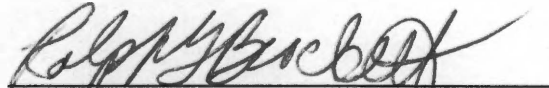
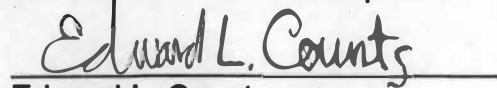


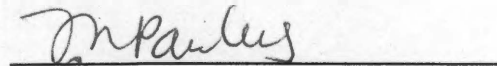
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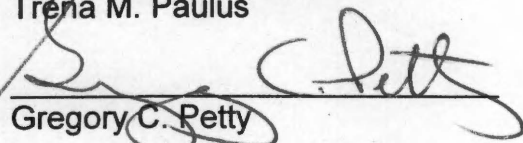
I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jennifer W. Summerlin entitled "The Experience of Participants Using an Online Discussion Forum in a Graduate Course." I have examined the final paper copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.


Ralph G. Brockett, Major Professor

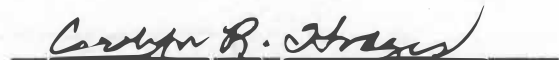
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The Experience of Participants Using an Online Discussion Forum in a Graduate Course

**A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
for the
Doctor of Philosophy Degree**

**The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee**

**Jennifer W. Summerlin
August 2007**

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my sweet Hannah Rose, the most wonderful child anyone could ever hope for, and to my husband, Jimmy, whose infinite love and support sustains and inspires me.

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This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many individuals; to all of you, I am most appreciative. I would specifically like to thank Dr. Ralph Brockett and Dr. Ed Counts for their expertise, kindness and unwavering support. I am also thankful for the expertise and support of my other committee members, Dr. Trena Paulus and Dr. Greg Petty.

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Words cannot describe the love and gratitude I have for my daughter, Hannah, and my husband, Jimmy; their steadfast support is beyond comprehension. To Jimmy, I am thankful for your love, support, comfort and friendship; you are the love of my life. To Hannah, I am thankful for your love, hugs, kisses, smiles, laughter, footsteps, and kind heart; you bring complete joy to my life. I cherish each picture you have colored for me and each flower you have picked for me; these have helped me more than you know. I thank God for both of you everyday!

ABSTRACT

This study was designed and implemented to describe the experiences of doctoral students using an online discussion forum and determine the effectiveness of this type of instructional tool. Specifically, this study examined the students' experiences with overall communication, themes of the discussion board/forum, and traits and/or skills, which were needed for this online environment, with the purpose of determining how these experiences may have enhanced or hindered their overall course experience.

The specific approach used for this research was a qualitative case study methodology, which consisted of face-to-face interviews conducted with doctoral students from a small private university in the southeastern United States. Data were collected using a face-to-face semi-structured interview approach whereby open-ended interviews of the participants were conducted using a general interview guide. Using Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach, participants' responses were evaluated for similarities and differences and then categories of like content or themes were developed.

Participants in this study described their experiences with using the online discussion forum in terms of four overall themes including: (1) learning to use the technology, (2) creating a voice for every student, (3) flexibility of the medium and, (4) frustration with online communication. Findings from this study indicate that students portray many benefits of using an online discussion forum as a supplement

to a traditional face-to-face course including: flexibility of the online communication, creating a voice for all students and ease of communication. However, from the perspective of the learner, there are also many negative aspects to this type of learning environment, including, but not limited to: the lack of initial training, the lack of nonverbal communication cues in the online environment, the lack of guidelines for students as to what is expected of them in this type of online communication and the concerns of miscommunication via online discussion.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Online course management, online communication, and blended instruction are presently some of the emerging trends in the higher education classroom. It is very clear that online technology has the potential to bring remarkable changes to major aspects of how education is conducted, including higher education (Grabe & Grabe, 2001; Harasim, 2000; Keegan, 1996; National Online Learners Priorities Report [NOLPR], 2005; Oblinger & Kidwell, 2000). To effectively serve our present day students, educators should provide students with innovative technologies, including online course delivery, online course management systems and online communication. Many maintain that effective online learning systems are essential for the success of institutions of higher education in today's technological world (NOLPR, 2005; Norton & Wiburg, 1998; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2006).

The options for online learning or Web-assisted delivery and online communication in today's higher education classroom are extensive and escalating. Online course offerings and enrollments have significantly increased since the turn of the century (Smart & Cappel, 2006). Practitioners are fortunate to have abundant technological tools at their disposal and in some cases are given incentives to develop more online course materials and online communication options for their students.

The worldwide market for online learning was projected to be more than \$18 billion by the end of 2005 (Moore, 2001). A vast number of institutions in higher education are increasing distance learning course offerings to attract such students as working adults who are balancing work, home and other commitments (McEwan, 2001; NOLPR, 2005). This widespread growth of online courses and online components raises questions about student learning effectiveness and assessment (Herron & Wright, 2006). The implementation of computer-mediated communication and online course management systems has outpaced practitioners' understanding of how this communication medium should best be used to promote effective learning (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). Are these online communication tools effective instructional methods? What are the students' experiences with these online communication options and do students see this as a positive aspect to their overall course experience?

In distance education, it is necessary that educators consider how communication will occur and how to apply experiences that will promote effective and efficient learning (Garrison, et al., 2001; Simonson, et al., 2006). Harris (2000) contends that we, as practitioners, need to develop new and flexible frameworks that can be used to structure understanding-focused learning activities that help students make use of online tools. There is also a need for scholars to compensate for the inadequacy of understanding online communication in higher education by studying interactions, perceptions and outputs of participants who are engaged in the use of online communication for educational purposes (Garrison, et al., 2000, 2001). According to Simonson, et

al., (2006), the key to success in an online learning environment is not which technologies are used, but how they are used and what information is communicated using these technologies. It is important that practitioners attempt to better understand the use of online discussion forums in higher education from the perspective of the learner.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The primary purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of cohort members using an online discussion forum in a doctoral level course.

Therefore, the following served as a research question:

- What are the experiences of doctoral cohort members in an online discussion forum?

This general question served as a framework for the study; however, as is evident in the interview guide (Appendix A), it was anticipated that other questions and sub-themes would emerge from the research.

Need for the Study

Currently, online delivery and/or online course materials are rapidly being implemented in many higher education courses. However, online education and communication are still somewhat new in terms of educational practice, and much remains to be learned about online course delivery and online communication (Chin & Williams, 2005; Garrison, et al., 2001, Garrison, 2004; Luppici, 2007). Although in recent years there has been a significant increase

in research involving distance education and online collaboration, the topic is still relatively new and research in this area is limited. As online learning and blended instruction continue to expand in higher education and business environments, practitioners need to gain an improved understanding of where, when and under what circumstances online learning can be applied most effectively and how it can best be implemented (Smart & Cappel, 2006). Assessment of online education enables institutions to strategically target areas in need of improvement and facilitates the development of future instructional designs (NOLPR, 2005). There is a need to review the elements of the technology used for distance education courses and courses that use online or distance education components (Garrison, 2004).

Woods and Ebersole (2003) state that additional research is needed to help practitioners understand the complex dynamics involved in building a learning community using computer-mediated communication such as online discussion forums. Simonson, et al., (2006) maintain that instructors of distance education should strive to understand technology and technological methods to help distance and local learners have a positive learning experience. In addition, the instructional development process should be based on the unique characteristics and needs of students, combined with the teaching style of the instructor and the course goals and content (2006). According to Davies (2006), if online instruction is to be effective the main focus of the course should be on learning and the primary purpose for developing an online course should be to provide students with effective instruction. Further research is needed about how

online communication gives students voice, the blended online learning environment, and to determine if online course delivery and online communication are effective instructional strategies.

There has been little empirical evidence to support the relationship between the use of technology and enhanced learning (Strauss & Frost, 1999). This lack of evidence affects practitioners' attempts to have a research informed approach when developing online learning activities for students in higher education. Krentler and Williams (2001) state that technology has been described as a means to help aid in creating a learner-centered environment in the higher education classroom. However, without substantial research to inform practice this learner-centered educational environment is puzzling at best.

Distant learner satisfaction is an important dimension in understanding the success of interactive distance education courses and research has found that the assessment of learner satisfaction is one of the main keys to overall success of a distance education program (Simonson, et al., 2006). When speaking about teaching strategies for the online classroom, Simonson, et al. (2006) explain:

Students can provide insight into the design of the learning experience.

They can give feedback in lesson design and instruction delivery. Using a simple form of feedback, students can describe or indicate in some other way their expectations and perceptions of the class structure and the delivery mode.... Evaluating these responses, the instructor can gain an understanding of how the learners perceived the class experience. An instructor's personal philosophy will influence the approach to teaching at

a distance.... Although the dynamics of a philosophy will not predict an instructor's success in the distance education classroom, successful teaching at a distance places the recipients' needs before organizational convenience and at the center of planning and decision making. The individual needs of the learners are brought to the forefront in education that uses electronic technology, because separation of learners from the instructor requires students to take more responsibility for learning (pp. 129-130).

It is clear that the understanding of student's perspectives of the online discussion forum is a vital link to understanding the use of online discussion forums as a tool in both the online and the blended classrooms. As an adjunct faculty member who utilizes online learning tools such as online discussion forums and electronic chat, I undertook this study because I wanted to improve my practice. I saw a need for a more thorough understanding of the online discussion forum from the perspective of the learner.

Graduate students at a small private university in the southeastern United States, who are members of a doctoral cohort, are required to take various courses containing both face-to-face and online components. As for many graduate level courses, "breadth" versus "depth" is a common challenge. Faculty struggle with the need to cover a wide range of topics, the need to focus on certain curriculum or information in more detail and the need to build a sense of community among the course participants. This is an ever-present dilemma for

course instructors as all of these components need to fit within a limited period of scheduled course time.

Many online instructors try to foster a sense of community among learners by incorporating personal, non-subject-matter-specific discussions boards or forums (Woods & Ebersole, 2003). By using online discussion forums students and instructors are not confined by the limits of scheduled face-to-face class time. Because of time constraints for these graduate courses, there is value in using tools such as online discussion boards/forums to continue the learning, reflecting and discussion process outside of the regular face-to-face classroom. However, research is still limited on using online discussion boards as a Web-assisted or blended instructional method. This qualitative research will help understand online discussion forums, a component of distance education, from the perspective of the learner and will help construct a more complete understanding of the students' perspective of online discussion forums.

In addition, this research will provide valuable data from the perspective of the learner and offer insight as to how the online discussion forums are used in a doctoral graduate course. This type of instructional design process will help instructors make informed decisions about technology use in the higher education classroom (Simonson, et al., 2006). Therefore, this research will help supply practitioners with much needed details concerning the use of online discussion forums and provide additional groundwork in using these forums as an instructional tool.

Assumptions of the Study

The following assumptions apply to this study:

- I assume that the participants were not influenced by me as a researcher.
- I assume that participants answered questions and reacted in the same manner as they would have regardless of whether a study was being conducted.
- I assume that study participants shared their experiences openly and that they felt free to respond in an open manner.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations apply to this study:

- I acknowledge that the characteristics of the instructor may have had an influence on students' perceptions of the online discussion forum.
- As a researcher, I understand that participants who know they are part of a research study may act differently than would they under normal circumstances.
- I recognize that this study was confined to students enrolled in a doctoral cohort for a specified course at a small private university in the southeast; therefore data from this study cannot be generalized to other populations.

- I acknowledge that no attempt was made to gather demographic data on participants nor was participants' technology skill level identified prior to the interview process.

Reflexivity Statement

I acknowledge that as a graduate student in Instructional Technology and as an adjunct faculty member in a technological field, all interviews, observations and data analysis will be filtered by my "worldview, values and perspectives" (Merriam, 2001). As an instructor who uses online discussion forums and other online components as a supplement to a traditional face-to-face course and as a student who has been required to use such online tools, personal biases did surface. Some biases I acknowledge to possess were the thoughts that many online discussion forums were used as an extension of electronic mail and as a form of busy work for students. To this end, I had to identify personal biases and remain conscious of my own experiences in order to minimize the effect of these on the study. During the interview process I relied on the interview guide and the participants to control the course of the interview. I only recorded the participants' experiences and did not share any of my thoughts on the issues.

Definition of Terms

1. **Blended instruction** – A course utilizing both traditional face-to-face instruction as well as online components.

2. **Blog** – or a Web log, is a Web site updated frequently with links, commentary and anything else someone chooses to post...it is free-flowing ideas (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).
3. **Cohort** – a group of people from a given population experiencing an event together in a particular time span.
4. **Collaborative learning** – the grouping and pairing of students for the purpose of achieving an academic goal, an instruction method in which students work together in small groups toward a common goal.
5. **Computer mediated communication or (CMC)** – communication that occurs via networked computers.
6. **Distance education** – teaching specifically designed to be carried out remotely, the students and the teacher are in different locations and lectures are transmitted through some type of technology.
7. **E-Discourse** – is the production, transmission and consumption of electronic text (Perkins & Newman, 1999).
8. **Electronic discussion groups or (E.D.G.)** – online discussion forums tailored for a specific audience, where you can leave messages and expect to see responses to messages you have left.
9. **Online** – is the condition of being connected to a computer or a telecommunications system; the term is frequently used to describe someone who is currently connected to the Internet.

10. Online course management systems – software that brings teaching and learning online, it allows for colleges, schools and universities to unify academics, communities and administrative services online through one integrated and customizable system. Some features of online course management systems include online grading system, virtual chat, virtual classroom/chalkboard, discussion forums, student rosters, and student web page templates.

11. Online discussion board/forum – is a general term for any online "bulletin board" where one can leave messages and expect to see responses to messages one has left.

12. Web-assisted instruction – the blending of online and traditional instruction.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provided an overview of the study, the background of the problem to be explored, the purpose of the study, the rationale for the study, assumptions and limitations, definition of terms and the organization of the study.

Chapter Two provides a review of the related literature organized in five major topic areas including: (1) the state of online learning, (2) distance education, (3) qualitative research, (4) online discussion/communication, and (5) the learner and online discussion/education. Chapter Three outlines the method

for the study. Included sections are: research design, sample, procedure/data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Four provides data analysis and findings of the study. In conclusion, Chapter Five provides an overview of the study, research conclusions, guidelines for practitioners and offers recommendations for further research.

In addition, a complete reference list follows the five chapters. The Appendices contains the interview guide, the IRB form from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the course syllabus, a copy of the participant consent form, the transcriber's statement and the participant pseudonym list.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter One provided an overview of the study, the need for the study, the purpose of the study, the rationale for the study, assumptions and limitations, definition of terms and the organization of the study. This chapter presents a review of the related literature organized into five major topic areas including: (1) the state of online learning, (2) distance education, (3) online discussion and communication, (4) the learner and online discussion/education, and (5) qualitative research.

Generated by the onset of the Internet craze, distance education and e-learning are now central elements of a higher education system trying to keep pace with today's technologically driven instructional trends. Many contend that effective online course management systems and other online learning methods are necessary for the success of institutions of higher education (Clifford, Friesen & Jardine, 2003; Garrison, et al., 2000). Krentler and Willis-Flurry (2005) found that student learning was, in fact, enhanced by using technology as a learning tool.

Currently higher education practitioners have numerous technological tools at their disposal, including online course management systems. Online course management systems have provided practitioners with an intuitive template for online course materials and online communication. But are those tools effective instructional techniques? Do students benefit from using online

discussion boards and does this type of online communication promote active learning? Lock and Redmond (2006) explain that educators have a role to play in answering some of these questions and in designing and implementing effective collaborative learning environments based on the needs of the learners while tapping into the world beyond textbooks and traditional classroom practices.

The State of Online Learning

This is an exciting yet challenging time for distance learning and e-learning in higher education. Enrollment in online courses is steadily increasing and the scope of online course offerings is seeing continuous growth. In the year 2005, more than 54,000 online courses were offered worldwide by some 1,680 institutions (Simonson, et al., 2006). Online course management, virtual classrooms, educational blogs and open learning are just some of the emerging buzzwords in education. It is now clear that online technologies will bring changes to major aspects of education, including that of pre-K, higher education and adult continuing education (Grabe & Grabe, 2001). To effectively serve today's technology driven students, educators should provide students with innovative technologies, which include online course delivery and various other distance learning options (Yanes, Pena, & Curts, 2006).

Today many educational resources, including instruction, are delivered via the information highway by utilizing online course management systems, multimedia packages, and other online communication methods. In contrast

from traditional education, today in many classrooms the textbook has been replaced with the “virtual course”, the “virtual classroom”, and the “virtual school” (Snider, 1996). Currently in the higher education classroom practitioners can identify three main types of learning environments, including: (1) traditional face-to-face instruction; (2) online or distance education, where all of the course materials are presented at a distance or by the physical separation of the teacher and learner and (3) the blended classroom in which some of the course materials are delivered using the traditional face-to-face method and other parts of the course are delivered at a distance or by using communication methods via online course management systems. Schlosser and Burmeister (1999) mention courses and programs that use both the traditional face-to-face and online components and consider this to be the “best of both worlds” for instructional design. Additionally, according to McEwen (2001), Web-assisted instruction, the blending of online or distance education and traditional instruction, offers a richer learning environment than either one offered alone. Needless to say, there is, however, debate over which instructional delivery method is best and which provides an optimal learning experience.

Hull (1999) lists several benefits of virtual or online learning, some of which include: (1) flexibility that makes it highly adaptable to curriculum and instructional strategies; (2) provides access to learning, regardless of location; (3) provides access to other institutions, industries and businesses; (4) allows real-time visual contact between students and instructors; (5) has minimal physical requirements and (6) supports the use of diverse media. Furthermore, Van

Vaught (1997) believes that information technology can help in designing and implementing highly effective learning and teaching systems.

Grabe and Grabe (2001) state that today's technology can take on various roles in education, one of which is that of the tool approach. The tool approach assumes that various types of technology can be used as a tool for learning. Another approach involves the student as an active learner and teacher as facilitator. The principles of distance education recognize that effective online learning depends on the quality and quantity of opportunities for interactive learning (Yanes, et al., 2006). Online discussion is just one tool we can use to help create a more interactive learning environment for both face-to-face and online courses and to modify our class dialogue to reach outside the four walls of the traditional classroom. With online discussion forums, online chat and virtual drop boxes, students are afforded an opportunity to be an active learner while not being bound by the limits of scheduled class time.

Distance Education

For the most part, it appears practitioners in higher education seem to think of distance education as a recent movement. However, the concepts that form the basis of distance education are over a century old (Simonson, et al., 2006). The foundation of distance education can be traced back to a Swedish newspaper advertisement in 1833 for a correspondence course. The Society to Encourage Studies at Home brought distance education to the United States in the 1870's with correspondences courses in classical curriculum, which were

mainly taken by women (2006). According to Holmberg (1986), a major shift in the current direction of distance education occurred in 1971 with the founding of the Open University of the United Kingdom, a degree granting distance teaching university. This institution brought credibility and respect to distance education and helped prompt the development of other virtual universities (Holmberg, 1986).

As maintained by Simonson, et al. (2006), distance education has been practiced for more than 150 years, during which time it has passed through three main phases: (1) correspondence study, with its use of print-based instruction and communication medium; (2) the rise of the distance teaching universities and the use of analog mass media and (3) the widespread integration of distance education elements into most forms of education, characterized by the use of digital instructional and communication technologies. Holmberg (1986) provides a number of reasons for the founding of distance teaching universities including: (1) the need to increase the offerings of university education; (2) the realization that students with jobs, families and other commitments form a large group of perspective full and part-time students; (3) a wish to serve both individuals and society by offering study opportunities for adult students; (4) the need for further training in many professions; (5) a wish to support educational innovation; and (6) a belief in the feasibility of an economical use of educational resources by mediated teaching. See Figure 2.1.

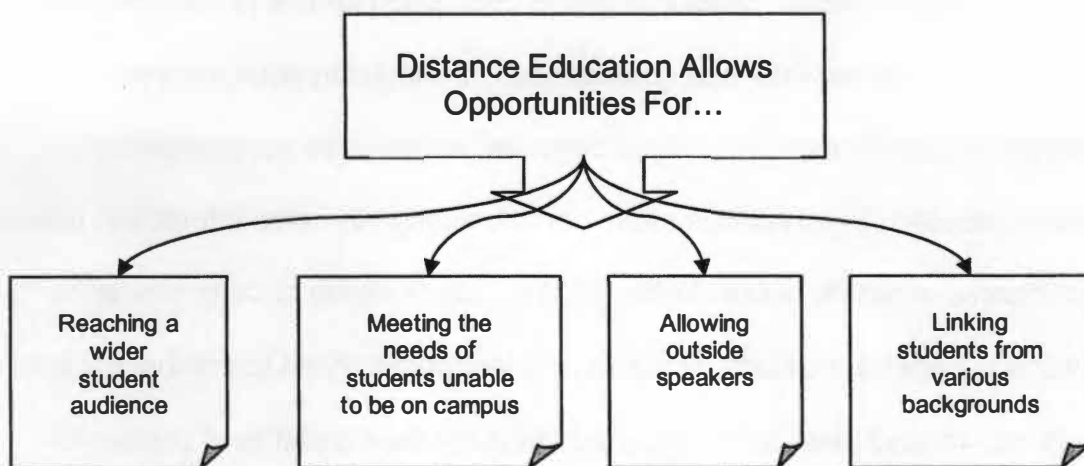
Figure 2.1: Holmberg's Reasons for the Founding of Distance Universities

Why Distance Teaching Universities?	• A need to increase the offerings of university educational opportunities
	• The realization that students with jobs, families and other commitment comprise a large group of perspective full and part-time students
	• A wish to serve both individuals and society by offering study opportunities for nontraditional or adult students
	• The need for further training in many professions which lends itself to distance education
	• A wish to support educational innovation
	• A belief in the feasibility of an economical use of educational resources by computer-mediated teaching

The term “distance education” can have multiple meanings and has been applied to a wide variety of programs and audiences and has been delivered via numerous forms of media. To use a basic definition, distance education takes place when a teacher(s) and student(s) are separated by physical distance and some form of technology is used to bridge the instructional gap. Distance education can take on many forms including voice, video, print media and electronic data, to name a few. According to Simonson, et al., (2006) distance education can mean geographical distance, time distance and possibly even intellectual distance. Distance education can also be defined as institution-based formal education where the learning group is separated and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors (Simonson, 2003). Using this definition, it can be said that four main components comprise distance education which include: (1) institutionally based; (2) separation of teacher and student; (3) interactive telecommunications; and (4) sharing of data, voice, video and learning experiences (Simonson et al., 2006).

Distance education is enabling colleges and universities to reach and accommodate a wider student base by breaking down geographic barriers and time or schedule restraints. The Internet has numerous resources for utilizing distance education for the delivery of information and instruction including e-mail, discussion forums and chat room delivery, to name a few. According to Willis (2001), distance education allows opportunities to: (1) reach a wider student audience; (2) meet the needs of students who are unable to attend on-campus classes or other group meetings; (3) involve outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable; and (4) link students from different social, cultural, economic and experiential backgrounds. See Figure 2.2. In addition, online learning or distance education may have further appeal for both funding agencies and from an administrative standpoint, as its format does not call for bricks and mortar for campuses and does not need any physical maintenance (Herron & Wright, 2006).

Figure 2.2: Willis' Opportunities in Distance Education



Online Discussion/Communication

Instructional technologies can be organized into two categories: telecommunications and instructional technologies. Since telecommunication means to communicate at a distance, telecommunications are electronic methods used to connect the instructor, students and resources (Simonson, et al., 2006). Online discussion forums can serve as a means of electronic communication between instructor(s) and student(s). Online discussion forums allow students and instructors to ask questions, express concerns, give personal reflections, share thoughts/ideas and offer a means of support or since of community, all while at a distance. Discussion boards can facilitate open communication between instructor and student, and among students. This type of communication also allows for anonymous posting of ideas and/or concerns. One study found that while online discussions tended to explore issues in an interesting way, it did so without resolution of the ideas raised via the online forum (Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin & Chang, 2003).

An advantageous feature of online discussion forums is the option of asynchronous or synchronous communication. Asynchronous means communication in which interaction between parties does not take place simultaneously. Synchronous mean communication in which interaction between participants is simultaneous (Willis, 2001). This flexibility of communication options is beneficial for both students and instructors trying to combat scheduling conflicts. Im and Lee (2004) analyzed the interaction patterns of preservice teachers using an online discussion forum and found that the synchronous

discussion forums were used more to establish social bonds, while, on the other hand, asynchronous discussions were used most often for task oriented activities.

Yanes, et al., (2006) state that instructors are responsible for shaping the general learning environment for the online discussion and usually moderate these discussions; however, students can also moderate the online discussions. In planning online discussion there are various factors to consider (see Table 2.1) including: (1) the types of questions posed – will the questions foster critical thinking; (2) the purpose of these questions – will the questions promote reflective thinking on their experiences; (3) the number and pacing of the questions – are the questions overwhelming for the students; (4) the types of asynchronous and synchronous discussions to be used – which tool will lend itself to achieve the desired purpose; and (5) the use of the discussion forum – is it for reflecting, role playing and so on (Yanes, et al., 2006).

Palloff and Pratt (2005) state that currently there are very few guidelines for designing an online environment for collaboration, but do offer ways in which instructors can help create this online collaboration including incorporating small-group assignments, requiring research assignments that ask students to

Table 2.1: Factors to Consider When Planning Online Discussion

Factors for Planning Online Discussion	Consider the types of questions posed
	Consider the purpose of these questions
	Consider the number and pacing of the questions
	Consider the types of discussions to be used
	Consider the main use of the discussion forum

* Modification from Yanes, Pena and Curts (2006).

seek out resource material from their peers, having shared facilitation of discussion, assigning homework forums and having asynchronous discussion of readings and discussion questions. Faculty utilizing online discussion forums as a tool for their online or face-to-face course should consider various elements in managing such online discussion. According to Yanes, et al., (2006) faculty and/or practitioners should (1) familiarize students with the discussion tools; (2) humanize the online environment; (3) organize discussion topics; and (4) facilitate the online discussion by clarifying and probing.

Walther (1996) states that there are three forms of communication in cyberspace or in an online environment: impersonal, interpersonal and what he calls hyperpersonal. Impersonal and interpersonal are also displays of behavior in face-to-face communication. According to Walther (1996),

hyperpersonal communication is a consequence of the slow, but inexorable growth of interpersonal communication that arises from asynchronous communication. It happens when: users experience commonality, are self-aware, physically separated, and communicating via a limited cues channel which allows them to selectively self-present and edit; to construct and reciprocate representations of their partners and relations without the interference of environmental reality (p. 19).

The Learner and Online Discussion/Education

Like other forms of distance education, online discussion forums can be beneficial for a variety of reasons. Many students and instructors believe the

opportunities offered by types of distance education outweigh the barriers (Holmes, 1999; Nonis, Bronack & Haton, 1998). Online discussion can facilitate self-paced and collaborative learning. Computers can help individualize learning; the students can help “set the pace and tone” of discussion and create their own knowledge. Matthew and Varagoor (2001) found that well-designed online materials could promote student learning by appealing to students’ learning styles and providing flexible ways of learning. In a study regarding students’ perceptions of online learning a perceived strength according to students was that of flexibility, convenience and the ability to complete units at their own pace (Smart & Cappel, 2006). Vician and Brown (2000) found that content of computer-mediated communication focused on course material and that most of the communication took place during times other than the 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. usual timeframe.

According to Meyer (2003), time is a valuable resource and students have a need to use time wisely, while weighing other demands on their time. This is reasoning supporting higher education institutions offering numerous online courses, since many students today have multiple demands placed on their time including work and family obligations. Meyer also found that students had the experience of feeling that time expanded in the online discussion (2003). An action research study regarding online learning communities found that students listed benefits of a Web-assisted course as (1) having a flexible schedule, (2) being able to work at any time and any place and (3) being able to choose the best conditions for learning (Leh, 2001). In a study comparing online and

traditional face-to-face learning, Hannay and Newvine (2005) found that distance learning options are most appealing because they are convenient for students who must manage numerous other personal commitments.

In one study, the electronic discussion group became a forum where students furthered their learning by discussing course related and controversial issues and applied experiences from the field back to theory (Dutt-Doner, 2000). Shaw and Pieter (2000) examined an online course in education and found that 55% of the students believed that the online course enabled them to take a more active role in the learning process. Meyer (2003) found that students greatly appreciated the opportunity to participate more fully in class discussions that was afforded by the online environment, that the online discussions had contributions from every student and that the online discussion was often more thoughtful, more reasoned and contained evidence from other sources such as articles and reports.

According to Yanes, et al., (2006), online discussions can be used to promote students' cognitive growth and can also be used in traditional face-to-face classes to enhance student interaction. Computers can be interactive; the online discussion can incorporate ideas/thoughts of all students, not just those who are vocal in face-to-face interaction. In a case study of a discussion-oriented course, Poole (2000) found that a strong sense of community was developed through the dialogue of the online discussion forum. Online discussion provides students time for reflection and an equal opportunity to contribute, resulting in the emergence of multiple perspectives (Frank & Davie,

2001). Integrating the asynchronous discussion format into traditional face-to-face courses can afford students beneficial delay time to carefully reflect upon and articulate their views, compare their views with others and expand the meaning of the topic (Yanes, et al., 2006).

With an online threaded discussion, individual students can post their comments or questions to the class and other students are free to respond. This type of forum can also be used to post announcements, clarify assignments, make changes to the class schedule and address questions or concerns. A case study found that Web-based bulletin boards or discussion boards/forums promoted dialogue among students (King, 2001). Furthermore, engaging students in dialogue with other students and instructors encourages active learning. Krentler and Willis-Flurry (2005) found that students who participated in class discussion online 76% -100% of the time earned a significantly higher course grade point average than students who did not participate as actively. This is consistent with other findings which support a relationship between the uses of technology and improved learning (2005).

Computer-mediated communication can also serve as a means of personal and group reflection. In one study analyzing online communities, students revealed their appreciation of time to reflect (Frank & Davie, 2001). Andrusyszyn and Davie (1995) found that instructional design integrated into a course, which promoted reflection, contributed to a richer, more personally meaningful learning experience. It was also found that activities that facilitate reflection could help transform raw information into integrated knowledge (1995).

When analyzing the content and purpose of various types of electronic communications the opportunity for personal reflection was a major purpose of the communication (Levin, 1999). Personal and group reflections are leading components of online communication and online discussion (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1995; Levin, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 2002; Poole, 2000).

In addition, Meyer (2003) found that a very important need of students was having time to reflect before speaking. For the students who felt constrained by the classroom, the online discussion affords them the opportunity to take time to develop a response. Luppicini (2007) found that a variety of empirical studies regarding online learning showed reflective thinking to be a positive aspect of this learning environment. Fabro and Garrison (1998) found that the nature of the asynchronous medium gives learners time to reflect, then contribute to the discussion after having time to formulate their thoughts. Furthermore, a researcher studying cognitive presence in online learning found that focus group members agreed that asking students to reflect using online discussion encouraged many students to express their views and opinions (Kanuka & Garrison, 2004).

In both online and face-to-face learning environments students often work in isolation without the assistance and support of fellow students. Setting up an online discussion forum can encourage student-to-student, student-to-instructor and instructor-to-student interaction. In a study analyzing the content and effectiveness of four different kinds of electronic communication, Levin (1999) found that student-to-group messages fostered more reflective exchange than

did one-to-one student messages. Computer networking and online communication can also enrich effective peer interaction (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2001).

Online communication and online discussion also increase access; students do not have the challenge of dealing with conflicting schedules or geographic barriers for study sessions or group meetings. In a study assessing online course materials, Matthew and Varagoor (2001) established that 57% of students believed the use of an electronic mailing list proved to be very helpful for the course. According to Shedletsky and Aitken (2001), nontraditional students and working students may prefer and/or adapt well to the nature of student collaboration online. Most students find that a major advantage of online discussion forums is the option of asynchronous or synchronous communication. Petrides (2002) reported that participants revealed that it was easier to work in collaborative groups in an online environment because there was no need to rearrange everyone's schedule. Use of the online asynchronous collaboration provided this flexibility with scheduling.

Although many advantages are associated with online learning and online communication, there are various factors that make the online environment deficient. Hara and Kling (2000) found that students reported feeling frustrated and confused with learning to use the technology. Another study found that students described feeling many emotions including frustration, shame and even embarrassment when learning to use the technological environment; these students reported feeling shame or embarrassment when they couldn't complete

a task because of their lack of technological skills (O'Regan, 2003). In addition, Leh (2001) found that students with low technology skills described feeling pressure and anxiety using Web-assisted functions such as online discussion and stated that such feelings might have a negative impact on learning.

Smart and Cappel (2006) found that students with more experience using technology and online learning rate it in a more positive manner. Studies of the online learner indicate that students are able to overcome anxiety about online technology with the passage of time (Brown, 2001). Researchers have found that the greater amount of experience students have with technology, equates to a higher level of satisfaction in learning to use other new technologies (Simmers & Anandarajan, 2001). In a study which examined student perceptions of an online digital library, results indicated that males and students with more technology and Internet experience had significantly higher positive perceptions of the online resources such as the digital library (Koohang, 2004).

In a study about the online learner, Smart and Cappel (2006) determined that students wanted more detailed directions for online assignments. Meyer (2003) found that faculty need to be more instructive with their assignments for the online discussion forum, giving students a better understanding of what is expected of them while using the forum. In a study which reviewed computer-mediated communication research, results indicated that various factors affected the success of an online course including program support, technical support and training (Luppigini, 2007). Palloff and Pratt (2005) state that if an online course is

designed with detailed guidelines and students understand what is expected of them it can help alleviate problems.

The importance of being a good writer, which includes the ability to express ideas clearly in written form and the ability to avoid making embarrassing mistakes, becomes of great importance in the online setting (Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, Meyer (2003) found that although some postings did make use of emoticons, students still missed the facial and hand gestures of face-to-face traditional discussion. Kanuka and Garrison (2004) found that online learners have to conduct written reflection and must be able to clearly articulate their position using written language. A rubric for assessing student online learning also listed the delivery of a post or grammatical correctness as a category to consider for online communication (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002).

Extensive computer illiteracy is still present in today's higher education classrooms. Practitioners can not assume that each student will have the technological capabilities to communicate online. According to Matthew and Varagoor (2001), one major barrier encountered by students was the frustration of accessing and using the interface with their online course materials. Nonis, et al., (1998) found that one of the greatest challenges to overcome in Web-based discussion was to ensure that students are prepared to use the technology. Students must also be motivated and skilled in computer operation before they can successfully function in any computer-based distance education environment. There is a learning curve for even the most basic of online communication.

Computer infrastructure is costly and some students may not have personal access to a home computer with Internet access. However, all universities do have open computer labs with free Internet access for student use. Computer technology evolves so quickly that it's challenging to maintain the newest and up-to-date technical advancements. Owston (1997) explains there are barriers to accessing online course materials and/or communication which include: malfunctioning hardware/software, Internet connection difficulties, slow servers or busy signals just to name a few.

A concern of some regarding technology and education is simply job security. Could the technological progression replace people with computers or online courses which use facilitators as opposed to traditional faculty? Compare this to the agricultural industry in the 1800's when 90% of the population farmed; because of agricultural advances, today that number has declined to less than 3% of the population (Snider, 1996). Many fear the same for the educator in the age of online education or e-learning. Could virtual reality or e-learning take the place of the classroom teacher or professor? Many would agree this is not an implausible notion. Some practitioners suggest this type of education is fast approaching and yet still others maintain that a computer could never replace the interaction and face-to-face contact of student and teacher.

Many believe that we can become fascinated by the technology and forget to assess the instructional value of such a tool. It is unwise to assume that online communication and discussion can be the same as face-to-face communication and discussion; it is not the same. According to Davis (1997), a community in

cyberspace is quite different, but the precise characteristics of such a community have yet to be identified. The challenges that often make communication and collaboration in face-to-face interaction difficult are also present in online communication, along with various other technological concerns. For example, Piccoli, Ahmad, and Ives (2001), found that students with more experience using technology and with a positive attitude toward technology perform better in a virtual learning environment than did students with less technological experience.

Although promoted as a means for making instruction easier, experienced online faculty claim that their online instruction requires more time and effort than their face-to-face instruction (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2001). This is a major concern, as faculty are already pushed to learn new instructional methods and to keep up with the constant rate of change in a technological environment. In addition, faculty who teach online spend time learning computer skills, which takes time away from the interaction with students, learning about typical course content and from other faculty duties.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is a complex and evolving field of inquiry that embraces a wide array of approaches, methods, and techniques and is accompanied by ongoing debate over what constitutes quality (Agostinho, 2005). The phrase qualitative research can have different meanings to different people.

Bogdan & Taylor (1975) maintain qualitative research is,

Research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior, it directs itself at settings and the individuals within those settings holistically; that is, the subject of the study, be it an organization or an individual, is not reduced to an isolated variable or to an hypotheses, but is viewed instead as a part of a whole (p. 2).

Strauss and Corbin (1990) define qualitative research as any kind of inquiry that produces findings that were not derived by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification. Creswell (1998) maintains the term qualitative research is typically used as a broad term to represent research conducted in a natural setting to investigate a social or human issue in contrast to the quantitative approach. According to Hatch (2002), in qualitative research,

The lived experiences of real people in real settings are the object of the study. Understanding how individuals make sense of their everyday lives is the stuff of this type of inquiry....qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it...qualitative methods provide means whereby social contexts can be systematically examined as a whole, without breaking them down into isolated, incomplete, and disconnected variables. Qualitative data are objects, pictures or detailed descriptions that cannot be reduced to numbers without distorting the essence of the social meanings they represent.

Qualitative reports are usually complex, detailed narratives that include the voices of the participants being studied (p. 6).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state, "There have never been so many paradigms, strategies of inquiry, or methods of analysis for researchers to draw upon and utilize" (p. 18). According to Agostinho (2005), qualitative research is an evolving field of inquiry due to its relatively short history in comparison to conventional scientific research, which is employed by quantitative methods. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the process of analyzing qualitative data, such as those in written material, or personal interviews, consists of three concurrent flows of activity including that of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing that simultaneously occur during the data collection process.

The most popular qualitative approach in distance education is the case study, which is used most commonly in the medical field. Using the case study method allows the researcher to do an in-depth analysis of a particular setting or situation through observations, interviews and discussions (Patton, 2002). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), the case study method is appropriate when a particular event is studied from the points of view of all participants. Often case studies also include an examination of artifacts but according to Miles and Huberman (1994), a study that focuses on the experiences of participants in a set course for a set amount of time is well-matched for the case study approach. For this reason, the researcher felt that the case study would be the most practical approach for this study.

Conclusion

The academic community seems to be uneasy about anything new, the new being concepts that are a part of a new communication medium, the new way in which knowledge is created, the new way we teach and learn and the new way students and faculty interact (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2001). Making sense of a new educational environment is never easy. It is important to provide sufficient training for students and faculty to perform well in the current and forthcoming online educational settings. It is also necessary to provide ongoing support to students and faculty to help prepare and continually educate in an education system, which is becoming more reliant on online technologies.

When speaking of information technology in today's higher education system, Holmes (1999) states,

The measure of success for higher education will be very simple...Successful education providers will thoroughly understand their learner markets and will take advantage of every technical advancement to create learning environments that match students' learning styles, preferences and needs.

Successful higher education institutions will apply the transforming power of information technology to all their administrative and academic systems, making any and all changes necessary to serve adult learners in the 21st century (p. 15).

An online or e-learning environment in our higher education institutions is no longer atypical. It is important to put into practice various forms of technology in our educational settings. It seems to be a beneficial and innovative way to progress into the next phase of our educational system. Online technology is quickly progressing and new technologies are emerging so the possibility for growth and improvement are limitless.

The literature cited above clearly shows that research regarding online learning and distance education is extensive; however, it also indicates that further research is needed to better understand the online discussion forum in a higher education blended classroom. Based upon this need for further research, this study was designed and implemented to evaluate the perceptions of doctoral students using an online discussion forum and determine the effectiveness of this type of instructional tool. Research on the impact of online learning systems, online communication and online course management systems in education is still somewhat limited. However, interest in e-learning and distance education has been rapidly increasing.

Further research on the impact of online communication technologies is important for the development and implementation of beneficial instructional methods. Chapter Three will illustrate the method of this study, participants of the research, instrumentation and procedures that will be used to conduct the research and data analysis method to be used for this study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

In this chapter I will present the method used in this study; this includes information about participants, research design, the sample, the data collection process and the data analysis procedure used for this study. The data generated from this study in the form of personal interviews were coded, categorized and analyzed by qualitative methods. The primary purpose of this descriptive qualitative research study was to describe the experiences of students in a doctoral cohort using an online discussion forum and how these experiences may have enhanced or hindered their overall experience in the course.

Permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee, Knoxville and from the Institutional Review Board from the given university prior to beginning data collection for the study.

Confidentiality was of utmost importance; I ensured this by using a numbering system on all field notes and transcripts. The names of participants in the study were never used outside of the personal interview environment.

Research Design

This descriptive qualitative case study was designed to examine the experiences of doctoral students while using an online discussion forum as a means of communication between students and/or instructor for a specified course. Specifically, this study examined the students' experiences with overall

communication, themes of the discussion board/forum, traits and/or skills which were needed for this online environment and how these experiences may have enhanced or hindered their overall course experience. The specific approach for this research used a qualitative case study methodology. A situational analysis case study was used, which according to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), this method is appropriate when a particular event is studied from the points of view of all participants. Often case studies also include an examination of artifacts, but, according to Miles and Huberman (1994), a study that focuses on the experiences of participants in a set course for a set amount of time is well-matched for the case study approach. A qualitative research design was used for this study consisting of face-to-face interviews conducted with doctoral students from a small private university in the southeastern United States. The participants were selected from a specified course that utilized online discussion forums. All of the data used in this study were from a semester-long graduate course delivered by blended instruction, which includes both traditional face-to-face meetings in combination with online components such as online discussion forums.

Qualitative interviews create a type of speech event during which the researcher asks open-ended questions, encourages participants to give their unique perspective on the issue at hand and listens for cues and language that reveal meaning (Hatch, 2002). Qualitative research can be advantageous when attempting to answer the “how” or “what” of a phenomenon. Creswell (1998) states that qualitative research is an inquiry process, which explores a social or

human problem; it builds a thorough picture, analyzes words and reports detailed views of participants.

According to Creswell (1998), qualitative research involves studying a small number of participants in-depth to develop patterns and to understand meanings of a phenomenon. In qualitative studies, the researcher is attempting to understand a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). According to Hatch (2002), naturalistic inquiry, a term synonymous with qualitative research, has a goal of capturing naturally occurring activity in natural settings.

Sample

The sample for this study was comprised of 20 graduate students at a small private university in the southeastern United States, who were members of a doctoral cohort for the Fall 2006 semester. This small private university has an approximate enrollment of 4,000 students. Courses offered by this university are available through three locations/formats including: courses offered on the main campus, courses offered by satellite campuses, and courses offered in a totally online environment via the Internet. This small private university is affiliated with a religious association. Permission to conduct research using human participants was obtained through the Institutional Review Board on Human Subjects at The University of Tennessee and through the Dean of Academic Affairs and the Chair of the Department of Education at the given university. A copy of the Institutional Review Board Human Subjects forms can be found in Appendix D.

I am an adjunct faculty member at this small private university; therefore I had easier access to the participants. There were no known difficulties as a result of this, as I did not conduct research in the department in which I teach. The interviews were conducted within the Department of Education and I teach as an adjunct at the university but do not currently teach in or have any affiliation with this department.

Convenient sampling was drawn from course members who were willing to participate in the study; this consisted of 20 students. I contacted the faculty member who serves as the coordinator of the doctoral program at the university in which the study was conducted. This faculty member also happened to be teaching the course for that particular semester. Permission was obtained to use the specified course through the Institutional Review Board at the university. I was interested in using this particular course because it represented a group of doctoral students who were using an online discussion forum as a supplement to a traditional face-to-face course. This course was also convenient for geographical purposes. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which researchers are interested (Silverman, 2005).

Data were obtained from a personal interview format from students enrolled in an educational graduate course. The course is a required component of an educational leadership doctoral program; it is a traditional face-to-face format with online elements such as the use of the online discussion forums, the digital drop box, and electronic mail. The course that was used for this study met

face-to-face approximately seven times a semester in a weekend format with class meetings on Friday nights and Saturdays. This course also used online components approximately three to four times a week, including online discussion forums, the digital drop box and electronic mail. Discussion board participation was worth a portion of the participation points for the final grade in the course and consisted of weekly discussions on the assigned readings, various topics and open discussion. Students who posted material to the online discussion were not anonymous; various postings were listed by the students name and email address. The instructors served as facilitators of the online discussion forums for the course. In this manner the instructor/s would post the initial thread for the discussion forum and then serve as facilitator as students posted and responded to the forum at hand.

Of the 23 students registered in the course, 20 students completed the participant consent form and were part of the interview process. Only those students who returned the participant consent form were interviewed. There were eight women and 12 men who participated in this study; the age range of participants was from approximately 25 to 60 years of age. All study participants were pursuing the Ed.D. degree. This population provided a sample of graduate students who were using online discussion forums in a face-to-face course in conjunction with online components such as online discussion forums.

Procedure/Data Collection

A face-to-face semi-structured interview approach was used for this study. Open-ended interviews of the participants were conducted using a general interview guide (See Appendix A). This approach involved developing an outline/guide, which included a set of questions to be explored with each participant, prior to the interview. The guide permitted open conversation but helped to ensure all questions were thoroughly covered in the interview process. The actual interview was "guided by a list of questions to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions should be determined ahead of time" (Merriam, 2001, p. 75).

This semi-structured format allowed for the use of open-ended questions, and helped the researcher to reveal the ways students assign meaning to their experiences. However, the researcher recognized the importance of giving respondents an opportunity to take questions in whatever direction they chose. Using this approach for qualitative research, interviewers enter the interview setting with questions in mind but also generate further questions in response to participants' responses (Hatch, 2002). The interview outline/guide for this study was based on the research questions and is included as Appendix A.

According to Silverman (2005), one can use in-depth interviews as a method to gain direct access to the "experience" of a given situation. Hatch (2002) also states that in qualitative research, interviews can be used alongside other data collections methods or it can be the primary only data source. Qualitative interviews can encourage participants to explain their unique

perspectives on the issue at hand (Hatch, 2002). Silverman (2005) indicates that the interview method is useful in qualitative research when asking open-ended questions to a small sample.

Prior to conducting interviews, permission to conduct research using human participants was obtained through the Institutional Review Board and through the Dean of Academic Affairs and the Chair of the Department of Education at the university in which the research was conducted. I made an initial visit to the specified course to give a brief overview of the study to potential participants. Students who expressed interest in participating in the study were given a participant consent form. I conducted face-to-face interviews with 20 students from the course; these students had signed and returned a participant consent form. A sample of this form is included as Appendix B.

The majority of participants lived a significant distance from campus, and were only on or near campus during the scheduled weekend in which the course met face-to-face. The participants were from two states and lived within an approximate 100 mile radius of the main campus. Given the struggles with geographical distance, I was given permission by the course instructors to conduct some interviews during a scheduled weekend format class; several participants were interviewed on a Saturday during a regularly scheduled weekend class meeting. I conducted other participant interviews at a location and a time of each interviewee's choosing. All participants were interviewed in a private location on the university's campus.

I conducted interviews as soon as possible following the semester's end for which the online discussion forums were used. According to Hatch (2002), it is suggested that qualitative interviews begin with social conversation to create a relaxed atmosphere. I started each interview with several minutes of simple introductory dialogue and chat, which helped create a more personable tone. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) state that interviews will be more successful if they take place in a quiet location to minimize distractions and interruptions. For the convenience of the participants all interviews took place in a quiet private office or conference room on the university's campus at a time selected by the interviewee.

All interviews were audio taped and I took notes at each interview session. During the interview I observed body language as well as the tone of verbal responses. Participants understood that the audiotape and notes were held in the strictest confidence. Confidentiality and anonymity were of greatest importance; I helped to ensure this by using a numbering system on all field notes and transcripts. The names of participants in the study were never used outside of the personal interview environment and for purposes of the participant consent form.

Actual interviews varied in length from approximately forty-five minutes to one hour, depending on responses from each participant. However, I had four short interviews that lasted approximately 20 minutes but also provided rich data for the study. Therefore, these participant interviews were included in the data analysis as well. I planned to continue interviews until data saturation had

occurred. After the thirteenth or fourteenth interview I felt data saturation had occurred; however, I continued the interview process as the remaining participants were previously scheduled for an interview and I wanted to be certain no new themes emerged.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data gathered through personal interviews were interpreted through the process of coding and categorizing. Using Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach, participants' responses were evaluated for similarities and differences and then categories of like content or themes were developed. This process allows for an in-depth examination of the participants' comments to accurately represent the participants' perceptions and experiences. Although I used Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach for data analysis, others support this type of analysis as well; according to Creswell (1998), in qualitative study data analysis, the researcher follows a methodology of reduction, including an analysis of statements and themes and a search for meanings.

The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word software. I hired a professional to transcribe the audio tapes; this individual signed a transcriber's confidentiality statement (See Appendix C). Every attempt was made to have the tapes transcribed within a week of the interview. A numbering and lettering system was used to identify the audiotapes and transcripts in order to protect the participants' identity. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the process by carefully storing the audiotapes, notes and

computer files in a secure location. Each participant was given a pseudonym for the write-up of findings in Chapter Four. Pseudonyms were assigned according to gender; the names were selected at random starting with the letter A through letter T (See Appendix F).

The transcription process involved close, repeated listenings to recordings, which often reveal previously unnoted recurring features of the conversation (Silverman, 2005). The professional transcriber was instructed in this method and indicated that she did complete repeated listenings of the tapes to ensure accurate verbatim transcription. Each interview was transcribed and typed verbatim. I read, reread and reviewed each transcript thoroughly and made notes.

Data were coded based on themes, keywords and phrases. This was accomplished by conducting a search for both words and phrases using a computer program in addition to manually reading through the transcripts and identifying themes using a highlighter method. Keywords that identify the meaning of the content were generated; these keywords were used to create the themes or content categories by grouping the comments according to similarity of their content. Initially, the data revealed fourteen overall themes; these themes were condensed to show four major content categories or themes, with each theme exhibiting two or three sub-themes. After identifying the major themes, a screening process followed to eliminate irrelevant or overlapping data.

In this study I used the approach suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994) to analyze the content of documents. According to Miles and Huberman,

the process of analyzing qualitative data, such as those in written material, or personal interviews, consists of three concurrent flows of activity-data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing that concurrently occur during the data collection process. In short, data reduction refers to the process of selecting, simplifying and transforming the “raw” data that appears in written materials. The data reduction process is part of the analysis process because it involves analytic choices. Data reduction is a form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses and organizes data (Miles & Huberman, 1984, 1994).

Data display is the second major analysis procedure. A display is an organized construction of information that permits conclusion drawing. The purpose of this part of the analysis is to reduce large amounts of information or complex information into selective and simplified key words or easily understood sections (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The present study used keywords, tables and charts as methods of analysis because they allow for the systematic organization and access of abstract information.

In Miles and Huberman’s approach, the third method of analysis activity is the drawing of conclusions. From the beginning of data collection, the content of the interviews begins to have meaning to the research topic. In this study, the content of responses of students’ perceptions of threaded online discussion forums were analyzed following Miles and Huberman’s approach for the analysis of qualitative data. I plan to share the data analysis and conclusions with participants upon the completion of the study.

This chapter has presented the method for this study, including research design, sample, procedure/data collection and data analysis. In Chapter Four I will report the results of my data analysis in terms of themes and sub-themes.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

In this chapter I describe the results of my data analysis; this includes four overall themes that describe the participants' experience with the online discussion forum. The four major themes derived from the data include: (1) learning to use the technology, (2) Giving a voice to every student, (3) flexibility of the online communication and (4) frustration with online communication. These are illustrated in Table 4.1.

The data generated from this study in the form of personal interviews were coded, categorized and analyzed by qualitative methods. The primary purpose of this case study was to describe the experiences of students in a doctoral cohort using an online discussion forum and how these experiences may have enhanced or hindered their overall experience in the course. Permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee, Knoxville and from the Institutional Review Board of the university in which data were collected, prior to beginning data collection for this study.

A face-to-face semi-structured interview approach was used for this study. Open-ended interviews of the participants were conducted using a general interview guide. This approach involves developing an outline/guide, which includes a set of questions to be explored with each participant. The guide permitted open conversation but also made certain all questions were thoroughly covered in the interview process. The interview outline/guide for this

Table 4.1. Themes Derived from the Data

Major Themes	Sub-Themes
Learning to use the technology	• Feeling confused • The simplicity of the medium • The need for initial training
Giving a voice to every student	• Giving a voice to shy students • Reflection time gives all students the opportunity to respond and discuss
Flexibility of the online communication	• Ease of communication with instructors and students • Taking class outside of the classroom • Flexibility of time and place
Frustration with online communication	• Feeling confused between different online tools • Worries about online lingo and tone • The "check-off" factor

study was based on the research questions and is included as Appendix A. Twenty students signed and returned the participant consent form and all 20 were included in the interviewing process for this study. All study participants were pursuing the Ed.D. degree. This population provided a general representative sample of graduate students who were using online discussion forums in a face-to-face course in conjunction with online components such as online discussion forums.

Description of the Course

Several years ago the School of Education, at the university in which the research was conducted, began a Doctor of Education program. The majority of courses offered in this program are in a "cohort format" with many of these courses being offered on a weekend basis as most students are employed full-

time and travel a great distance to attend classes face-to-face. The main topic of the course in which research was conducted was theory development in education; each course in the doctoral program is organized into a module format. This particular module was one semester in length and offered six credit hours to the students. This module on theory development in education examined the historical context of curriculum development and organizational structure, investigated current and future theories associated with organizational change and curriculum reform. Module objectives and requirements for the course can be found in Table 4.2. The course met face-to-face on a weekend format while requiring some online components between class sessions such as the online discussion forums and electronic mail. Students in this course section

Table 4.2. Course Module Objectives and Requirements.

Module Objectives	Module Requirements
Understand organizations and curriculum through knowledge of research, theory and practice.	Maintain a learning journal relative to ongoing activities, readings, research, reflections and seminars.
Apply organizational and curriculum theory to the needs of their own organizations to increase understandings of schools and their stakeholders.	Complete all learning tasks and assigned readings.
Participate in appropriate field experiences focusing on authentic curriculum development.	Participate in and contribute to professional dialogue.
Acquire skills for the evaluation of effective curriculum and organizational models.	Attend and prepare for all seminar events.
Develop skills to address system-level needs related to organizational behavior and learning communities.	Include all written assignments in the learning journal.
	Complete an organizational analysis product by the end of the module.

were asked to complete the regular face-to-face assignments as well as other components such as the online discussion forum and the digital drop box. Participants were asked to contribute to professional dialogue as part of their overall grade for the course. All students registered for the course were automatically given access to their personal online course management system, in this case WebCT. For many of the participants this was the first course they had ever taken that required some form of online assignments such as online discussion forums and electronic mail.

Theme One: Learning to Use the Technology

As the participants described their experiences with the online discussion forum for the course, they described learning to use the technology in several sub-themes including: the need for initial training/getting connected online, feeling confused, and the simplicity of the medium.

Need for Initial Training

The majority of participants described a struggle with learning to use the technology in terms of needing a formal-structured training on using the online course system and the online discussion forum at the beginning of the semester. They also expressed the need for instructors to not automatically assume that they (the students) understand how to use the technology. Many participants did indicate that they were offered a very brief training during the first class session

but it wasn't sufficient training and they were adamant about the need for in-depth initial instruction. August, a female participant, explained:

...it was just assumed that everybody know how to use WebCT because, or discussion board because most places have gone to that. Um, but that is just like saying that everybody knows how to do PowerPoint when they don't (laugh) it is second nature to a lot of us, I know how to use it but I work with people who never, ever used it.

August continued:

...and so I think that it would have been helpful to just have, you know, a little walk through and say, you know, when you do your discussion board, this is how you do this or when you post a report, this is how you post a report.

Other participants observed this same issue with the need for initial training; when asked to offer recommendations for future cohorts they provided some suggestions, Dora illustrated:

I am sure that there were people who didn't feel comfortable with it (online discussion). They hadn't responded on WebCT before. They had not done any of the posting. I think that even at this level, you think, well, people automatically should know what they are doing. It might be good to, to just spend a few minutes showing everyone how to get there, how to post, because sometimes things would not be posted correctly.

Ella offered another recommendation:

Make sure either during the first class or the, you know, overview, that it is actually displayed in the classroom and kind of walk students through it because even though like I said, I sit on the computer all the time, but you still need that initial training of how to. I am a visual learner, so you show it to me, I can do it. If it is written down, I can do it too, but visually I can remember...just have some more instruction because, people my age and older aren't necessarily as familiar with online learning and it is hard to get into that pattern unless you know what the expectations are, and how to get there and how to use the system.

Ella elaborated on the need for training at the beginning of the semester and compared it to a teacher inservice type of training:

The process, um, and even a little handout as you receive when you go to inservices and things. I think the main thing is just the overview at the beginning...just have that overview of how to or what if, give scenarios. What if you upload a paper, this is what you do, or making sure we are aware that there is a time frame, cause I don't think that was mentioned to us. Um, the professor will put you can upload it between this date and this date at this time.

Many participants described their experience with the need for initial training in terms of also needing more guidelines as to what is expected of students using the forum and a timeframe of when postings should occur.

Noah explained:

I would say the biggest disadvantage is, right now, is some of the people are waiting so long to answer those questions, we may need to set the timeframe for that. Basically it is due by the next class period but if people wait until the day before to post it, then really there is not a discussion going on with those classmates who don't participate 'til the end.

Sullivan added:

I think, you know, if he (instructor) said we are going to have this on here for the week, you know it is going to be on here from the 7th to the 14th, please respond during that time. And then we are going to meet the 21st. That gives everybody a chance to see everybody's comments.

Trey offered another recommendation:

...if there is a time set on there, you know the flexibility of that...but I think putting just a little bit of time constraints on there, we know when it has to be due...I think it just gives a better idea of what everybody wants.

Noah illustrated his view on a timeframe associated with the online discussion forum:

So, yeah, I would think that they probably need a, you know, a time frame. Let's keep that discussion the first week after class and then let it flow from there.

Furthermore, when asked what recommendations they might have for future cohorts using an online discussion forum, several participants indicated a need for more training and for more specific guidelines on what is required of students who are using the forum.

Faith's recommendations are as follows:

I think specific requirements of how many times you needed to log on, or not log on but, um, add a thread or response to a thread. Ah, possibly if the professor um, set up threads that speak to specific units or ideas more frequently...Um, I think that um, specific requirements of how many times you needed to log on or not log on but, um. Add a thread or respond to a thread. Ah, possibly if the professor um, set up threads that speak to specific units or specific ideas more frequently. Um, I believe that um, last semester the professors only started maybe four or five threads in the course of the semester and have they done more about say fifteen to twenty ah, there would have been a lot more interaction.

Kayley makes a recommendation along similar lines as well:

I would recommend...that the next cohort have someone come in and explain, okay, well you know you want to hear someone say put it in the drop box...we need someone to go through the steps of explaining what blackboard is all about.

Ivan gave a detailed explanation of what this initial training may involve:

...take 15-minutes in the class, say hey. Let's sit down. Let me show you how to log on. Let me show how to carefully, how to find this. Here is the discussion board. Let's practice putting in, "Hey my name is Jay. Welcome to this class and so forth". Just basic instruction. Um, avoiding the assumption that everybody knows how. Because I think that would be something I would suggest in the future is just um, clarifying for each student or stood relative to using the median. You know have a minimum number of um, contacts or hits as they say you know. You are required within the one semester course to have at least five you know. Five discussion responses. If it is a required part of the course and part of the evaluation process or assessment process for the course it has to be put in the syllabus. So what should be stated in the syllabus, you know, maybe a minimal 5% of your grade is discussion. Discussion contact on the board. I should be saying that a student desiring additional instruction you know, is encouraged to seek the professor or fellow classmate or

whatever. It is to get the help you need to be comfortable with it. Encourage its use. Maybe just like five to ten minute just a little training for them at the beginning of class. Um, I think that certainly would help.

These data indicate that many participants described a struggle with learning to use the technology in terms of needing a structured training on using the online course system and the online discussion forum at the beginning of the semester. According to the data, participants also wanted faculty to understand the value of this hands-on training on or near the first class meeting. It appears that as the use of online course management systems have become common place in higher education many feel that conducting initial training would be an unproductive use of time. However, according to these participants training is still of supreme importance, especially for those students who consider themselves as novice users of the technology.

Feeling Confused

It was apparent from the data that participants seem to fall into one of two categories in terms of learning to use the technology; participants indicated they were either very lost with this online environment or they discussed the simplicity of the medium. Even students who indicated initially feeling extremely lost with the online environment did state that once they learned to use the online forum it took only minimal technological skills. One of the ways participants described their experiences was in terms of being very confused or lost with the online environment. For example, one participant talked about not knowing how to find

the discussion forum and then not knowing how to post what he wanted to say.

This participant also alluded to age as being a factor in hindering his use and didn't want faculty to assume students knew anything about using a forum such as this one: Owen explained:

It was my first experience using an online discussion forum. My lack of computer experience and knowledge um, make a little bit, I was kind of inapt I would say, using the discussion forum. Ah, I contributed I think three to four times over the course of the semester in the discussions that were available...I think it could have been much more useful to me, had I been more adapted and involved in the process.

Trey shared how his novice user status and the struggles to learn the technology affected his experience:

I mean how was I to post my message if I didn't know how to get to the message board? I think they (faculty) just take for granted that we are supposed to know this.

Ivan described his take on computer use and how faculty should not assume students know how to use such technologies:

I am a significantly older student than the students I am in class with. You know, I am in my early 50's. They are typically in there late 20's early 30's. I grew up and graduated from high school without computers. None at all. Almost made it through college without computers. So, and I. The (inaudible) today is more aware of using computers. It is more of an interval part of their formal education. They are more comfortable with it. I think and the instructors within the course should be aware of this or should not make assumption about the student's ability to use just basic computers stuff.

According to the data, it seems that although today most students are familiar with online course managements systems and other online tools, we still should consider students who feel confused or overwhelmed with the technology.

Understanding the needs or concerns of these students is vital to help ensure a productive learning environment.

Simplicity of the Medium

When participants described their experience with learning to use the technology, most of them stated that once they had learned the online environment there was simplicity to the medium in general. Many of the students indicated that the skills needed to use the online discussion forum were minimal and basic. For example, several participants described the skills they felt were necessary to use the online environment. These are illustrated below.

Owen explained what types of skills are necessary to use the online forum:

Very basic skills, just a matter of logging on and being able to navigate through, you know, a couple of different links to click, it's pretty basic I would say.

When asked what computer skills are needed for the forum, Burlene explained:

I guess basic computer use, probably things that I am not thinking of that I feel like they are second nature to me, but you know, how to use a mouse, how, how, how to log in, knowing your password, being able to find the discussion board, those types of skills you did need to be able to use it.

When asked what skills are useful when using the forum, Trey stated:

Definitely familiarity with the Internet and um, some word processing skills. Definitely basic skills, there is nothing too technical um, about it at all and it was pretty easy to navigate to the discussion forum.

In Noah's experience the computer skills were minimal, he explained:

I needed very little technology skills. I mean, basically we go online and you just hit the, you know, the course site and we go on there and there is the questions, hit on it and type back. I mean it is pretty minimal.

Burlene added:

...cause the discussion board was easy, I knew how to reply, but posting stuff, I just, it is really simple.

Ella described the level of difficulty as she experienced it:

Being part of the discussion forum, it wasn't that difficult. It was just the fact of remembering to go online and actually participate.

Quinn also explained the ease of using the discussion forum:

It was pretty user friendly. I just did it on my own.

When asked if there were any computer skills necessary to use the forum, Jack stated:

Basically just have to maneuver through the Internet...them um, if you can click a mouse button, it is not hard.

Kayley described using the forum as being very basic:

Even if you could not type that well, just the basics of typing, um, nothing anyone could have done it. It did not take a lot to figure out what you had to do...just the basics. As long as you can do the basics, anyone could do it and that was a plus of about using the blackboard program. There was not anything distinctive. Once you log in it is pretty much self-explanatory. So, it is very basic.

Sullivan described the skills he needed to use the forum as simple:

It was kind of simple...so the skills would be number one, clicking on the mouse or actually having type in using the keyboard. But there were some times when you had to actually look for different places to where to go but once you got those basics down, it was pretty simple.

These data indicated that the participants considered the technology skills needed to use the online forum as basic and minimal. Even participants who at first struggled with the technology stated that once they learned to use the forum, it was very simple and user friendly.

Theme Two: Giving a Voice to Every Student

As participants described their experiences they spoke about how the online discussion forum was such an advantage for the class as a whole because it allowed each student's voice to be heard. The theme of giving a voice to every student is described in terms of the following sub-themes: giving a voice to shy students and reflection time gives all students an opportunity to respond and discuss.

Giving a Voice to Shy Students

Some participants described the use of the online forum as a win-win relationship or in terms of enjoying this type of discussion environment. They indicated that this type of forum allows all students, even those who are shy and less verbal in class, to provide input and be an active participant in the course. I was amazed that almost all the participants stated that this was a major advantage to using the online forum.

Dora illustrated how the forum allowed for students to give opinions or participate in discussion without having to stand up in class:

...and one of the nice things is that if you are somebody that doesn't like to respond in class, you don't like to talk out loud, it is a forum for you to actually give your opinion and what you believe without having to stand up in front of everybody else.

When asked about an advantage to using the online forum, Burlene stated:

Advantages were probably, um, if you are someone who is kind of shy, or you don't like talking in front of other people, the discussion board allowed you some freedom, you can kind of be a little bit more open because you are not looking at anyone face-to-face. You know, almost like email, and

so you could kind of say, um, what you wanted to say. Um, without feeling like you making, you're making a stupid comment.

Owen described how the forum allowed him to hear views of classmates that he otherwise may not have heard in class:

I think it allowed, I think it allowed me to get some insight from others that perhaps are not as vocal in class in that forum, so I think I was able to certainly gather some information about some of my classmates, um, that maybe I wouldn't have otherwise received in class.

Marina explained how this type of forum can make for a more meaningful experience:

...it is beneficial because, you know, some people in class are just not vocal. But when you get on the discussion forum out on the computer, people tend to be more open because there is, I guess, because there is less face-to-face possibly and then tend to be more open and it provides for a more meaningful educational experience.

When speaking of her experience with the online discussion forum, August (who considered herself shy) described how this type of forum allowed her to feel more confident in the class; August added:

Confidence. You just realize that you are in there and everybody else is in the same boat and we are all thinking the same thing and you are not sitting back in the back of the class wondering if you are the only one that has that thought.

When asked about advantages for the online forum, it seemed that many participants continued to maintain that it indeed created a voice for every student. For example Marina stated:

...and you know, you hear 25 different points of view. Whereas in class, you might get four points of view if you're lucky. So it is that you get more points of view and either new questions arise, so it its always got you thinking about something else, new things arise all the time.

Faith described how the discussion forum helped her to express her views:

I think that I tend to be shy or sometimes I am not as verbal or vocal in a large group of students or classmates and I feel that on discussion board, I could probably maybe reiterate something I said in class or elaborate on something I said in class or even, um, piggyback on something someone else said in class.

Leo also described the forum in terms of giving a voice to every student:

I liked the discussion forum...I think that there is a lot of benefit from that. Uh, because it, with the online forum, uh, people who normally won't contribute in a group setting has the opportunity and they will, you know, they will speak up so to speak with us online...as far as giving everybody access to participate, it is wonderful.

Marina explained how the forum allowed for every students opinion:

...I did not know a lot of people who were in the program and, um, a lot is interesting because a lot of time, people don't necessarily talk much in class. We were told to make sure everybody is responding on the forum, you get to hear everybody's opinions, and a lot of times they won't talk in class.

Jack explained why it seemed easier to participate online than during the regular face-to-face class sessions:

...where sometimes in class I would not necessarily participate because I did not want to dominate the class with talking so much. So on, online I did not feel that way, I was able to continue to answer questions.

As shown by the data above, participants indicated that this type of forum allowed for all students to have an equal voice in class discussions, not just students who are vocal in the face-to-face class sessions. It is also noteworthy that almost all participants cited this as an advantage to using such a forum in a doctoral level course.

Reflection Time

Many participants talked about the discussion forum as a valuable tool to foster reflection of topics discussed in class. Students spoke of this mostly in terms of giving students a voice outside the classroom and giving students a voice who needed this time to reflect before contributing to the discussion. When speaking about the discussion forum in these terms, Faith explained:

I can kind of synthesize, you know what was stated in class and then go back the next week and you know, ponder it and think about it and either put it in our own words or be able to research it and kind of get back to the group...that has to do with my shyness and just, um, the way I react in front of a large group of people versus um, being able to feel comfortable with my thoughts. My personal thoughts that I can actually think about in writing and maybe um, come back to reflect on, change around before I actually send them out to a large group of people.

Other participants described their experience in terms using the technology as a way to have time to reflect on class discussions before responding or contributing to that discussion; Heath commented:

I enjoyed it. I was a little skeptical at first but um, you know it was a chance for us to reflect once we finished (face-to-face class), you know these, these heavy duty weekends and, um, when issues wanted to be continued over for the class we would go and discuss it there. Or, if somebody found something, had read some sort of research and commented on it, um, springboards from that as well.

Dora explained how the forum gave her time to think before responding to other students in the course and how the forum allowed students a chance to revisit discussions:

I think one of the best things was it gave me, um, some topics that I could think about, people don't necessarily think of things right that moment. You have to kind of think about it for a little while afterwards, and a few days after the class, when you are pondering back to everything, you think wow, and you look at what everybody put down. It is pretty interesting. I

didn't think of it that way. They found something later on. So, then when we came back to class, for responding to theirs, I was able to contribute more I think. So that's, that is kind of a nice piece, It is not just a one class, you're here (online) and you discuss....and being able to read everybody else's (online comments), and I really like, I think one of the best things is being able to go back and read what other people wrote, because there is, sometimes I did not get the same thing and when the instructors would post just the thought for people to respond to. It was amazing how many more thoughts came from that one.

Dora continued to explain:

Like I said, one of the biggest things is, some people just don't feel comfortable in front of everybody else or it takes them longer to process their thoughts and being able to go back and articulate those thoughts can be difficult. But, given time, they can do that. And, sometimes it takes two days, or looking at what other research says before you want to share exactly what your opinion is. So, that is probably the best thing.

These data indicate that participants' experience with the discussion forum was one that helped to encourage reflection time for topics previously discussed in class. It appears that participants have viewed this online discussion as beneficial, as it allowed students who needed additional time to reflect prior to contributing to the discussion a chance to have a voice in the course discussions. In addition, participants also indicated that the online discussion forum was advantageous for the class in general because it allowed each student's voice to be heard, even those students who may appear as bashful in the face-to-face class meetings.

Theme Three: Flexibility of the Online Communication

As the participants described their experiences they spoke about how the online discussion forum was an advantage because it allowed for flexibility in

learning, this was seen in three sub-themes including: ease of communication with instructors and students, taking class outside of the classroom, and flexibility of time and place.

Ease of Communication with Instructors and Students

One of the ways participants described their experience was in terms of the ease of communication, both student to student and student to instructor.

For example, August talked about communicating with faculty:

My experience was it is direct. It is direct to the professor in that you can get materials to him for questions that he has sent to you to answer. It is not the only means of contact in either direction because there is still email, or phone, or personal contact during class meeting time. But it has been more of a supplement mode I guess I would say.

Other participants shared how the ease of communication between students and instructors affected their experience with the course in general. For example:

Burlene expressed how the discussion forum helped to communicate with other students:

I think that it is a good thing. I think that it is necessary in the age of technology, that is pretty much how everyone, um, communicates and especially if you are in a class where you are not meeting on a regular basis, like we met, I am thinking six, anywhere from six to eight times, if that many, um, you are definitely going to need a discussion board so that classmates can talk to each other in lieu of them meeting and talking to each other, and especially too, when you have people from so many different areas in the region.

Noah explained how the forum helped him to keep in touch with classmates between face-to-face class meetings:

Well, it was nice just because we could still communicate...like an email or discussion we had. Here is what I am thinking, what are you thinking, that

person can email him back and we may not be online at the same time. It may be several hours or days later but we are still communicating, touching base, you know, the Saturday that we leave until, three weeks down the road 'til we meet again, so we are still keeping our minds talking about issues that related to class and to the program.

Dora seemed to like how the discussion forum allowed her to gain insight or help from other students and/or the instructor:

Student-to-student wise, one of the best things was that I was able to, if I was confused about topics that we discussed, or where to go with those topics on an assignment, you know, there are humans and I could pick up on things that they had said, typically they would ask questions that I was thinking, but maybe did not know how to verbalize. And I think, hopefully, I did the same thing. And then the instructor was able to talk to me through the discussion board, it gives me a little bit more feedback too. Not just seeing them face-to-face but during the lapsed time, you could say, okay, I was right on target, or no, maybe I need to go back and look at it a little bit more.

Ella illustrated how the discussion forum helped students to share experiences:

We were able to hear from our peers, their experiences and either use their experiences and what they learned in order to assist us in our everyday jobs, or instruction and as far as professors getting that feedback, just hearing someone else's take or expertise, because you know, they (the instructors) have done research in certain things and they would give us authors to look at or other resources to look at in order to better understand topics being covered in class.

Marina shared how the ease of communication between students had enhanced her experience:

...I would say to me, the biggest benefit of the discussion forum was the student-to-student because, typically when we were in the classroom setting, we're all focused on the instructor. We are not necessarily having discussions with each other. Though when we get on the forum, it is more about what the other people in that discussion group are talking about. And, where the focus is not necessarily instructor led, and the instructor basically does a prop block, then all the discussion is basically between the students. It is a different mindset than being in a classroom.

When asked about the role of the online discussion forum in the course, Ivan responded:

The online discussion forum, appeared to be more communication between students. Sharing ideas. Um, the discussion prompts that were provided by the instructor. Uh, one student would pick up the discussion, say something. Somebody else would pipe in. You know, it is discussion.

Kayley explained how the forum helped to touch base about questions or assignments:

...it helped me a lot with the fact that um. If I was not sure about something or if I had a question I had to ask him. Um, I could always email him (the instructor) and then he would automatically get back to me and let me know the answer. As far as student to student, um. It helped a lot with the assignments. As far as when we would email each other and say, "Well don't forget we need to get this done." "Don't forget you need to get those things done." Um, before your next class. It was a big help.

Many participants valued the flexibility of the online communication and felt as if it were a chief advantage; as indicated by Ivan:

I think one of the main advantages is the, the flexibility of the, of the forum in communicating with others. Like being able to contact them. If I called, If I tried to call them on my cell phone, they are either on the phone. They are not available and you constantly, whereas the discussion forum, you placed your response or your question out there and as others have time, they will respond. So there is a time lag in getting your response but yet um, it is not a matter of you having to contact them four or five times. You are, your response and your inquiry is there. They can get to it as they please...but I think that is a major advantage of it.

As indicated above, participants described their experiences with the discussion forum by expressing their fondness of the ease of communication student to student and student to instructor. It appears that participants valued the ability to communicate with others in the course in such an easy and asynchronous manner.

Taking Class Outside of the Classroom

As with many online instructional tools, the online discussion forum allowed for instructors and students to continue the learning process outside of the regular face-to-face class meetings or during seat time. Many participants described their experiences with online discussion in these terms. Burlene shared how the ease of communication outside of the classroom affected her experience, she illustrated:

...so it could kind of take us beyond the classroom...I think it played the role of just starting discussion on lots and lots of different topics. It took us outside of the classroom because a lot of times, the discussion were not based on classroom topic. It might have been something that somebody was wondering about, and we could kind of assist each other with questions and that type of thing.

When asked to give advantages to using the forum for the course, Quinn explained:

I would say advantage would be, that, being able to see what your colleagues are thinking without having to be in a classroom setting.

Calvin described an advantage of the forum:

Another advantage was that it did keep you thinking about a particular topic. For example, if we discussed in class something about a particular model, one of Marvin's metaphors and then the thread was discussed your school environment in terms of using one of Marvin's metaphors, then you had another second chance to reflect on what you already had read and discussed in class. You know, the more times you see something, naturally the more that it is going to stick with you.

Ella shared how the ease of communication outside of the classroom affected her overall course experience:

It allowed us to stay focused on what was covered, since we only meet, you know, once or twice a month. It allowed you to continue to stay

focused on what was discussed, how, what you may do on, what you may be doing on your job, may be playing a part in what was discussed in class, and to get feedback from others.

Peter described the advantage of being able to continue dialogue after class; he explained:

Another advantage is you can actually, um, continue a dialogue that you had in class...I could say that I did think it was uh, a valuable supplement to the class. It was, uh, it wasn't just busy work. It was in theory, here is the way it should be. It could be a very valuable part of the course.

Quinn stated that the forum helped to continue a dialogue outside of class and aided in answering questions:

...on answering specific questions, I think it is much, it played a large role, because otherwise we would have had to wait until we saw each other again at the next class session in order to have the dialogue.

Garth stated that in his experience it was helpful and served as a supplement to the course:

I thought that it (the online discussion) was helpful because it gave us an opportunity in-between class sessions to discuss subject matter with each other and so I felt like it enhanced the course work much...it was a support, supplementary to, to what we had done because a lot of the. A question might be posed that not everyone participated in, in answering or responding to it.

I found that many participants described the forum in terms of wanting more of the online interaction and less of the seat or class time. When asked about recommendations for future classes, Kayley gave details:

...I would like to see would be that possibly in the future to do more things on the blackboard and less time in the classroom. Because the same thing that you are doing in the classroom, you could achieve those things on the black-board. I mean, even sometimes in more detail because of the responses that we give to each other. Um, another advantage is you know, we talk a lot about the way things are worded and, and the understanding of an assignment um and we are allowed to kind of

elaborate on our own. But then when you take a look at someone else point of view, um, they may not mention that in the classroom. That they have a different point of view but on the black-board they will explain and go into detail about things that normally they would not discuss. We would not have the opportunity to discuss in the classroom. We kind of learn from each other in that way.

When describing what it was like being part of the online discussion forum, Dora stated:

I enjoy it. I think that it is an important part of our class. Um, I think we should do more with it as far as, you know our discussions. Um, less in the classroom and more on the computer.

Kayley explained how the forum helped to revisit ideas and served as reminders of topics as well:

Um, it was a big help because something I may have missed, someone else started talking about it during the (inaudible) I kind of remembered, oh yeah we did talk about those things. And, so when I got ready to actually write my papers, um, we had a topic that we had to further, you know, discuss along with detail about. It help me to go back and look at those questions and kind of see what everyone else was talking about. To make sure I had not forgotten anything.

When asked to describe the advantages and disadvantages of the forum, Jack described his experience in terms of "seat time" and why it seems less important in this type of course:

I mean there is, there is some advantages of seat time. But for example what we are doing is so much reading and so much work on your own, the advantage of seat time is not necessary, I mean I do not think you need the seat time according to the University's policies. And, I think that is why we have to have "X" amount of seat time. But in the seat time, I think in class and, becomes (pause) almost a waste of time. Uh, because we have already read everything that people are presenting on. Uh, I guess. I enjoy it because I like to hear what other people are saying in a conversation that comes up but, becomes you know, I can be spending that time researching what I want to be working on or reading a literature.

When asked to describe how the forum was used to communicate with other students, Kayley explained:

Um, I remember one time um, during the class everyone else was completely agreeing with everything else that was said and we had this one guy who completely disagreed with everything that had been sent in. But once he saw it justified in explaining why he disagreed it kind of made me go along. You know I see your point of view and I actually agree with that. Um, so I could understand what he was saying. Um, and it was. We ended up discussing it even later on in class because everyone was so shocked that someone had disagreed...Not only did he disagree but he justified exactly why. It kind of changed the opinions of most people.

When asked to describe the advantages and disadvantages of the forum, Jack described his experience in terms of wanting less seat time:

I mean there is, there is some advantages of seat time. But for example what we are doing is so much reading and so much work on your own, the advantage of seat time is not necessary, I mean I do not think you need the seat time according to the University's policies. And, I think that is why we have to have "X" amount of seat time. But in the seat time, I think in class and, becomes (pause) almost a waste of time. Uh, because we have already read everything that people are presenting on. Uh, I guess. I enjoy it because I like to hear what other people are saying in a conversation that comes up but, becomes you know, I can be spending that time researching what I want to be working on or reading a literature.

When asked about the overall experience with the discussion forum, Heath explained:

I think about on the evening news sometimes they will say, if you want to know more about so and so click on ABCnews.com for more...the discussion board was kind of like that. Um, if, if there was a controversial or topic maybe somebody was passionate about, we could continue online to discuss it or to point out new ones as in the argument.

Noah explained how the discussion would be an extension of a class topic:

It was just good to collaborate amongst our classmates and just to see how each person approached that and different angles that came from it. So that part was enjoyable. I mean basically the discussion would come

out of something that we had discussed in class or that he (instructor) wanted to extend, or he said, oh lets take a look at that.

When describing the role of the discussion forum for the class as a whole, Marina commented:

It gave us an opportunity to further discuss some of the topics that came up in class and a lot of times, to clarify with each other, how we heard material and, like I said, it was beneficial because a lot of times, as we were discussing topics we talked about in class, people would kind of look over the different slant that what you had and bring up more thoughts and more ideas.

These data indicate that participants appreciated the online discussion because is provided an opportunity for students to continue the learning process outside of the traditional face-to-face class sessions. Many participants viewed the online discussion forum as being a supplement to the course and a constructive way to collaborate with other course members even if they were separated by geographical distance.

Flexibility of Time and Place

The majority of students indicated that the online discussion forum was a major benefit for the course as it allowed students to complete many assignments on their own time and in a place of their choosing. Several participants described their experience with online communication in the following way:

Calvin explained the advantage of working on his own timeframe:

...you could do it at any time, 5 o'clock in the morning, or 12 o'clock at night. That is the beauty of email and WebCT and stuff like that. That you can do it at times that you can't call people or that you can't meet with

other people. It does facilitate you doing it at what would be outside normal hours.

Dora described how the discussion forum helped her to complete components of the course from a distance:

The nice thing was that you did not actually have to be there in person...you know, kind of at your leisure, come back and forth...I was able to come back and go take care of my kids, I could work in my school work for my own students at school, and then I could come back to it and there wasn't, there was not just a time frame for discussion.

Rick described the forum as convenient and a place for him to participate in his own comfort zone:

It was interesting because I was able to work at my own pace and I was able to participate in my comfort zone...it is convenient. You know, whenever I felt like writing, I would use the laptop or go online on the computer at home or at work.

Ella was happy to share the positive aspect of online discussion and the concept of completing this task on your own time schedule:

...just having that, that time, the being to come to like WebCT when ever you want to. After your kids go to bed, after you get off work. You know, because I, most of us do work full-time. Those are definite benefits. That it is not you have to be there at a specific time at your computer. You can do it more at your leisure.

One participant described how valuable this online tool had been to her and to her family, Dora explained:

It is a wonderful thing when you have a family and you have a job, and you live far away from one another. All of us in our group lived, most all of us lived 50 miles away from each other. There is no way that we could have talked on the phone, or communicated by email or gotten together certainly over the course of the semester. So it does make it easier to keep in contact and be right there for every one to see. And it is a wonderful thing when you've got a question looming in the back of your mind, to see somebody else ask that question or answer your question without you even having to ask.

When asked to describe the discussion forum in general, Jack described his impression:

I liked it, 'cause I was at home, in the comfort of my home and I felt more comfortable. I felt comfortable answering the questions, it was enjoyable, I did not feel like I was on the spot to answer questions.

These data indicate that the participants described their experiences with the online discussion forum as beneficial because it allowed for flexibility with the learning environment. Most participants expressed a favorable view of the discussion forum in terms of being able to complete class assignments outside of regular class meetings, the ease of communication between instructors and students and the flexibility of time and place. This appears to suggest that students who have experienced this type of instructional method seem to welcome its flexible nature.

Theme Four: Frustration with Online Communication

As the participants described their experiences with the course online discussion forum, they often conveyed frustration with the discussion board and the online communication in general; this was seen in three sub-themes, including: feeling confused between different online tools, worries about online lingo and tone and the “check-off” factor.

Feeling Confused Between Different Online Tools

Some participants described their experiences in terms of being somewhat confused about which online tools they were to use. Others indicated that in their experience this wasn't online discussion but rather an online bulletin board. I found that during the interview process some students used the incorrect names or terminology for the online discussion and may have thought that different forms of online communication were all considered a part of the online discussion forum. This is illustrated by Garth:

...there were things that we needed, instead of having to get on the phone and call, instead of email and I still don't see the purpose between email, I mean, I just have a hard time seeing the difference between discussion board and email. I am thinking that they are the same thing.

Burlene illustrated her frustration:

You had to be able to know how to take a report and send that through WebCT. I had a lot of issues with that, I don't think I still have figured that out. And I didn't see the purpose of that. Why can't I just attach it to email? I am still struggling with that. I didn't see the purpose of having to send it (the assignment) through WebCT.

Quinn showed clearly that there is a very confused feeling toward the technology; she stated:

I just have a hard time seeing the difference between discussion board and email. I am thinking that they are the same thing...what do you think about this?

I found that many participants described frustration with the online communication because they felt that it was not really online discussion but instead an online bulletin board; a place where students could simply post

thoughts. The difference being that online discussion should foster some type of engagement for students.

Faith explained:

Um, I did not feel like it was really that engaging. I have been in discussion forums for my other degrees and I felt like I was more a part of things and it was a little bit more engaging. I do not feel that there was any kind of real accountability for it so I think some people tended to blow it off or not take it seriously...Whereas, you know being the discussion board last semester I did not really feel like it um, really assisted that much in the whole setting of the course.

Several participants felt the discussion wasn't really discussion, but rather posting comments or opinions to the forum. Calvin described his thoughts on the discussion:

I felt as if it wasn't discussion. I think, I felt as if it was just a, uh, we posted comments online to fulfill a requirement, and there was no feedback. Sometimes I felt like I put on some, one, a comment that I thought was going to cause some discussion, maybe feedback, but when no one, uh, uh, picked me up on it, so it was merely just, I need to talk to some other and then you said, ah, just get them done.

Yet additional participants described a feeling of frustration because they felt this forum may have served more as a bulletin board for posting of opinions or ideas instead of as a true discussion forum. These views are illustrated in the following participant comments; Noah explained:

It was not a discussion. It was basically comment on that. And, so, we had class about three weeks back, and probably the majority of the class did not get to that 'til the middle of this past week. So, there was not much to discuss and people, there was two to three people that got up and the rest just kind of probably threw something down to get that done.

Peter described how he felt the forum was more of posting an opinion rather than discussion:

In some ways, it was not really discussion, it was more like, um, state your opinion and then wait for the next person to respond, and we tried, there were two people who tried to get some discussion going. Um, but it did not really work out that first time, I think, it was because everything was so new to us.

Calvin explained the importance of distinguishing between the discussion board and a bulletin board:

If you want to call it a discussion board, then it needs to be a discussion board. Not a bulletin board, but a discussion board. I need to elaborate on the distinction there. I mean, uh, the way I see it, the discussion board as you post something, other people discuss it with you. The bulletin board is something that you just post something on there and if other people read it, fine...It was just a bulletin board in my opinion.

Calvin continued:

A disadvantage was, there was no feedback, uh, and there was no way to change it. You know, I couldn't, I talked to some others in the class, I said, hey, ya'll need to, you know, give me some feedback and tell me if this is good or if I'm just, if you feel like I am talking out of a hole in the side of my neck, I said otherwise, you know, I am just learning...I am just posting, I am not learning. There was no follow up, no discussion, no in-class comments on it. There was nothing, I guess if you got your name checked off the box, you're done.

Rick illustrated how he felt the discussion was more of a way to state your opinion as opposed to a discussion board:

...this semester's online discussion seems to be a little bit more of a, um, just stating their opinion, the next opinion and the next opinion.

As seen in the data above, many participants described their experiences in terms of being somewhat confused about how to differentiate between the online tools and with the online communication in general because the forum was not being used as it was intended. There were also a good number of participants who felt as if the discussion forum wasn't actually for discussion, but

instead it served as a bulletin board. As indicated by the data, it was also apparent that participants often used the wrong names or terms for the online discussion forum.

Worries about Online Lingo and Tone

Most participants who expressed discomfort with the online communication had worries of being misunderstood with online tone or they worried about coming across as inadequate in their written communication. For example, a participant talked about not knowing if their tone would be interpreted the wrong way. Yet another participant expressed anxiety about being misinterpreted in their online communication and worried about offending other students by comments that could be viewed as offensive because of the online communication environment. Several examples are illustrated below.

Peter described how he worried about having peers misinterpret the online communication:

I guess, I had, I wanted to make sure that I was not coming across of overly sarcastic, or overly um, critical. When you make a comment, sometimes, especially e-mail. You go back and you re-read them and you realize, whoa, that was a bit harsh, and you never meant it that way, so, uh, with this being the graduate course, I really wanted to make sure that my, I used the tone of the message with how I meant that. Uh, I didn't worry about offending anybody in class by what I said, but I was just really worried about offending someone online by them misreading what I may have presented.

Owen described how he felt tone could be missed in the online communication or in the online discussion forum:

Um, I, I enjoyed it, I am not a big proponent of it though because I think that a lot of tone is missed in that forum. I prefer the face to face interaction. Whereas, I think some information can be conveyed, I think, you miss a lot.

Owen continued:

...I keep coming back to I think the biggest disadvantage is that you miss out on tone and delivery, and I think there is a lot to be said for that.

When asked to describe some of the advantages and disadvantages of the online forum, Sullivan explained:

Like I said, sometimes it is not face to face. You can get a reaction off of a body, you know, whereas when you are just listening to the words, unless you really know that person, it is hard to understand exactly what the words were but as the course went along, we met more and more, you can see the expression in the words so to speak. I know it is hard to understand but at the same time, when you've had knowledge of being in a room with them face to face, when they say those things then, you can actually see them talking to you.

When describing their experiences with the online forum many participants worried about written communication; this is demonstrated by the following:

Sullivan explained:

You want to have other people read your comments, your work, your material that you have put on there under your name and be able to feel like they were put in there by a professional, not someone who is in class for the wrong reasons.

August described how the online communication always has a name attached to the work and how everyone would be able to see what you have posted:

Um, you have to think about what you are doing because you know everybody else is going to be looking and see what is said and it has your name attached, so they all know what you said, but it does at the same time make you feel included.

Garth explained how the online communication can be intimidating and how ones vocabulary matters:

It was very intimidating in the beginning because you are still trying to make an impression with the students that you are with and also your instructors that are watching the discussion board and so the vocabulary that you choose. The way that you phrase things. That kind of thing was careful in the beginning, it was cautious in the beginning but by the end of the course, it was more laid back.

Calvin described a concern of being misinterpreted online:

You have to be careful that your sentences are not misinterpreted due to lack of facial expression I suppose...you might type up something and somebody, um, misinterpreted it because they don't hear your tone of voice, and they don't see your facial expression and they take it to mean something else.

When describing their experiences with communication or personal skills in which students needed to be a part of the discussion, Faith stated:

...you also basically need, um, specific manners I suppose to use on the Internet. That you knew that if you wrote in all caps you would not be, either that you could be interpreted as yelling at someone. So, I guess kind of you almost needed like a, you know, like a courtesy. Common sense courtesy, I guess on the Internet or how you would label that so that you knew how to, behave and be respectful to classmates.

When speaking of skills needed to communicate online, Jack explained:

Ah, spelling correctly. You know when you are not use to it, you could say any words you want as long as you could pronounce them correctly, uh, and know their meaning and use them appropriately within a sentence but, when you are writing all of the time and there is a spell check on there but that was probably the thing I was most conscience of was the spelling.

Sullivan gave a recommendation for future courses using the online forum:

Be sure the grammar was correct. You didn't want somebody else to see what you, you did not want them to think that you did not know what you were doing.

Jack explained how the online communication hindered him from elaborating on his views because of the written communication:

A disadvantage is when I am typing, which typing is not a problem but my thoughts...sometimes would deter me from continuing to explain my answer more. Simply because, I guess, I do not know what you call it. I guess maybe just pure laziness from a point to continue on with the thought where as when I am talking, I can ramble on for hours.

It appears these data indicate that most participants who expressed uneasiness with the online communication had worries of being misunderstood in their written online communication. Participants often cited a concern of being deficient in written communication or with their vocabulary; they also stated that one has to be more conscience and careful with online discussion as opposed to the traditional face-to-face method.

Frustration with the Check-off Factor

One of the ways participants described their experiences was in terms of being frustrated with the "check-off" factor. Many participants felt this activity was of little educational value and may have been considered a type of busy work for which they had to do in order to receive class credit. For example, for Burlene it was considered a chore with little value:

It was, what is the word I am looking for? It was a nuisance for me because I, with my job, I am on email all day and when I would come home, it would be hard for me to commit to going back to email to have an educational discussion.

Faith described how the forum felt as if it were more of an accountability factor as opposed to a true discussion forum:

Um, I really just kind of felt that it was more of an accountability measure at times. Um, when there were questions on there, when we knew ahead of time there would be questions on there and we are aware that the professors are able to check when we log in. You know what we say...it feels like an accountability measure and you know if you're a conscientious student you are more likely to um, log in daily...Um, you know just to kind of make you ah, at least seem interactive, weather you are or not.

Many participants described their experience with the forum in terms of completing the task at hand simply for class credit. This is shown with the following participant comments; Calvin explained:

Personally, I just, just felt that it was just another check-off that you had to get your name checked off, that you did participate online.

Peter also described a feeling of posting to the online discussion forum to satisfy a requirement and to get that ultimate "check":

Um, like I say, too often it seems like people would just post because they had to post it, they added one sentence and think, well I'm done with that. You can see that I went in there, I posted my thing and my time is done, check.

These data indicated that as participants described their experiences with the online discussion forum they often expressed frustration with this type of assignment or with the overall online communication. Participants cited several reasons for this discontentment including: being confused with different online tools, worries about online tone, worries about written communication skills and the check-off factor, which refers to completing the online discussion assignments just to receive credit or a satisfactory grade. It appears from the data that while participants did generally have a positive perception of the online discussion forum as part of their traditional face-to-face course, there are still

factors that negatively affect the overall learning process from the perspective of the learner.

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the findings of my study as derived from the data analysis; this included four overall themes that describe the participants' experience with the online discussion forum. The four major themes derived from the data are as follows: (1) learning to use the technology, (2) giving a voice to every student, (3) flexibility of the online communication and (4) frustration with online communication. In Chapter Five I provide discussion, conclusions, guidelines for faculty or practitioners and recommendations of my research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter One provided an overview of the study, the need for the study, the purpose, rationale, assumptions and limitations, definition of terms and organization of the study. In Chapter Two, I detailed a related literature review and in Chapter Three I overviewed the method, procedure, and data collection/analysis processes. Chapter Four presented the findings of my study; I collected and analyzed data gathered from participants about their experiences with online discussion forums which resulted in four major themes: (1) learning to use the technology, (2) giving a voice to every student, (3) flexibility of the online communication and, (4) frustration with online communication.

Chapter Five will bring the study to closure with a discussion of findings, implications for practice and recommendations. In this chapter I will reflect on the results of my findings and will connect these to everyday practice. Finally, I will outline several guidelines for practitioners who are utilizing online discussion forums and make suggestions for further research.

As an adjunct faculty member who utilizes online learning tools such as online discussion forums and electronic chat, I undertook this study because I wanted to improve my practice; I saw a need for more in-depth analysis of using the online discussion forum as an instructional tool from the perspective of the learner. The purpose of this case study was to describe the experiences of cohort members using an online discussion forum in a doctoral level course.

According to Merriam (2001), a case study approach can be used to help gain an in-depth understanding of a given situation and can help give meaning to a given situation for those involved.

Qualitative data were gathered in the form of personal interviews and data were interpreted through the process of coding and categorizing. Using Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach, participants' responses were evaluated for similarities and differences and then content categories of like content or themes were developed. This process allows for an in-depth examination of the participants' comments and to as accurately as possible, represent the participants' perceptions and experiences of using the online discussion forum. A face-to-face semi-structured interview approach was used for this study; open-ended interviews of the participants were conducted using a general interview guide, which can be found in Appendix A.

The findings outlined in Chapter Four are the result of data collection and analysis from personal interviews with 20 graduate students in a doctoral level course at a small private university in the southeast. Students in this course met face-to-face in a weekend format and were also required to use some online components in the course such as online discussion forums and electronic mail. The following research question formed the basis for the study: What are the experiences of doctoral cohort members in an online discussion forum?

Discussion of Findings

Results of the data analysis were similar to much of the literature; however, the data did show some surprising findings. The data revealed that almost all of the participants indicated that giving voice to each student was an advantage of using the online forum. Participants who considered themselves as vocal in face-to-face class also stated this as a benefit of the forum. I was also surprised by the difference in technological skill levels among students. For the most part, the existing research seemed to focus on the online courses; however, there appeared to be a gap in knowledge when examining a blended online environment from the perspective of the learner and a limited amount of research on giving students voice. This study has helped provide more insights to a web-assisted or blended online course. It should be noted that this study was confined to students enrolled in a doctoral cohort for a specified course at a small private university; therefore it may be inappropriate to generalize data from this study to other populations.

Participants in this study described their experiences with using the online discussion forum in terms of four overall themes including: (1) learning to use the technology, (2) giving a voice to every student, (3) flexibility of the online communication and (4) frustration with online communication. Reviewing the related literature helped me to better understand participants' perceptions of the online forum. I will discuss each of the four major themes and describe how these findings relate to the literature.

Learning to Use the Technology

Many of the participants in my study stated that a major concern for them, as a user of the online forum, was the challenge of learning to use the technology. Other researchers have also found that this is a common concern for online learners. Study participants also seem to fall into one of two categories when describing the experience of learning to use the technology: (1) very confused or (2) a feeling of simplicity of the medium. In this study, I found that participants who described themselves as being initially very confused with the technology did admit that once they learned to use the forum it was simple and required only basic skills. Studies of the online learner indicate that students are able to overcome anxiety about online technology with the passage of time (Brown, 2001). Other researchers have found that as students gain experience with technology, they will be increasingly satisfied with learning to use other new technologies (Simmers & Anandarajan, 2001). In a study that examined student perceptions of an online digital library, results indicated that males and students with more technology and Internet experience had significantly higher positive perceptions of the online resources such as the digital library (Koochang, 2004). In another study, researchers found that students with more experience using technology and online learning rate it in a more positive manner (Smart & Cappel, 2006).

Several of the participants did indicate a need for in-depth training in how to initially use the technology and the need for specific guidelines or expectations of students in terms of using the online forum. Other studies have found this to

be important to online learners as well. In a study conducted by Smart and Cappel (2006), it was determined that students wanted more detailed directions for online assignments. Meyer (2003) found that faculty needs to be more instructive with their assignments for the online discussion forum, giving students a better understanding of what is expected of them while using the forum. In a study that reviewed computer-mediated communication research, results indicated that various factors affected the success of an online course including program support, technical support and training (Luppigini, 2007). Palloff and Pratt (2005) state that if an online course is designed with detailed guidelines and students understand what is expected of them it can help alleviate problems.

As indicated by the data, many of the participants in this study considered the challenge of learning to use the technology as a key concern. However, I found that most participants stated that once they had learned to use the online discussion forum it was very simple and required only minimal skills. Participants in this study also emphasized the need for thorough training at the first class session.

Giving a Voice to Every Student

Participants in this study described the online discussion forum in terms of creating a voice for every student in the course. Even students who considered themselves to be very outgoing in class commented that it was nice to see each person's perspective online and that during a class session they may only hear from a few class members but online they hear from everyone. Other research

has shown evidence of this same perspective of online learning. A study that examined an online course in education found that 55% of the students believed that the online course enabled them to take a more active role in the learning process (Shaw & Pieter, 2000). Meyer (2003) found that students greatly appreciated the opportunity to participate more fully in class discussions that was afforded by the online environment; that, indeed, the online discussions had contributions from every student; and that the online discussion was often more thoughtful, more reasoned and contained evidence from other sources such as articles and reports.

Some participants in this study indicated that the online discussion forum provided an environment in which each student had a voice; they spoke of this in terms of giving students time to reflect and then having the opportunity to add to the discussion. Other studies have found this as well, including work from Meyer (2003) who found that a very important need of students was having time to reflect before speaking. For the students who felt constrained by the classroom, the online discussion afforded them the opportunity to take time to develop a response. Luppacini (2007) found that a variety of empirical studies regarding online learning showed reflective thinking to be a positive aspect of this learning environment. Furthermore, Fabro and Garrison (1998) found that the nature of the asynchronous medium gives learners time to reflect, then contribute to the discussion after having time to formulate their thoughts. Kanuka and Garrison (2004) found that cognitive presence in online learning found that focus group

members agreed that by asking students to reflect using online discussion encouraged many students to express their views and opinions.

Participants in this study described an advantage of the online discussion forum as a means to create a voice for every student. Almost all of the participants believed that it was beneficial to see/hear the perspective of each student, not just the students who were verbal in class. This was seen in two ways: giving a voice to shy students and giving all students time to reflect before contributing to the class discussion.

Flexibility of the Online Communication

The majority of participants in this study described flexibility of the online discussion forum as a major advantage to using such a technology. Other researchers have also found the flexibility of the medium to be a recurring theme in research involving the online learner. Many participants talked about being able to post to the forum in “their own time” and “in a place of their choosing”. When studying students’ perceptions of online learning, Smart and Cappel (2006) found that according to students, a perceived strength was that of flexibility, convenience and the ability to complete units at their own pace. Another study found that content of computer-mediated communication focused on course material and that most of the communication took place during times other than the 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. usual timeframe (Vician & Brown, 2000).

According to Meyer (2003), time is a valuable resource and students have a need to use time wisely, while weighing other demands on their time. This is

the reasoning behind the decision of many higher education institutions to offer numerous online courses, since many students today have multiple demands placed on their time including work and family obligations. Meyer also found that students had the experience of feeling that time expanded in the online discussion (2003). The notion of "time expanding" proposes that students felt as if the class actually had more class time because of the extra time spent in online discussion outside of the regular class sessions. An action research study regarding online learning communities found that students listed benefits of a Web-assisted course as (1) having a flexible schedule, (2) being able to work at any time and any place and (3) being able to choose the best conditions for learning (Leh, 2001). In addition, a study comparing online and traditional face-to-face learning found that distance learning options are most appealing because it is convenient for students who must manage numerous other personal commitments (Hannay & Newvine, 2005).

Furthermore, geographical distance was a concern with my participants; however, this type of communication method seem to break such a barrier and many participants mentioned how this type of tool had helped them communicate with students and instructors much more easily. One study found that using an online discussion forum provided preservice teachers with a different means of communicating with colleagues who were separated by geographical distance (Lock & Redmond, 2006).

In this study, participants stated that flexibility of the online discussion forum was a valuable aspect to using such a technology. Many of the

participants in this study explained how convenient it was to participate in the online forum in any place at any time.

Frustration with Online Communication

Most of the participants in this study stated that, at least in some aspects, the online communication caused a feeling of frustration. Other researchers have also found this to be a typical experience for online learners. In one study Hara and Kling (2000) found that students reported feeling frustrated and confused with learning to use the technology. Another study found that students described feeling many emotions, including frustration, shame and even embarrassment, when learning to use the technological environment; these students reported feeling shame or embarrassment when they couldn't complete a task because of their lack of technological skills (O'Regan, 2003). In addition, another researcher also found that students with low technology skills described feeling pressure and anxiety using Web-assisted functions such as online discussion and stated that such feelings might have a negative impact on learning (Leh, 2001).

In this study, I found that many participants described feeling frustrated with the online discussion because of the vast amount of time they spent online, only to feel as if it were a "check-off" activity. Other studies have reported similar findings; for example, Meyer (2003) found many students recognized this online discussion forum as a drain on their time. Smart and Cappel (2006) also found

that students believed many online assignments were too long and required too much time.

Additionally, many of my participants stated feeling frustrated with the online environment because of a worry with their ability to effectively communicate online and because of the loss of nonverbal communication cues. Other researchers have found similar concerns stating that the importance of being a good writer, which includes the ability to express ideas clearly in written form and the ability to avoid making embarrassing mistakes, becomes of great importance in the online setting (Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, Meyer found that although some postings did make use of emoticons, students still missed the facial and hand gestures of face-to-face traditional discussion. Kanuka and Garrison (2004) found that online learners have to conduct written reflection and must be able to clearly articulate their position using written language. A study for assessing student online learning also listed the delivery of a post or grammatical correctness as a category to consider for online communication (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002).

For most of the participants in this study, frustrations with the online communication emerged. Some concerns were with the technology itself, others were with worries of being able to adequately communicate online and still others were with worries of online tone being misunderstood.

Implications for Practice

Online learning or Web-assisted learning is currently a common practice in many educational institutions. Online learning systems have evolved into a familiar tool in higher education classrooms. It is not atypical to communicate with other students and faculty via online communication tools such as electronic mail and online discussion forums or chat; this is the reality of today's educational environment. It is important to pursue an understanding of how these types of learning tools affect our students and influence our practice.

Findings from this study indicate that students portray many benefits of using an online discussion forum as a supplement to a traditional face-to-face course including: flexibility of the online communication, creating a voice for all students and ease of communication between students to name a few. However, from the perspective of the learner, there are also many negative aspects to this type of learning environment, including, but not limited to: the lack of initial training, the lack of nonverbal communication cues in the online environment, the lack of guidelines for students as to what is expected of them in this type of online communication and the concerns of miscommunication via online discussion. The online discussion forum appears to be a practical way to expand the classroom outside of regularly scheduled class meetings, but there are challenges to using such an instructional tool. It is imperative that practitioners consider these factors when planning for this type of online communication in their courses.

Guidelines for Faculty/Practitioners

A key factor in deciding to conduct this study derived from my own personal need to understand online learning tools such as online discussion forums from the perspective of the learner. I also had a strong desire to improve my practice and wished for more detailed information for practitioners, such as myself, who needed guidelines when planning to use online discussion forums as part of a traditional face-to-face course. While several guidelines or rubrics for planning online discussion are available, a detailed step-by-step guide seemed to be absent. Based on the findings of this study, the following guidelines serve as suggestions for faculty planning to use an online discussion forum as a supplement for a face-to-face course:

1. Do not make assumptions that students automatically know how to use the technology.
2. Provide an extensive training on using the discussion forum at the first class session. A demonstration or hands-on activity is the most helpful method.
3. Provide guidelines of what is expected from students in terms of using the forum (when do they post, how often are students expected to post, how will you evaluate their postings, is this a part of their final grade); putting this in writing or on the syllabus is preferred.
4. Provide students with options if they need help with the forum (a tech support number, a time when they can meet with you or a tutor for technical help and so on).

5. As the instructor, periodically participate in the online discussion and provide feedback to the students online as well.
6. Occasionally talk about what is going on with the online discussion forum in the face-to-face class meetings.
7. Take a few moments at the beginning of the semester to explain why you are using the forum and that the forum does give a voice to every student and encourage students to take advantage of this extension of regular face-to-face class time.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study were based on personal interview responses of participants in a doctoral level course, which were utilizing online discussions forums. Based on the related literature review and the findings of this study, the following are recommendations for further research:

1. A further examination of the role of voice in online communication could provide more understanding of the online discussion forum as a blended instructional method.
2. When using the online discussion forum, a concern of some participants was that of online tone; it might be helpful to determine how instructors utilizing online communication tools can provide assistance to help students improve awareness of tone and lingo when communicating online.

3. According to the data, the participants indicated a considerable gap in their comfort levels with the online technology; a further examination of the relationship between comfort levels and age may give a better understanding of the online discussion forum from the perspective of the learner.
4. In examining the data, I realized there could be a connection to Bandura's self-efficacy model; a closer look at this could contribute to a greater understanding of online communication.
5. The data revealed that an initial detailed training for students who are using an online discussion forum could be beneficial; a closer look at the effectiveness of such training would be useful.

Based upon a need for further research, this study was designed and implemented to describe the experiences of doctoral students using an online discussion forum and to assess its worth as an instructional tool. As indicated in this study, online learning and online communication has plenty of potential. However, online learning and online discussion still have obstacles and continues to present challenges to students and practitioners. It appears that online communication technologies are valuable tools for the higher education classroom. Though in the end, the most important aspect of online learning is the online learner.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experiences of the members of a doctoral cohort using an online discussion forum.

Therefore, the following served as an interview guide.

1. Tell me about the discussion forum.
2. How big of a role did the discussion forum play in the course?
3. In your experience what role did the forum play with communication between students and instructor?
4. What communication or personal traits/skills were necessary for you to use the forum?
5. What computer skills were necessary for you to use the forum?
6. In your experience what are some advantages and disadvantages of using the discussion forum?
7. Based on your experiences, are their recommendations for future cohorts?
8. Are there any other experiences you would like to share?

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

The Experience of Participants Using an Online Discussion Forum in a Graduate Course

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study in which the primary purpose is to describe the experiences of cohort members using an online discussion forum in a doctoral level course. Therefore, the following will serve as a research question: What are the experiences of doctoral cohort members in an online discussion forum?

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

Qualitative data will be gathered through personal interviews. A semi-structured interview face-to-face approach will be used for this study. Open-ended interviews of the participants will be conducted using a general interview guide. This approach involves developing an outline/guide prior to the interviews, which includes a set of questions to be explored with each participant. The guide will permit open conversation but will also make certain all questions will be thoroughly covered in the interview process. This semi-structured format, will allow for the use of open-ended and unrestricted questions to help reveal the ways students assign meaning to their experiences. I will make an initial visit to the specified course to give a brief overview of the study to potential participants. Only students who expressed interest in participating in the study will be contacted further and only students who complete the consent form will be interviewed. A final telephone call will be made to schedule interview dates/times and places for the participants and an e-mail will be sent to verify the interview date/time/place.

~~I will conduct interviews as soon as possible following the semester's end for which the online discussion forums will be used.~~ For the convenience of the participants the interviews will take place in a private conference/class room on the university's campus at a time selected by the interviewee. Each interview will be audio taped and I will take notes at each session. Participants will understand that the audiotape and notes will be held in the strictest confidence. Interviews will be anywhere from forty-five minutes to one hour in length, depending on responses from each participant.

RISKS

There is minimal risk to participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality will be of greatest importance; I will ensure this by using a numbering system on all field notes and transcripts. The names of participants in the study will never be used outside of the personal interview environment and for purposes of the participant consent form. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Jennifer Summerlin, at 120 18th Avenue NW, Hickory, NC 28601, and 828-324-4147. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

_____ Participant's initials

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed you data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

By **APPROVED**
Pierre Larsson

FEB 16 2007

Appendix C

Transcribers Confidentiality Statement

Transcriber's Pledge of Confidentiality

As a transcribing typist of this research project, I understand that I will be hearing tapes of confidential interviews. The information on these tapes has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information on these tapes with anyone except the primary researcher of this project. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Mary S. League / League's
Transcribing Typist Etc. Date 2-01-07

Appendix D
Copy of the Human Subjects Form
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville



Institutional Review Board

Office of Research
1534 White Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: (865) 974-3466
Fax: (865) 974-7400

02/16/2007

IRB#: 7242 B

TITLE: The experience of participants using an online discussion forum in a graduate course

Summerlin, Jennifer
Instructional Technology, Health and Cultural
120 18th Avenue N.W
Hickory, NC 28601

Brockett, Ralph
Instructional Technology, Health and Cultural
A520 Claxton Complex
Campus

Your project listed above was reviewed and has been granted approval under Expedited review.

This approval is for a period ending one year from the date of this letter. Please make timely submission of renewal or prompt notification of project termination (see item #3 below).

Responsibilities of the investigator during the conduct of this project include the following:

1. To obtain prior approval from the Committee before instituting any changes in the project.
2. To retain signed consent forms from subjects for at least three years following completion of the project.
3. To submit a Form D to report changes in the project or to report termination at 12-month or less intervals.

The Committee wishes you every success in your research endeavor. This office will send you a renewal notice (Form R) prior to the anniversary or your approval date.

Sincerely,

Brenda Lawson
Compliances

Appendix E

Participant Pseudonym List

Participant Pseudonym List

To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were assigned according to gender starting with the letter A; names were selected at random.

The following is a list of the names assigned to study participants.

<u>Participant #</u>	<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Gender</u>
Participant 101	August	(Female)
Participant 102	Burlene	(Female)
Participant 103	Calvin	(Male)
Participant 104	Dora	(Female)
Participant 105	Ella	(Female)
Participant 106	Faith	(Female)
Participant 107	Garth	(Male)
Participant 108	Heath	(Male)
Participant 109	Ivan	(Male)
Participant 110	Jack	(Male)
Participant 111	Kayley	(Female)
Participant 112	Leo	(Male)
Participant 113	Marina	(Female)
Participant 114	Noah	(Male)
Participant 115	Owen	(Male)
Participant 116	Peter	(Male)
Participant 117	Quinn	(Female)
Participant 118	Rick	(Male)
Participant 119	Sullivan	(Male)
Participant 120	Trey	(Male)

Vita

Jennifer Summerlin is a native of North Carolina. She received her B.S. from Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina in 1995 and her M.S. from North Carolina State University in Raleigh in 1997. While at N.C. State she worked on a curriculum development project for North Carolina State University and for the North Carolina Department of Insurance under the direction of Dr. Barbara Kirby and then worked for the North Carolina Department of Transportation as a computer trainer.

After moving to Knoxville, Tennessee, Jennifer worked for Computing and Academic Services at the University of Tennessee as a technology trainer. In 1998 she decided to pursue her Ph.D. and was offered an assistantship in the College of Education Curriculum Lab. For two years, Jennifer also taught Introduction to Instructional Technology at the University of Tennessee. In addition, while completing coursework for her doctoral degree she taught for four years as an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Business at Pellissippi State Technical Community College.

Jennifer is currently serving as an adjunct faculty member at a small private university in western North Carolina; she teaches Web page design, graphic design, Internet technologies and imaging technologies.

