consuming” nature of online forums. All participants emphasize the value of technology skills in their current lives and jobs.

According to participant descriptions, *teaching presence* involves instructor availability and commitment, “teaching styles, level of technical proficiency, subject matter, and assigned class activities” in both online and F2F classes. Levels and value of reported teaching presence varies with each participant. For example, Lani recollects that
all instructors were “accessible” and “good about communicating [and] responding” to her. Steve remembers one instructor whose teaching presence was lacking during an online activity, but clearly evident when he attended a F2F class with her and she was able to explain the activity in person. Stacy deems her learning experience to be “powerful” in the online SPED class where she never met the instructor F2F and she absolutely adores her mentor teachers whom she physically worked with during her student teaching internship. However, Stacy still says that there were some not so good instructors, too. Both Lani and Stacy recall that they learned “what” as well as “how” to teach from examples and non-examples of instructors.

All participants are able to provide strong evidence of cognitive presence in both online and F2F classes. Both Lani and Steve assert that the initial cohort-wide F2F meeting that commenced the blended learning teaching program was essential in helping them to match “faces with personalities” and begin building solid and “respectful” relationships with peers. For example, Lani reports that this experience helped her to shape her own learning and opinions because she better understood peer’s responses written in online forums. Stacy says she was well aware of cognitive presence of peers by their motivation and commitment to student teams and depth of discussion in online forums. She describes some students as “slackers.” Steve maintains that he learned just as much in the blended classes as he would have in strictly F2F ones. He particularly learned a lot during peer discussions and sharing sessions. All participants seem to value both online and F2F portions of the program. Lani and Steve maintain that both realms are “complementary” and “valuable.” For example, Lani explains that online sessions allowed more time for reading, writing, research, reflection and collaboration while F2F
meetings capitalized on physical presence through hands-on collaborative activities. Additionally, all students describe honing 21st Century Skills, especially collaboration, communication and writing skills and using these skills in their current personal and professional lives. Stacy says that her collaboration skills often result in her being chosen team leader among colleagues at the school where she currently works. Lani and Steve describe specific collaborative activities that they assign students and how they oversee them in their own classrooms. Also, in her current job as a teacher, Stacy recalls the relevance of honing communication and writing skills for a technology grant proposal she wrote as an assignment for a cohort class. Once she was actually hired, she wrote and applied for a very similar grant and she got it. She says, “I immediately thought of that class. It connected with me really big time with me after that!”

Finally, we learned more about the environmental context of participants and how profoundly it affects their perceptions of personal participation levels and overall assessment of the cohort community. For example, as mentioned earlier, Lani and Stacy were able to devote more time to studies and the cohort program because they did not hold jobs outside their homes. Steve’s level of participation and value of social features embedded in program were decreased due to his full-time work schedule. Lani’s home situation was ideal for her to “try out” newly learned ideas and skills from the cohort program on her own kids. Stacy’s biggest incentive for completing the program was to “honor my father.” Steve made a point of learning technological features early on so he could participate in program coursework when he got off of work, but still have some time to spend with his wife. Lani and Stacy both recognize how fortunate they were to have had supportive families who allowed them to dedicate more time to their learning
community. Lani recalls that one older student who was married but didn’t possess the technology skills or enough support at home ended up dropping out of the cohort program altogether.

**Conclusion**

I believe that stories of these three participants show very clearly just how much overlap there is among the various presences described by Garrison et al., (2000), Moore (1989), and Wu Song (2009). It was interesting to note the similarities of experiences and opinions of the two female participants as compared to the one male participant. Besides gender differences, however, home/life/work schedules and experiences as well as technology preferences seemed to make big impacts on how the participants perceived their community.

In the next and final chapter, Chapter Six, I will discuss in more detail the findings and their implications when compared with results and conclusions currently reported in the literature about blended learning communities. Drawing upon the theories, strategies and practices outlined in my literature review, I will answer the research questions I posed about the meaning and the lasting effects of community on students who were members of blended learning cohort. Finally, I will explore some possible interesting directions for future research on blended learning communities of inquiry.
CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*Knowledge and Experience do not necessarily speak the same language. But isn’t the knowledge that comes from experience more valuable than the knowledge that doesn’t?*

(The Tao of Pooh, p. 29)

**Overview**

Experience is what informs the discussions, conclusions, and recommendations of this study. The purpose was to explore the character, meaning, and impact of community using the lived experiences of three blended learning community members who had successfully completed a two-year undergraduate education degree and teacher certification cohort program. Their perceptions, sense-making, and culture were compiled into a case study that describes the lasting effects of their learning community subsequent to completing their program and four years after their entry into the workforce as teachers.

This exploratory case study used virtual ethnographic methods to address a gap in the literature pertaining to online learners and their learning communities. It provides a longitudinal view of the lasting effects of one blended community of inquiry on its learners. This extended “snapshot in time” offers a more holistic picture to help uncover some of the intricacies and complexities of the term *community* as well as the people who comprise and experience it. Educators really must have a better understanding of how students perceive community in online and blended learning settings so that they can improve their teaching in these modes. This study adds to that body of literature.

I used open-ended questions during interviews (see Interview Guide, Appendix A) to gather first-hand, in-depth data including rich, “thick” descriptions of participant
experiences as members of a blended learning cohort. Interviews were conducted more than four years after students graduated from the program. The eventual qualitative coding, analysis, and interpretation of their responses resulted in a set of emergent themes that loosely fit the Community of Inquiry model (see Figure 1) and coding template (see Table 1) developed by Garrison et al., (2000). I eventually assembled these themes into narrative form “to render life experiences, both personal and social in relevant and meaningful ways (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10).

This chapter discusses the research findings to determine similarities that support the existing literature as well as differences that may provide unique insights and knowledge to beneficially inform practice. Additionally, aligning findings and conclusions with existing literature also helps to ensure that important themes were not overlooked and adds to the trustworthiness and credibility of findings (Merriam, 1998). The original research questions are revisited and answered in the context of discussion of findings and results.

Several significant results emerge from this study which will be elaborated below. First, while there is support for current models of learning communities, they tend to be over-simplified to the point that critical variables are often missing. Secondly, models have only looked at learning communities from a narrow perspective instead taking a wider systemic view, which may limit the sustainability of communities over time. Finally, it is a pedagogical imperative for learning environments to “take advantage of the dynamic developmental nature of communities to make experiences of adult learners relevant to the ever-changing, ICT-enabled world in which they live and are employed” (Hassan, 2004, p. 3).
Discussion of Findings and Results

I began my research with questions about the ambiguous and amorphous nature of communities, especially in blended learning settings. Some researchers may find that there is no way to resolve these kinds of ambiguities. Burbules (2000) does after all warn that the term community is “just vague enough…to hide important differences, intentions, and group dynamics” (p. 2). Yet I am able to piece together an image of community as instantiated through direct statements about experiences from members of a blended learning cohort that provide some new insights. I also use the lens of the Community of Inquiry framework as well as other recent literature on communities and adult learning to understand the implications of my interpretations and conclusions. The research questions at the core of this study are as follows:

**RQ1:** Based upon their personal experiences with taking blended learning courses, how would students personally define *community* within predominantly online educational settings?

**RQ2:** How does current research on blended learning communities compare with the descriptions given by members of this study?

**RQ3:** Which activities or events fostered or hindered the forming of meaningful and enduring relationships with their classmates?

**Research Question One: Defining Community**

All participants agreed with Garrison and Anderson (2003) that as part of the blended learning teacher cohort, they were members of a Community of Inquiry (CoI) “composed of teachers and students transacting with the specific purposes of facilitating, constructing, and validating understanding, and of developing capabilities that [led] to
further learning…and encourage[d] cognitive independence and social interdependence simultaneously” (p. 23). I completed a line-by-line analysis of interview transcripts to tease out key community elements common to all participants to support their claims of CoI membership. Table 3 below lists features that participants collectively describe as defining their learning community:

**Table 3. Characteristics that participants collectively describe as defining their learning environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community indicators</th>
<th>Participant requisites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Its foundation accommodated the personal life and responsibilities of its members.</td>
<td>Time away from job, home, family and friends were obviously carefully considered during the conception of cohort program. Students had occasional opportunities throughout program to bring their learning into their households and involve family members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Environmental Context)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It suited student lifestyles.</td>
<td>The majority of time was spent learning online which allowed students to maintain family life and work responsibilities while attending school full-time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Environmental Context)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It met student personal needs and goals (“What’s in it for me” - WIIFM).</td>
<td>All participants said that getting their teaching degree, certification, and becoming teachers was their goals coming into the cohort program. Stacy said that the way they learned to work together is expected in the workplace today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Social Presence)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It allowed for a variety of F2F and online interactions.</td>
<td>All participants acknowledged the importance of the first F2F meeting to kick off the program to allow them to physically connect with peers. Stacy mentioned being excited during the F2F weekends to re-connect with peers and instructors. Stacy mentioned feeling “almost addicted” to WebCT as she checked three to four times daily to see what peers were doing. Steve described an excellent online repertoire of materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Social Presence and Technology Presence)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was non-threatening.</td>
<td>Participants felt safe to take risks, express opinions, challenge ideas of others, and to disagree. Stacy described her cohortmates as “eager and excited to learn and try new things.” Stacy and others learned to ignore and eventually have empathy for “slackers.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Social Presence)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It allowed for formal and informal interactions and discourse among students.</td>
<td>Stacy described sitting in the Jacuzzi after classes with other cohortmates and having cohort-related and non-cohort-related conversations. Steve described informal sharing sessions with peers about student teaching experiences as being “engaging” and “extremely helpful.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Social Presence and Technology Presence)</em></td>
<td><em>(Social Presence)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It provided students with a group identity and a sense of belonging.</td>
<td>Lani and Stacy describe feelings of a “communal me” where they found others who were just like them with the same types of stresses, concerns and commitments. Steve describes occasional “professional checking in” with peers and mentors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Social Presence)</em></td>
<td><em>(Social Presence)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It provided tools to support communication, collaboration and community-building.</td>
<td>Some of the technology that students talk about using includes online discussion forums and chatrooms, email, homepages, Webquests, and telephone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Technology Presence)</em></td>
<td><em>(Technology Presence)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It met and often exceeded student expectations of what a learning community had to offer them.</td>
<td>Lani said going into the cohort she did not have a goal of making friends with other members. Yet Lani and Stacy said they eventually learned to depend on their peers. Lani, Stacy, and Steve all said that the majority of what they learned and use in their classrooms today was learned from peers. All participants described some assignments and activities they found to be personally meaningful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Its blended learning structure provided bonding and learning opportunities for a diverse population.</td>
<td>Lani, Stacy, and Steve described F2F classes capitalizing on physical presence to include hands-on activities, small group presentations, and collaborative projects. Online sessions were spent engaging classmates in asynchronous and synchronous discussions and “sharing” sessions, conducting research, critiquing each other’s work, collaborating, and reading and writing about academic theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Cognitive Presence)</em></td>
<td><em>(Cognitive Presence)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort activities and assignments were specifically designed to challenge students and get them working together.</td>
<td>All participants described the curricula as challenging. Most assignments and activities were interactive. All participants noted that as they continued to collaborate with peers over time, collaboration became easier because they got to know each other’s work habits and commitment levels, especially for those students who worked outside the home or who dealt with other intervening life variables (e.g., marriages, pregnancies, sickness, death of family members).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It provided students with specific opportunities for self-improvement (WIIFM).</td>
<td>All participants described honing 21st Century skills (such as for teamwork, communication and technology) that they have found useful beyond the program, especially in their professional lives. Steve said he learned how to really make synchronous chatroom discussions productive for himself.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>It provided clear and accessible support channels.</td>
<td>Students developed clear and accessible channels of support including peers and instructors to help them deal with stresses in the program as well as in their personal lives. Stacy said it was nice to have a “back-up system” in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It provided students with opportunities for peer mentoring.</td>
<td>Students became resources for each other, especially with technology issues and questions. Stacy described peers watching each other teach and helping each other “tweak lesson plans.” Lani, Stacy, and Steve have many stories about how peers learned from each other. Lani described witnessing positive behavioral changes in herself and peers as a result of working together in groups and giving each other feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was enduring throughout time in program.</td>
<td>Its cohort structure encouraged students to bond. Students stayed together for all classes during the two years of the program, got to know each other very well, and were able to build trusting relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It embraced the diverse local cultures and customs of its members.</td>
<td>Lani describes a unique culturally conditioned value in Hawai‘i to become a contributing member of the community. Stacy describes cohortmates as <em>ohana</em> (family).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of its facilitators were competent, engaging and accessible.</td>
<td>Lani describes all instructors as being good communicators and role models. Stacy feels that videos used in one of her classes were really powerful because she felt that instructor’s presence even though she never got a chance to meet him F2F. Yet Stacy and Steve also described instances where a few instructors weren’t prepared and who lacked technology skills which resulted in their classes being “repetitive and boring” or “confusing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It continues to endure among many of its members. Stacy and a former cohort member from another island set up a pen pal project for their students. Lani and Stacy share ideas about teaching all the time and they still send out and respond to emails from other cohort members. 

(Environmental Context and Social Presence)

It evolved. Now that program is over, participants in the program no longer need the type of community features as before. However, participants now have the types of skills and commitment to create alternate ways to keep up with each other as well as any new members. 

(Environmental Context, Social Presence, and Cognitive Presence)

All of the community indicators in Table 3 are taken directly from student interview transcripts. Garrison et al., (2000) and Wagner, (1994) define these types of indicators as signaling meaningful student experiences and interactions within a learning community. The community indicators also correspond directly with each of the three themes considered by Garrison et al., to be requisite for a Community of Inquiry to exist: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Thus, according to the CoI model, participant descriptions of their experiences have corroborated their assertions that a CoI existed within their cohort.

The lived experiences of the students, however, revealed limitations in the CoI model as well. Clearly, technology presence was a major factor in determining how students “transacted, facilitated, constructed and validated understanding as well as how they developed capabilities that led to further learning” (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). In this cohort, students explicitly described how they used technology to interact with the content, the instructor, and other CoI members. Without learner-interface interaction (a.k.a. technology presence) the other three types of interaction may not have taken place.
An additional limitation of the CoI model that Garrison, et al., (2000) seem to consider to be beyond the parameters of a community of inquiry, but nevertheless affects it tremendously, is *environmental context*. As I mentioned earlier, family support, outside jobs, financial responsibilities and other external supports are important factors that define adult learner viewpoints of their learning community and their personal experiences within it. This link is well-documented in research on adult learning (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009; Kember & And, 1994; Park, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Shields, 1994) and so it is remarkable that it is absent in the model. Furthermore, Dr. Matthew Lipman, the professor who introduced the notion of a Community of Inquiry, described it as providing opportunities to alternate between the personal, reflective, and private world of the individual and the public, shared world of society (Garrison, Kanuka & Hawes, n.d.). Why is the fundamental component of a CoI (the personal, private world of the individual) missing from the model? Otherwise, the defining indicators present in participant accounts of their experiences mirror many of the definitions of community and learning communities described in the literature review (Dede, 1996; Ford, 2003; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000; Herring, 2004; Jeffrey and Mark, 1998; Solloway & Harris, 1999; Vrasidas, Zembylas, & Chamberlain, 2003). For example, Ford’s criteria for developing a “significant community” included common interests, dynamic/spontaneous interactions, a shared sense of group identity that he calls a “communal me,” reputation, efficacy and trust, which are all characteristics that Table 3 demonstrates to be present within the blended learning cohort. Vrasidas, Zembylas, and Chamberlain (2003) add the elements of freedom of expression, easy access to technology tools, facilitator and peer-
mentoring roles, and a joint vision, which, again, participants described in detail during the interviews. Following Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker (2000), Garrison et al., (2000), and Kling and Courtright (2003), participants also confirm that an initial F2F meeting at the outset of their predominantly online cohort was helpful in building a solid foundation for their learning community to flourish.

Finally, when we consider the worldviews of participants, there is support for the CoI model, but it is a “qualified” support. Participant accounts of experiences within the blended learning cohort seem to espouse a systemic definition of community that encompasses all dimensions of their participation and experiences within it. Essentially, the Community of Inquiry that participants define comprises elements of social presence, cognitive presence, teaching presence, technology presence, and environmental context. Within a thriving CoI, these elements are intertwined, overlapping, and reciprocal.

**Research Question Two:**

**Comparing Cohort Community to Existing Literature**

There is remarkable consistency between student accounts of their community and what current literature says about learning communities in general. As is evident from comparing “Community Indicators” and “Participant Requisites” in Table 3, participants gave specific, personal examples that unfailingly matched the descriptions of learning communities by researchers.

I discovered another interesting peculiarity pertaining to various presences or themes as I scrutinized data generated from interviews. For example, all students credit their peers for most of their learning within the cohort as well as their development as teachers. Based upon personal statements of participants, however, they each appear to
use different measures to define their overall success in the cohort program. Lani primarily attributes her success to peer support (*social presence*); Stacy acknowledges the role of her peers, but says her family’s personal and practical support was the definitive factor of her success (*environmental context*); Steve recognizes the pivotal role his early commitment to learning requisite technology skills played in his success (*technology presence*). I did not find anything in the literature to account for this incongruency among participants, but I surmise it is attributable to their individual experiences, beliefs, values, and attitudes. However, since two of the presences that are revealed as critical to participant success are missing from the original CoI Model by Garrison et al., (2000), I believe it adds credibility to my assessment of the model as limited in scope and narrow in practicability and sustainability. It does not appear to address or plan for the learning community to evolve with its members.

The literature on adult learning maintains that online and blending learning classes are still fairly new modes for teaching and learning. I recognized a distinct development in the literature that corresponds to reported experiences of participants relating to the roles of instructors within learning communities. Specifically, using catchy phrases such as “gentle guide” or “guide-on-the-side, the doctrine of “teacher as facilitator” rather than “teacher as expert” has been promoted as the educational ideal, especially for online and blended learning courses (Palloff and Pratt, 1999).” Within the last decade, however, learner and teacher roles are understood to be more flexible (Coats & Stevenson, 2006). The researchers explain that teachers and learners are socially mediated roles that all community members assume at one time or another. In this light, the idea of teachers as “guides on the side” seems to remove them from all learning
transactions. Socially mediated teacher and learner roles, however, place the teachers with the learners back squarely in the learning situation. Within the blended learning cohort, participants described this exchange of teacher/learner roles as “peer mentoring.”

Finally, right at the beginning of the computer technology boom in education, Moore (1989) was prescient enough to understand the transformation in store for education as well as the ensuing debate about the types of interaction to follow in the realm of distance learning. He described three: learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction. Wagner (1994) joined in on the discussion and added a fourth type of interaction: learner-technology interaction. Although the idea of social context has been around for quite a while and has proven to be an intrinsic part of any learning situation, I have never seen it discussed as a possible fifth interaction. Based on the findings of this study about a blended learning cohort community and my familiarity with current research on adult learning, my contribution to this discussion on types of interaction in distance learning is a fifth type of interaction: learner-environmental context interaction.

**Research Question Three: Describing Activities**

**That Fostered or Hindered Forming Meaningful and Enduring Relationships**

There were noticeable differences in the ways Lani and Stacy described their experiences with peers as compared with Steve. When I presented the interview results in Chapter 5, I noted that Steve worked full-time and was enrolled in school full-time while Lani and Stacy were enrolled in school full-time but they did not work outside the home. It seemed a logical conclusion to me that Steve’s schedule impaired his social relationships with peers. In the literature review, however, Rovai (2001) contends that
students who use an online course discussion forum to engage in socioemotional discourse to convey praise, encouragement, and support for peers, build a stronger sense of community, satisfaction and perceived learning. Essentially, he is saying that students who use positive, motivational messages when communicating with peers are better able to get to know them and build meaningful online relationships. I contend that the inverse is true as well. Students who do not bother to engage in socioemotional discourse with their peers are less likely to build meaningful online relationships. Steve’s full schedule is inevitably affected the amount of time he spent online. Yet during his interview, Steve also expressed his impatience with students he describes as “long-winded” and who he felt frequently went “off-topic.” Based upon these responses, I feel instinctively that Steve simply did not value socializing with peers as much as Lani and Stacy.

Steve also made it clear during his interview that he preferred synchronous online chatrooms rather than asynchronous discussion forums. He described the former as “spontaneous” and “engaging” and the latter as “time-consuming” and “tiresome.” Conversely, Lani and Stacy touted the merits of the discussion forums that Steve so vehemently criticized and they both fervently objected to the online chat sessions that Steve so highly esteemed. They not only described the chat sessions as “confusing” and “frustrating,” but they both also regarded them as “a complete waste of time.” Lani said, “The chat to me was like being in a room where everyone is talking at the same time. I didn’t really get anything out of that experience.” Stacy said, “By the time I’d get what I wanted to say typed, the others were already on another subject…To me it wasn’t very useful.”
There is no way to actually gauge whether or not the “disembodied experiences” or the “impoverished interactions” described by Dreyfus (2001) are at play in the negative reactions to online discussion forums for Steve and the online chatrooms for Lani and Stacy. In order to foster the dialogical discourse that results in deep, meaningful interchanges that Burniske (2004) describes, rules of conduct must be established and the number of participants must be limited so that the threads of conversations are not lost as people talk over each other (Hasler-Waters & Napier, 2002). Steve mentions that he did learn to “wait his turn” in the online chatrooms, which probably made his experiences there more pleasant and meaningful.

I do not believe that it is far-fetched, however, to infer from the personal circumstances of the participants that time schedules were probably a major factor in causing the conflicting outcomes. Steve did not have time to go back and sort through discussion forums for new posts. Steve’s time was limited and so were chat session times restricted. Lani and Stacy could schedule time throughout the day to spend on and to reflect upon discussion forum topics and carefully craft what and how they wanted to respond to their peers. Lani says the time she spent crafting her online communications to peers to ensure they said exactly what she wanted them to say “was almost ridiculous.” Following Polhemus et al. (2000), Lani and Stacy champion online discussion forums that allow “thoughtful, insightful responses.” Additionally, Stacy & Lani, probably welcomed breaks allowing them some “adult time” after spending the majority of their days at home with their children. For educators, it is important to note that having multiple ways of interaction available within a learning community is important because different people may find they need different ways to engage.
There were also mixed reviews regarding the occasional F2F classes. Lani and Steve expressed satisfaction with the teachers and the activities during these weekend sessions, but Stacy found several of the teachers and activities “repetitive” and “boring.” All students reported the projects and activities that they engaged in with peers helped them to hone 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication, thinking and social skills that they continue to use in their own classrooms today. Following Napier & Hasler-Waters (2003), they assert that teachers can’t assume students possess collaboration skills going into group projects. All participants said that it took time for them to learn how best to work together.

**Conclusions**

The classes are over. The cohort is disbanded. Yet the community still exists for at least two of the interviewees in my study.

For the members who continue to participate even though it is no longer required, the community is still useful to them and it has some relevance in their current personal or professional lives. And, thus, to some extent, the lasting intent of the community, which is to build an enduring support network, still exists.

However, current models for learning communities brandish lofty goals and ideals, but are relevant only for immediate use and membership, not necessarily for life after the degree is earned. This shortcoming was difficult to discover, but I was provided a particularly suitable vantage point. I looked at learning communities in retrospect. Six years to be exact.

We don’t have a lot of evidence of what people see and think about communities after the fact. What are the worldviews of members when they look back at their
experiences in blended learning communities? Which elements do they find most meaningful?”

The models seem to ignore environment. The blended learning community exists within an educational environment, but each of its individual members exists within a personal environment that they bring with them into the community. As educators, we know that these environments exist and that they are important. As my research shows, the environmental contexts of students are important components that affect their commitment and participation within learning communities. Why do we pretend they do not exist?

I also find that models are “time limited” because they are based upon the immediacy of the environment. They are narrow because they are not looking at community in a time perspective. They are always looking at communities in the “here and now” perspective.

Of course, some of the elements in the CoI model I used did seem to fit what community members were telling me, but there are definitely pieces in learning community models that we need to reconsider when we look at community from a greater time perspective.

For example, one of the very things that many communities in education frequently ignore is exactly what sustains them over time: a common interest component. The models have simplified to a point that sometimes variables that are important are overlooked or downplayed. The models tend to look at community from a narrow perspective, but communities exist in systemic perspective. And they involve real people with real needs, real desires, goals, and lives beyond the classroom.
The way communities work is also an important aspect to consider. Models cannot ignore that all educational communities, whether “brick and mortar” (conventional) or “brick and click” (blended or strictly online), are technology-based. Technology does matter. What it enables and what it limits are critical pieces that affect community members in the near and long term.

Finally, lifelong learning is a buzz word in education that has roots in learning communities because it can lead to participating in new communities or building new networks for learning. In the blended learning cohort that I studied, even though the teachers came into the schools as new teachers and newcomers to the school community, because of their collaboration and communication skills, they are taking up leadership positions.

In summary, the five major conclusions of this research are as follows: a) The lasting intent of cohort community as a support network still exists; b) Models ignore environment even though adult learner theory tells us that it is a key component of the learning community affecting both commitment and participation; c) Models are framed by a narrow perspective instead of taking a wider systemic view, which may inhibit the sustainability of learning communities over time and limit the longitudinal value of educational practices; d) Models ignore technology even though what it enables and what it limits are critical pieces that affect community members in the near- and long-term; and finally, e) Lifelong learning skills lead to participating in new communities as learners take new skills into new environments and assume different roles in new communities.
Recommendations

Many of the questions that I have raised are not in the nature of this study to specifically look at or try to answer. The results of this study lead us in a direction so we are now more aware that learning community models and practices need to be reconsidered. Since this is an exploratory study, I did not expect it to necessarily answer all of the questions, but more to raise critical questions about what we should be thinking.

My recommendations for future research are as follows: If the issues I have brought up in this study are critical pieces to individuals based upon their needs, goals, and points of view, how are we, as educators and practitioners, thinking about our current managing of learning communities that we can do better? Knowing this information, there are things that we might be able to change to affect our practices and the longitudinal value of our teachings.

Additionally, as we broaden our understanding of communities to consider them from a long term perspective, what elements do we find that endure that are meaningful? We ought to be thinking about these pieces as we try to develop communities in education in the first place because they are obviously the most meaningful to people. Why are we not thinking about them?
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Online Interview Instructions and Guide
Telephone Interview Guide

1. When you think about your experiences as a member of this cohort, what are some of the first things to come to your mind?

2. Overall, how would you rate your experience as a member of a blended learning cohort?

3. What were your learning goals going into the cohort?

4. How important was a socialization process to you to be successful in your own learning? Why? Please provide at least one example based upon your experience in the cohort that you believe helps make your views clear.

5. When you think back on your experience as a student, can you think of any specific online activities when you keenly felt the instructor’s presence during an online assignment or activity? Please describe what comes to your mind.

6. Can you think of an online class or online experience where you definitely felt engaged or mentally challenged? Please describe.

7. Based on what you remember about your classmates and what they told you, how do you think the majority of others in the cohort learned best (in groups or individually)? Why do you think they favored learning this way? (What I am trying to get at here is your sense of the overall value of community for learning among learning community members.)

8. Please describe one activity that you participated in online as part of the cohort (either on your own or with your classmates) where you believe your learning was MOST meaningful or significant to you.

9. Please describe one activity that you participated in online as part of the cohort (either on your own or with your classmates) where you believe your learning was LEAST meaningful or significant to you.

10. Looking back, how would you rate your online experiences as compared to your F2F experiences in retrospect?

11. Which online tools were most useful to your learning as a student? Why?

12. A community of inquiry is described as follows:

   A critical community of learners, from an educational perspective, is composed of teachers and students transacting with the specific purposes of facilitating, constructing, and validating understanding, and of developing capabilities that
will lead to further learning. Such a community encourages cognitive independence and social interdependence simultaneously.” (Garrison & Anderson, 2003:23)

How would you describe the community that your cohort built? Did your community change over time or with classes/instructors? Please elaborate.

13. From what you remember, did your relationships with peers change as classes changed? For example, since our EDEF 310 class had no F2F component (except a 5-minute introduction where we physically introduced ourselves and handed out class materials), do you remember our class as being different in any way from other classes where you were able to physically interact with your classmates more frequently? Please explain.

14. Below is a list of skills that many educators and business leaders deem extremely important for life and work in the 21st Century:

- Good communications skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening)
- Ability to learn independently
- Social skills (ethics, positive attitude, responsibility)
- Teamwork skills, collaborative learning, networking
- Ability to adapt to changing circumstances (flexibility, adaptability, innovativeness)
- Thinking skills (problem-solving; critical, logical, numerical skills)
- Entrepreneurship (taking initiative, recognizing opportunities)
- Information, Media, Technology, Digital literacies

Did you learn or develop any of the skills listed above as part of a blended learning cohort that have been useful to you in your life even after your program was over? Please provide some specific examples to illustrate what you mean.

15. Is there anything on your mind right now that occurred to you that you wanted to share with me that we didn’t really get to during your interview?
Appendix B

Human Subjects Approval Form
MEMORANDUM

April 22, 2005

TO: Wallace Napier
   Principal Investigator
   Educational Foundations

FROM: William H. Dendle
      Executive Secretary

SUBJECT: CHS #13691. Preparing Learning Communities to Thrive Beyond Blended Classes: A Longitudinal Case Study

Your project identified above was reviewed and has been determined to be exempt from Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations, 45 CFR Part 46. Specifically, the authority for this exemption is section 46.101(b)(1). Your certificate of exemption (Optional Form 310) is enclosed. This certificate is your record of CHS review of this study and will be effective as of the date shown on the certificate.

An exempt status signifies that you will not be required to submit renewal applications for full Committee review as long as that portion of your project involving human subjects remains unchanged. If, during the course of your project, you intend to make changes which may significantly affect the human subjects involved, you should contact this office for guidance prior to implementing these changes.

Any unanticipated problems related to your use of human subjects in this project must be promptly reported to the CHS through this office. This is required so that the CHS can institute or update protective measures for human subjects as may be necessary. In addition, under the University’s Assurance with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the University must report certain situations to the federal government. Examples of these reportable situations include deaths, injuries, adverse reactions or unforeseen risks to human subjects. These reports must be made regardless of the source funding or exempt status of your project.

University policy requires you to maintain as an essential part of your project records, any documents pertaining to the use of humans as subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to, and received from, the subjects, as well as any executed consent forms, data and analysis results. These records must be maintained for at least three years after project completion or termination. If this is a funded project, you should be aware that these records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representatives of the University, State and Federal governments.

Please notify this office when your project is completed. We may ask that you provide information regarding your experiences with human subjects and with the CHS review process. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your project. Any subsequent reactivation of the project will require a new CHS application.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or require assistance. I will be happy to assist you in any way I can.

Thank you for your cooperation and efforts throughout this review process. I wish you success in this endeavor.

Enclosure
Protection of Human Subjects
Assurance Identification/IRB Certification/Declaration of Exemption
(Common Rule)

Policy: Research activities involving human subjects may not be conducted or supported by
the Departments and Agencies adopting the Common Rule (58FR20003, June 18, 1993) unless the
activities are exempt from or approved in accordance with the Common Rule. See section 101(b)
of the Common Rule for exemptions. Institutions submitting applications or proposals for support
must submit certification of appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and approval to
the Department or Agency in accordance with the Common Rule.

1. Request Type
   [ ] ORIGINAL
   [ ] GRANT
   [ ] CONTRACT
   [ ] FELLOWSHIP
   [ ] CONTINUATION
   [ ] COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT
   [X] EXEMPTION
   [ ] OTHER:

2. Type of Mechanism

3. Name of Federal Department or Agency and, if known,
   Application or Proposal Identification No.

4. Title of Application or Activity
   "Fitting in: Exploring Community in Blended (i.e., Mostly Online and Occasional
   Face-to-Face) Learning Classrooms"

5. Name of Principal Investigator, Program Director, Fellow, or
   Other
   Wallace Napier

6. Assurance Status of this Project (Respond to one of the following)
   [X] This Assurance, on file with Department of Health and Human Services, covers this activity:
     Assurance Identification No. F-3526, the expiration date October 15, 2005
     IRB Registration No. IORG0000169

   [ ] This Assurance, on file with (agency/dept),
     Assurance No. (if applicable), the expiration date (if applicable)
     IRB Registration/Identification No. (if applicable)

   [ ] No assurance has been filed for this institution. This institution declares that it will provide an Assurance and Certification of IRB review and
   approval upon request.

   [X] Exemption Status: Human subjects are involved, but this activity qualifies for exemption under Section 101(b), paragraph 1.

7. Certification of IRB Review (Respond to one of the following IF you have an Assurance on file)
   [ ] This activity has been reviewed and approved by the IRB in accordance with the Common Rule and any other governing regulations.
     by: [ ] Full IRB Review on (date of IRB meeting) or [ ] Expedited Review on (date)
     [ ] If less than one year approval, provide expiration date 

   [ ] This activity contains multiple projects, some of which have not been reviewed. The IRB has granted approval on condition that all projects
   covered by the Common Rule will be reviewed and approved before they are initiated and that appropriate further certification will be submitted.

8. Comments
   CHS #13691

9. The official signing below certifies that the information provided above is
   correct and that, as required, future reviews will be performed until study
   closure and certification will be provided.
   10. Name and Address of Institution
       University of Hawaii at Manoa
       Office of the Chancellor
       2444 Dole Street, Bachman Hall
       Honolulu, HI 96822

11. Phone No. (with area code)  (808) 950-0007
12. Fax No. (with area code)  (808) 539-3954
13. Email:  dendle@hawaii.edu

14. Name of Official
   William H. Dendle
   Compliance Officer

15. Title

16. Signature
17. Date
   April 22, 2005

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any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to: OS Reports Clearance Officer, Room 503 200 Independence Avenue,
S.W., Washington, DC 20201. Do not return the completed form to this address.
Appendix C

Agreement to Participate in Doctoral Research
AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN
A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION RESEARCH STUDY ENTITLED:

Preparing learning communities to thrive beyond blended classrooms:
A longitudinal case study

Investigator: Wallace N. Napier-Psomas, Doctoral Candidate

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Ellen xxx

Department: Educational Foundations
            xxx, Room xxx
            xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
            xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
            xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
            (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this study is to explore the character and meaning of community in online educational settings from the viewpoint of students. Based upon their personal experiences with taking online courses as part of a predominantly online cohort of students, how would they define community in blended learning classrooms? Which online activities or events fostered or hindered the forming of meaningful relationships with their classmates? What stories might they tell and which words might they use to describe community?

What You Will Be Expected to Do

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. Allow me to interview you via the telephone for at least one hour at your convenience. There is a possibility that I will need to do a follow-up interview. If so, we can decide upon the day and time that is most convenient for you.
2. Be available by email or phone for any checking I may need to do with you as a follow-up to the interview.
3. Once I have made transcripts of the online interview, you will be provided with a copy for your review. You will be asked to check for accuracy of facts and intent and to either edit as you wish or accept the transcript as is.

What You Can Expect Me to Do

1. I will maintain your confidentiality throughout the entire research study. I will use pseudonyms to refer to participants and I will never designate by name or island any member of the cohort under any circumstances.
Voluntary Participation

Each student will remain voluntary throughout the entire timeframe of this study and is free to withdraw at any time with no consequences to the individual.

Your Rights

1. To Confidentiality

   - Your identity and what is said in interviews will be kept strictly confidential. That is, no person other than the researcher will have access to the interview transcripts. You will be given a personal copy of the transcript of the interview.
   - In order to protect participants, the names and other identifying characteristics about any student in this study will not be divulged to anyone. Each person interviewed will be given a pseudonym in order to provide anonymity.
   - Interview transcripts and bio-data information will be used in the dissertation and any other subsequent publications in such a manner so as to protect the student from identification by the readers.
   - All written transcripts (except the one provided to you) will remain in the possession of the researcher in a secure location. The data will be used for the dissertation as well as in materials written for publication. No one will have use of these materials, except the researcher for the purposes of the dissertation and perhaps a follow-up article based upon the research. Transcripts of study participants who prematurely exit the study will also be destroyed.

2. To Ask Questions at Any Time

   You may ask questions about the research at any time. You may contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or by email at: xxx@email.edu

   If I cannot answer your questions, you may contact Dr. Ellen xxx, my dissertation chair at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or by email at: xxx@email.edu

3. To Withdraw at Any Time

   You may withdraw from the study at any time, and you may require that your data be destroyed, without any consequences to you.

4. Benefits

   Students will have an opportunity to reflect on the roles they and others in the cohort have played in bringing about and promoting a class community. Sometimes, students are not fully aware of the significance of their individual contributions, which lead to success or perhaps problems for the entire group. The opportunity to reflect may provide them with insights into future online and face-to-face group meetings to make them more personally satisfying and successful.
The contributions to the field of higher education will also be very important as there are limited numbers of studies about online educational communities devoted primarily to the viewpoints of students. The reflections of the students may provide valuable insights to other students, faculty and researchers, informing both theory and practice.

5. Possible Risks

To the knowledge of this researcher, there are no risks involved in this study.

Thank you very much for your time and assistance.

Certification

I certify that I have read and understand the above, that I have been given satisfactory answers to any questions about the research, and that I have been advised that I am free to withdraw my consent and to discontinue participation in the research at any time, without any prejudice or other consequences.

I agree to be a part of this study with the understanding that such permission does not take away any of my legal rights, nor does it release the investigator or the institution (or any agent or employee thereof) from liability for negligence.

If I cannot obtain satisfactory answers to my questions, or have comments or complaints about my participation in this study, I may contact:

Committee on Human Studies (CHS)
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Telephone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant                  Date

c: Signed copy to participant