A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY ON STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING

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Martha Esther Mathurin, candidate for the degree of Master of Education in Educational Psychology, has presented a thesis titled, \textit{A Grounded Theory Study on Student Perceptions of Online Distance Learning}, in an oral examination held on August 23, 2013. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

The student population in higher educational institutions in North American Societies of the 21st century is rapidly changing (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The findings in a recent study conducted by Allen and Seaman of universities in the United States indicates that approximately 6.1 million students were enrolled in at least one online course during their academic program. Allen and Seaman further state the increased offerings of an online learning option are also forms an integral part of the long term strategy of educational institutions to increase student enrollment. With the upsurge of sophisticated technologies, students have become more informed of the choices for educational advancement and have higher expectations for their learning experiences (Gerda, 2005).

Additionally, the increase in globalization and the intense competition amongst higher education institutions worldwide has resulted in the shift to online education as part of the organizational strategy to alleviate the financial challenges that have ensued from the current global economic crisis (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Higher education institutions are not only forced to strategically realign their focus but at the same time are required to ensure students are provided with a high standard curriculum that is easily accessible online and is also delivered in a cost effective manner (Dykman & Davis).

Dykman and Davis (2008) further explain that although online learning has created new learning opportunities for some students, some faculty members question the quality of this type of learning experience. Jones, Chew, Jones, and Lau (2009) describe the introduction of online learning into higher education curriculum as “uncertain times” due to the relative newness of this area of learning and teaching. The literature reviewed
indicated the thrust towards online learning has created an excellent research opportunity to better understand the current issues as well as develop possible avenues for improvement for this new approach to learning. My research has explored the students’ perceptions of online distance learning and its impact on the participants’ learning experiences at the University of Regina. Additionally, the students’ perceived benefits and drawbacks of online learning were examined. This is a qualitative study in which I have adopted the social constructivist grounded theory principles developed by Kathy Charmaz (2006).

A grounded theory approach to research also allows future readers to engage and connect with the research participants and gain more insight into their experiences with online learning (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Twelve (12) participants consisting of eight females and four males from the graduate and undergraduate levels were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews of approximately 30-60 minutes. The participants were enrolled in degree programs in the following areas: International Studies, Economics, Education, Business Administration, and Human Resource Development.

The conclusions of the research indicate that although the intention was to explore the students’ experiences and perceptions of online learning, the findings revealed students’ concerns were more related to the pedagogical practices used in the online environment.
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DEDICATION

First, I would like to thank the Heavenly Father for affording me the opportunity to be here and realize my dream. Coming to Canada to complete my degree program has truly been a life changing experience both personally and professionally. Through the homesickness and long nights, I questioned my purpose for being here; I am glad He gave me the strength to endure it to the end.

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To my fellow International students both new and old, I encourage you no matter how difficult a task may seem, remember this is your journey, **LIVE IT UP** and **NEVER GIVE UP!!**
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the following will be presented: first a brief overview of online learning, second the rationale which guides the current study, third the conceptual framework outlining the various models of online learning, fourth the purpose of the study, and finally, the overall structure of the research.

1.1 Brief Overview of Online Learning

Historically, higher education learning has taken place within the confines of a traditional classroom where the primary method of instruction has been through lectures (O’Malley & McCraw, 1999). In their research, O’Malley and McCraw conclude that the student – teacher interaction in the traditional setting formed an important part of the learning process. However, over time with the recent knowledge explosion and increased use of social media as well as web-based technologies, individuals primarily in North American cultures are living and learning differently (Ho, 2009).

Additionally, with the development of online learning models such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) from organizations like Coursera (2013) with a pedagogical foundation based on education for all, students in poorer regions of the world are also able to access higher educational opportunities (Coursera). Although the new demands of highly technological societies require individuals (including students) to develop new skill sets, there is also a growing need to gain access to flexible learning opportunities that can facilitate their retraining and professional development (O’Malley & McCraw, 1999).
A second factor which must also be considered when examining the growth of online learning is the development of an increasingly consumerist attitude towards education where students are seeking opportunities where learning has to take place quickly, inexpensively, and conveniently (Gunasekaran, Mc Neil & Shaul, 2002). For example, countries such as Germany, England, and the United States (which are highly consumer-oriented societies) have taken the lead in developing governmental policies to significantly streamline the use of technology into higher education (Vigentini, 2009) in order to meet the new demand for learning that is convenient and easily accessible.

Additionally, the University of Regina, formally part of the Campus Saskatchewan initiative, now defunct due to lack of funding, has increased online learning opportunities for students through the use of funds obtained from the Technology Enhanced Learning Funding provided by the Provincial Government to ensure online courses formed a mandatory part of the University’s curriculum (University of Regina Distance Education Task Force Report, 2010). With this changing trend, more educational institutions are increasing their investments in online distance learning hoping this new approach to learning will significantly reduce the amount of time spent in traditional classrooms by learners (Sambataro, 2000). Similarly, many educational institutions have identified online learning as one of the most frequently used and fastest growing avenues for learning (Chyung & Vachon, 2005).

Gunasekaran, McNeil and Shaul, (2002) state e-learning providers conclude that the continued growth in the development of web-enabling technologies in online learning is quickly becoming a more viable option for learners. For example, commercial organizations such as Morgan, Keegan & Company reported that approximately $750
billion was spent on all forms of education, with $2 trillion being spent specifically on e-learning in the United States (Gunasekaran, McNeil & Shaul, 2002). Such research indicates that educational institutions and commercial organizations have recognized the great value of online learning and foresee continued spending in this area (Gunasekaran, McNeil & Shaul). In fact, educational institutions have begun to conduct research on ways to best optimize online tools and to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Snyder, 2009).

Barron and Mayberry (2000) indicate that online learning has created new learning opportunities that can potentially reduce the constraints of time and space in a cost effective manner by making it exceedingly easier for full-time employees to access higher education opportunities. The increased investment in online education is not only an attempt to create greater access to educational opportunities for students; it is also a proactive response by institutional administrators in an effort to keep universities globally competitive and financially viable in these uncertain economic times (Dykman & Davis, 2008).

Romanov and Nevgi (2008) found that despite the novelty of online distance learning, at times some adult learners struggle and question the effectiveness of an online learning experience. In their findings, Romanov and Nevgi point out that although there has been significant research focused on the students’ experience with particular forms of online learning such as synchronous and asynchronous, some of the research fails to examine the effectiveness of the students’ learning process in these environments. Although Learnframe (2000) highlights the cost effectiveness of online learning, Snyder (2009) critiques that in some instances there exists pedagogical gaps between the theories
and practices which at times hinder the effectiveness of the learning process in the online environment. Similarly, some faculty members as well as administrators have also come to question the quality of the online experience as opposed to the traditional modes of instruction (Bates & Poole, 2003).

The literature reviewed indicates that although online learning is a relatively new area of interest for higher educational institutions (Dykman & Davis, 2008), contradictions need to be further examined. O’Malley and McCraw (1999) also indicate that although online learning has become part of the long-term strategy for higher education institutions in the United States, faculty members are still reluctant to accept this modality of instruction. Not only are these contradictions evident for faculty but as well for students who have expressed concerns about the effectiveness of this learning approach (Romanov & Nevgi, 2008). From an administrative point of view educational institutions are seeking to increase online and distance learning opportunities as cost cutting measures that will maintain the profitability of the institution, which at times may be without much consideration for the pedagogical implications (Baggaley, 1999). In addition the introduction of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has also contributed to ongoing controversy of online and distance learning as students or communities worldwide are able to access diverse learning opportunities (Coursera, 2013). As a result of the apparent contradictions that exist in the literature, the following rationale will be presented.

1.2 Rationale for the study

The uncertainties and apprehension exhibited by students as well as the questions by faculty regarding the authenticity of this learning modality clearly indicates that there
exists a need to dig deeper, to explore and identify the contributing factors resulting in the differing attitudes towards online learning. In a culture that is highly driven by technology, the current study has created an opportunity to further explore the perceptions and attitudes of students towards online learning at the University of Regina.

1.3 Definition of online learning

With the growing use of the world-wide-web and many web-based technologies Picciano (2002) suggests there is an increase in the number of students who are actively seeking out higher education learning opportunities online. Although there are various definitions of online learning, a general definition presented by O’Malley and McCraw (1999) defines online learning as a class whereby 80% of the content is taught online. For the purpose of the current study, the concept of online distance learning will be defined as a form of learning which occurs either entirely or partially in the virtual environment (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia & Jones, 2009).

Students at post secondary institutions have the option to learn in varying virtual environments which has resulted in the development of a variety of models of online learning namely: blended learning, massive open source courses, and flipped classrooms which may contain either a synchronous or asynchronous modality of delivery. Although these models of online learning will be further examined in Chapter 2 a sound understanding of how learning evolves in this environment is critically important.

Although traditional models of learning, such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism may be relevant frameworks to explain the learning process in the online
environment, Siemens (2004) believes that due to the unique nature of online learning, these traditional theories may at times seem limiting.

Siemens (2004) points out that the mere complexity of online learning lends itself to a different form of learning which he defines as connectivism. Siemens defines connectivism as a critical learning approach that not only focuses on learned behaviours, the input of information, or the social construction of learning, but also identifies the multiple dimensions of learning that can occur as a result of the impact of modern technology. With the introduction of technology into the learning process the online environment becomes fluid, constantly changing with a high influx of information that is greatly dependent on the level of connectivity (Siemens). It is through this process of connectivity that learning becomes multifaceted and meets both the cognitive as well as the emotive needs of the learner as in a traditional classroom setting (Siemens).

Siemens’s (2004) proposed approach to online education assists in clarifying how technology can further enhance the ways in which students currently learn. As a result, the current research is guided by the learning theory which focuses on the construction of knowledge through connection and community. The conceptual framework which develops this theme will be explored in the following section.

1.4 Conceptual framework

Swan (2003), Snyder (2009), and Piccicano (2002) indicate in their research that the most important factor which contributes to a more efficient online experience is derived from the level of connectivity which is evident in the virtual world. Siemens (2004) further emphasizes from the connectivism standpoint that an approach to online
learning which encompasses the development of communities of learning where the learning process is organic and constantly changing also contributes to a more fulfilling online experience for the online learner. In a community of learning students are actively involved, motivated, and connected during the social construction of knowledge and the professor becomes the facilitator of the online learning process (Porter, 2004). Porter notably argues that the role of the professor in the online environment is one where he/she serves as the connector who strengthens the learning process either through an effective curriculum design or in his/her role as a coach facilitating the process of knowledge creation. Siemens (2004) further emphasizes that through a process of connectivism learning is multifaceted either through tailored course work, plugging into networks, joining Google circles, group chats, massive open sources, or blogs to name a few.

The learner in the online environment also plays a vital role in the construction of his/her knowledge. Porter (2004) in her research further states that whilst various learners will approach their program of study quite differently, most students will certainly assess the quality of the online class by how well the professor is able to deliver and facilitate the interconnectedness with course materials and technological resources.

The primary role of the professor in the online environment, as in the traditional classroom, is to serve as a facilitator who must ensure that he/she understands the personalities as well as the learning needs of the students (Porter, 2004). By developing a comprehensive understanding of the students in the learning environment a professor is better equipped to facilitate a vibrant learning community where students can connect in a meaningful way to share his/her ideas or exchange his/her thoughts with the larger
group (Porter). Siemens (2004) reinforces that it is through this process of connectivity the professor or instructor will facilitate the development of an effective learning community and attempt to lessen possible pedagogical gaps that may arise in the online environment. However, the online environment is not only dependent on the facilitation of the professor but also on the student’s ability to self regulate in this new learning environment (Knowles, 1973). Knowles indicates that the adult learner, as in the traditional classroom setting, has the need to feel respected, is goal oriented, focuses on the relevancy of the materials to be learnt, is motivated, self regulated and brings individual life experiences into the learning environment. In the following section a cursory overview examining communities of learning will be presented.

**Figure 1. The Constructivist Approach to Online Learning**

![Figure 1. The Constructivist Approach to Online Learning](image)

Figure 1. In the online environment there are three key factors that influence the development of social presence online. Adapted from “A Constructivist Approach to Online Learning: The Community of Inquiry Approach by Swan, Garrison, and
Swan, Garrison and Richardson (2009) indicate there are three main components within the online environment, the teacher, the student and peers that facilitate the development of communities of inquiry in which knowledge is constructed. With the continued interaction and connection between teacher, student and peers a greater sense of social presence can be created in an online environment. Creating social presence online becomes a huge part of engaging the students in their learning due to the reduction of face-to-face interactions (Lave & Wenger, 2002). Therefore the dynamic relationship between professor, student, and peers becomes even more important to facilitate the exchange and the creation of ideas, beliefs, and concepts (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Lave and Wenger (2002) also suggest that the learner is changed after the interaction with the professor and peers in the online environment. The interaction between the internal world of the learner and the external influencers assist in the development of communities of practice whereby knowledge and experiences facilitate the development of the learners (Lave & Wenger). An overview of communities of learning will be presented in the following section.

1.4.1 Building communities of learning

The connectivism approach to online learning is a very important part of the process of building communities of learning. Building a community of learners is a very dynamic process which involves a commitment from the professor as well as the students to attempt to create a learning space which allows the learners to connect in a meaningful way and to share ideas with his/her peers (Porter, 2004). To be effective in this role the
professor must ensure that he/she is aware of the learning styles of their students, their individual goals, as well as his/her social identity within the learning environment (Knowles, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978). Having a greater appreciation of the background and experiences a student brings into the online learning environment allows the professor to better understand the individual motivations and expectations which in some ways can affect their overall attitudes as well as the students’ perceptions of the online learning environment (Porter, 2004). Bellon and Oates (2002) suggest the online environment at times has the tendency to depersonalize the teacher-student connection which then places additional pressure on the professor to design a curriculum that not only fosters community online environment but does not alienate the student.

Bellon and Oates (2002) further explain that some professors, although perhaps successful in creating an environment conducive to learning in the traditional classroom, might at times struggle in the virtual classroom. The biggest challenge is in achieving a sense of community and connectivity which is vital for the students’ success in the virtual world (Siemens, 2004). The students who seek out learning opportunities in the online environment come with their individual experiences, motivations, and perceptions and are actively seeking out fulfilling learning outcomes (Porter, 2004) as in traditional classrooms. However, in the online environment more emphasis is placed on the role of the professor to create more efficient connectors which facilitate higher levels of connectivity for the students with the course content and educational technologies (Siemens, 2004). Additionally, designing the curriculum for an online environment may also require a shift of teaching modality that requires the professor to reframe his/her teaching philosophy in order to enrich the online learning experience and meet the
individual learning needs of the students (Siemens, 2004; Porter, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 2002).

Another important element needed to develop a community of learning is the existence of social interactions in the online environment. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) stress the importance of interaction in the online environment and its impact on the students’ learning. Anderson et al explain that a community of learning is an excellent way to encapsulate the dynamic relationship that exists among the professor, the student, and peers as well as the content that is being learned. The students’ interaction with the professor focuses on the relevance of the teacher’s presence in the environment; the interaction with the content focuses on the cognitive ability of the learner; and the peer interaction defines the level of social presence that is felt in the virtual environment.

The relevance of interaction and proper facilitation by the professor, Keller’s (1999) research indicates that the overarching element that must be considered when reviewing student success in the online environment is highly determined by their individual motivations. Not only will this affect how and with whom they connect but determines the overall experience in the online environment (Keller). From the research and literature reviewed there are three critical elements in interplay: first how students connect, second how they interact, and third what are the motivating factors that contribute to students’ attitudes in the online environment. An added component to the current research which influences a student’s attitude towards learning in the online environment as well as in the traditional classroom setting is student motivation which will be further discussed in the following section.
1.4.2 Motivations

The dynamic relationship among the professor, student, and peers is greatly influenced by the students’ motives and expectations (Keller, 1999) which at times determines their success in the online environment.

Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) suggest the online environment requires the interplay among three critical components: the teacher who comes into the learning environment with certain expectations, the students and student peers who also enter this new learning environment driven by their individual motives as well as their past experiences. The online environment becomes the new classroom whereby learning and the exchange of ideas or concepts takes place. In the online learning environment it is very important to note that a lack of one element can affect the learner’s success or his/her perceptions of their learning in this type of environment (Anderson et al).

In the online learning environment greater pressure may be placed on the instructor to ensure that the students receive a satisfying online experience. Not only is there a need for the instructor and student to be fully aware of course structure, communication approach, and pedagogical approaches that will be used (Poe & Stassen, n.d.) but student motivations must also be taken into account as this can potentially influence students’ perceptions of this new learning environment.

Although there exists various definitions for motivation, such as the Oxford dictionary (2009) generic definition as a “reason for one’s actions or behavior” or the definition of Ryan and Deci (2000) which states that motivation is a “reason to be moved to do something”, the current research is informed by Keller’s (1999) definition. Keller’s definition identified four critical components of motivation namely: relevance,
satisfaction, attention, and confidence with the technologies as significant factors which motivate the online learner. Additionally, students’ beliefs in their abilities also influence their cognitive, emotive, and behavioural skills during the learning process (Bandura, 1993). Keller further explains that students who felt confident with the technology were more likely to work in this format. Keller’s research also indicates that the course content which is relevant to the student captures their interest and contributes to a more satisfactory learning experience. Further evidence from Keller’s research also indicates that students’ motivations are influenced by their experiences as well as their individual perceptions of the online learning environment. It is therefore very important to note that a student’s perception and attitude towards online learning is closely related to the motivations that have influenced or informed their decisions to learn in this type of environment (Keller). The following section will examine the purpose of this current study.

1.5 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the current study was to examine the students’ perspectives about their experiences with online learning at the University of Regina. An exploration of the students’ perspectives of online learning was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of the participants with online learning?
2. What are the perceptions and attitudes of the participants towards online learning?
3. What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks of online learning?

The current research has adopted a connectivist approach to teaching and learning as well as an interpretivist approach to research. The interpretivist approach is most fitting
for this current study as it allows the reader a greater breath of flexibility to explore the experiences that are particular to the selected students at the University of Regina. It also lends itself to question whether the 12 students felt connected and engaged in their learning experience. The interpretivist methodology focuses on the individualized stories of the participants and the peculiarities which they felt as part of their respective online learning environments. In the following section the organization of the study will be presented.

1.6 Organization of study

The current study is presented in five chapters. In Chapter 1 an historical overview of online learning, its definitions, the rationale, and purpose of the study have been presented.

In Chapter 2 an overview of online learning at the University of Regina is examined. Chapter 2 also reviews the various modalities of online learning currently presented in the literature as well as the pedagogical implications that have resulted due to the development of new forms of online learning.

In Chapter 3 the methodology which has guided this study has been presented. Subsequently, Chapter 3 focuses on the relevance of grounded theory to this current study.

Chapter 4 outlines the findings in the current research and explained the students’ perceptions and attitudes towards online learning. Chapter 5 outlines the students’ views about the benefits and drawbacks as well as the critical elements needed for a student to be successful in this learning environment.
Chapter 5 presents the main findings in relation to the research questions which have guided the current study and the extant literature outlining areas of similarity and difference. In Chapter 5 the dialectic relationship which exists between the students’ perceptions and their attitudes towards online learning is further discussed. Additionally, in this chapter the key relationships that exist among the professor, students, peers, and course content in the online environment are also discussed in detail. The second part of Chapter 5 outlines the implications for the University, participants’ suggestions, delimitations of the current research, areas for future research as well as the overall conclusions of the study.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter has primarily two main foci. First, I will present a general overview of the development of online learning at the University of Regina and a definition of the adult learner. Secondly, I will present a cursory overview of the modalities of online instruction. In addition to creating the premise to ground my study, I will also focus on the importance of building communities of learning and their relevance in the process of knowledge construction.

2.1 General overview of online learning at the University of Regina

According to Dr. Vi Maeers, (Personal Communication, December 5, 2011) former Director for the Centre for Teaching and Learning, online and distance learning courses were formally institutionalized as a result of a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) initiative, instituted by the provincial government and brokered through Campus Saskatchewan. This initiative enabled the universities, upon receipt of governmental funding, to develop a block of online courses. As a result of this initiative both universities sought to provide students with an increased offering of online courses.

In 2009 the Distance Education Task Force was also commissioned to conduct an assessment of the strategic direction for flexible learning at the University of Regina (University of Regina Distance Education Task Force Report, 2010). Through a series of 24 meetings and more than 300 student surveys the findings indicated that the University at the moment was not prepared to centrally administer and support learning opportunities for the “non traditional student” (University of Regina Distance Education Task Force Report, 2010). As a result a five year strategic plan was created which aligned with the University’s overall strategy of “Mamawohkamatowin: Our Work, Our People,
Our Communities” (Distance Education Task Force Final Report, 2010). The findings of the task force also revealed there was an increase in the number of students who were currently enrolled in the online classes.

In Table 1 (p.26) the Distance Education Task Force reported a constant increase in the number of online/televised courses that have been delivered by the distance learning department. This increase was as a result of the increased offerings of online classes as well as the changing demands of the student population that was seeking access to higher education opportunities with ease and convenience (University of Regina Distance Education Task Force Report, 2010).

**Table 1: # of courses/televised courses delivered online.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>U of R Online Courses</th>
<th>First Nations U Online Courses</th>
<th>Televised Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* University of Regina Online Courses, First Nations University Online Courses and Televised Courses. Adapted from the “Distance Education Task Force Final Report” by University of Regina, 2010, p 20.
Similarly in Table 2 (p.27) the number of students enrolled in online courses significantly increased from 2004 to 2009 from approximately 500 students to over 1,200 students.

Table 2: # of students enrolled in online courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>U of R Online</th>
<th>U of R Televised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>1100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The number of University of Regina Online Course offered as opposed to the number of Televised University of Regina Classes. Adapted from the “Distance Education Task Force Final Report” by University of Regina, 2010, p.21.

The data presented in the University of Regina Distance Education Task Force Final report (2010) indicated an increased enrollment in online classes by the students of the University of Regina as well as the First Nations University. O’Malley and McCraw (1999), and Sweet (2010) have indicated that the student population has changed and the typical student in higher education is older, married, has had a previous degree and is simply seeking out opportunities for retraining or refining his/her skill set. With growing
changes in the student demographics it is important that a definition of the adult learner is presented in the current research.

2.2 Overview of the adult learner

In the current research, it is important to understand the adult learners’ process for learning especially in the online environment. The adult learner, who is married or is a single parent, has previous working experience or post secondary knowledge, in most instances has a slightly different attitude towards learning compared with new high school graduates who are just embarking on a new life journey (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Knowles (1973) describes the learning needs of the adult learner, as unique and diverse. The adult learner is seen as someone who not only reproduces or masters the concepts he or she has been taught but seeks out learning outcomes which are relevant and applicable to their daily lives (Knowles). Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (2005) state the adult learner places greater emphasis on ensuring that their learning process is engaging, relevant, and applicable to the social realities in which the individual is immersed.

Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (2005) further emphasize that an effective adult learning process must also facilitate the retention, reinforcement, and transformation of knowledge. It is not only about the mere accumulation of knowledge but also extends to the fact that learners have the autonomy to participate in the co-construction of their knowledge (Driscoll, 2000). Driscoll further shares that the adult learner is not only focused on creating knowledge but on creating meaning in his/her experiences. All learners come with previous knowledge and experiences; it is through a process of connectivism that they are able to create meaning (Siemens, 2004). From the findings of
Knowles’ research the adult learner therefore is constantly seeking innovative, easier and convenient ways to access various learning opportunities. With the onset of online distance learning the doors to higher education institutions have been opened up to more adult learners (Callahan & Sandlin, 2007).

However, the increased accessibility to convenient and flexible learning options is not without concerns from some researchers who have subsequently categorized online distance learning as a controversial area of study (Jones, Chew, Jones, and Lau, 2009). Jones et al. (2009) state that some scholars and educators have stated that the development of an online learning environment can disrupt the institutional culture of traditional classrooms. Jones et al. (2009) further explain that some educators question whether the online environment is as an effective learning environment as compared to the traditional classroom setting. With these opposing points of view, the phenomenon of online distance learning, despite its novelty and creative approach to learning, is at the same time an area of great concern for learners and educators.

If one is to further critically examine the development of online distance learning through different social discourses, one of the themes that would stand out significantly is whether or not this form of learning environment has truly revolutionized higher education (O’Malley & McCraw, 1999). Callahan and Sandlin (2007) argue that despite this new found flexibility and greater choice offered through online distance learning, it may still increase the socio-economic gaps that exist between different learners. In their findings, Callahan and Sandlin state that the individuals with the greater economic capacity would be able to access and purchase the educational technologies and supports necessary for them to be successful in an online learning environment. The need to have
access to modern technologies despite the ease and convenience online learning affords a student then raises questions of affordability for the adult learners who may be single parents, living in poverty, or working full-time, and at the same time trying to complete their education (Callahan & Sandlin, 2007). Although the intention for online distance learning is to create opportunities for the non-traditional student to access higher learning opportunities, issues of affordability can certainly be a hindrance. However, recent initiatives such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) transcend borders and offer access to free online classes (Coursera, 2013). In the following section the models of online learning will be presented.

2.3 Modalities of online instruction

There are many modalities of online instruction. The current research has examined the following models of online instruction: blended learning, massive open online courses, and flipped classrooms with the different modes of delivery which can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Additionally, after presenting the modalities of online instruction, an overview of how these modalities translate into the online environment at the University of Regina will be discussed. The definition of online learning as used previously in Chapter I (which is a form of learning that occurs either at least 80% of the course content in the virtual environment) will continue to guide the overview presented in the following sections.

2.4 Overview of online learning

Servage (2005) states that the term e-learning has also been used interchangeably with varied expressions such as distance education, web-based training, and online learning. Servage further explains in his research that one of the main challenges
encountered with e-learning and distance learning is deciding on an appropriate nomenclature that clearly defines the concept. Servage defines distance online learning as a process of learning information that is delivered in an electronic format. The learner also has the opportunity to identify relevant information and convert it into something meaningful using appropriate technological applications (Honey, 2001).

Snyder (2009) also identifies a fully online-based model as one that consists of the student learning at his/her own pace through the use of web-based technology. There is little or no face-to-face interaction by the learner with other users. The online learning experience becomes the combination of the hardware and software that replaces the face-to-face interaction which once existed within the traditional classroom environment (Remtulla, 2007). Allen and Seaman’s (2011) research has indicated an online model is one whereby 80% of the content is delivered in an online format. As a result, it is important to understand the format in which the content is delivered to students online.

2.5 Blended model

Porter (2004) defines this format of learning as a combination of face-to-face and web-based instruction. Porter further explains that in this format of learning educative technologies are used to enhance and possibly recreate the onsite experience for students in the virtual environment. The use of modern educational technologies allows the learner to better connect not only with the course content but also with instructors and peers in the online environment (Porter). Yukawa (2010) further states that despite the flexibility of online learning at times the lack of classroom interaction results in superficial understanding of key concepts for some learners. With the introduction of the blended learning model, students are able to benefit from the face-to-face interaction and enrich
their online experiences. This integrative form of online learning was specifically developed to target the various needs of the learning community especially in North American cultures (Yukawa). Blended learning in its simplest form consists of course materials or resources delivered over the web in conjunction with in-classroom instruction which forms the main component of the course. Another form of blended learning is one which also attempts to encompass a constructivist approach to learning which is learner-centered and combines the student’s former knowledge to his or her current experiences (Snyder, 2009). The blended learning model also promotes an active form of teaching and learning (Snyder). This model of online learning specifically highlights the importance of learning communities and how this integrative approach to learning contributes to the enrichment and construction of knowledge. Porter (2004) and Snyder (2009) also state the introduction of a hybrid or blended format will hopefully assist with issues of isolation and disconnectedness experienced by students strictly in the online environment. A revolutionary approach to the blending learning model is the introduction of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which will be presented in the following section.

2.6 Massive Open Online Courses

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are courses that are usually free and delivered to students online. Coursera, a company that was established by two computer scientists from Stanford University, were the pioneers to create a shift of online learning in higher educational institutions (Lewin, 2012). Coursera partners with Global and North American institutions to offer more than 100 online courses around the world (Lewin). The pedagogical foundations of Massive Open Online Courses are to give the students
the opportunity to learn the material as quickly and demonstrate their understanding of the materials learnt (Coursera, 2013). Machielse (2013) states that MOOCs have become an area of great interest in higher education as there have been concerns expressed that the increase in this form of online content delivery will reduce the need for on campus classes. Machielse’s research indicates that over 2.7 million students have been able to access this form of learning which they would have missed out on in the past due to accessibility or affordability. The recent introduction of MOOCs according to Lewin (2012) opens up opportunities for students in countries around the world to access new online courses (Coursera, 2013). Massive Open Online Courses will revolutionize the structure and format of online classroom delivery by increasing students’ access to massive educational resources online (Daniel, 2012). The Coursera community of learning has truly transcended international borders and has a student enrolment of 9.5 million students from 195 countries around the world (Coursera, 2013). In addition to the development of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) the literature speaks to the recent introduction of flipped classrooms which will be presented in the next section.

2.7 Flipped Classroom

The Flipped Classroom was initially developed by Karl Fisch, a high school professor from Denver Colorado, United States, who decided to flip his classroom (Pink, 2010). To some this new approach to teaching was known as the “Fisch Flip” where students reviewed homework during class time and work on lectures at home (Pink) The literature describes that the flipped classroom as an innovative approach to teaching which was popularized by the Khan Academy which has flipped the traditional classroom structure on “its head” (Knewton, 2011). The basic structure of the flipped
classroom is one whereby the student at his/her convenience is able to review online videos of the class lectures at home before coming to classes (Knewton). Knewton indicated that the concepts learned by the students at home are further solidified during the classroom under the guidance of the professor or teacher. Gobry’s (2012) article states the introduction of a flipped classroom will allow the students to better utilize the time spent within the classroom and allow the professor to better assess the students’ learning.

2.8 Asynchronous and synchronous modes of delivery

In the previous sections the main models of online distance learning have been presented. However, the delivery of the online courses can be done in either an asynchronous or synchronous format. Porter (2004) and Hrastinski (2008) describe the asynchronous mode of delivery as one that is commonly facilitated through the use of technological resources, such as e-mail and discussion boards supported by teachers whose learners do not access the online content at the same time. The learner in this type in this mode of delivery, Porter (2004) states, has the time and convenience to process and complete the assigned tasks within their own timeframe as well as enjoy the leisure of doing the learning at their own pace. It is through this form of learning the student has a greater level of flexibility and autonomy to determine when and how much time will be spent in the online environment. For example, an undergraduate class such as History 100 or a graduate class in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Regina may follow this type of course format.

Schlosser and Simonson (2002) also indicated that in the asynchronous form of learning, members of the learning group are separated by time. However, through the
introduction and use of interactive technologies online users are able to connect and share within their learning community. The introduction of connectors in the online environment helps to facilitate higher levels of interaction and connectivity for the exchange and development of ideas (Reigeluth, 1999). Additionally online learning gives students more access and flexibility to higher education which is a very cost effective and innovative method of learning delivery (Mittal, 2008).

The asynchronous mode of delivery, similar to what normally occurs in a traditional classroom setting, focuses on the development of online learning communities that are learner-centered, active, authentic and collaborative (Reigeluth, 1999). Dawson (2006) points out that this form of learning is self-directed as the student has a great deal of flexibility in deciding in what time the learning takes places, which in many ways contributes to the quality of his or her learning experience (Covey, 1989).

The synchronous mode of delivery is one which is supported through, among others, video conferencing, Adobe Connect, online chats, Google Circles, Skype chats, Twitter and online forums where learners feel that they are part of a knowledge learning community (Hrastinski, 2008). Porter (2004) describes this as “same time” learning. In this form of learning students connect to the online learning environment at the same time (Hrastinski, 2008; Allen & Seaman, 2011). Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) emphasize the importance of facilitating strong interaction within the learning environment and states interaction is one of the key factors which ensure a successful online experience. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer further state that a positive online learning experience is primarily achieved when a student feels connected not only to the course content, but also as a result of the skills and knowledge he/she acquires
when he/she feels they are a part of a learning community. The asynchronous and synchronous modes of delivery can certainly be used in various online environments and are dependent on the learning outcomes determined by the professor (Hrastiniski, 2008). Although the introduction of online learning allows learners to access higher educational opportunities it is not without concerns of affordability for single working parents who are trying to make a better life for themselves and their families (Callahan & Sandlin, 2007).

2.9 Online learning at the University of Regina

The participants in the current study primarily used the Moodle content management system. However, at the University of Regina, each model previously reviewed has been used: blended learning, flipped classrooms, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Although some faculty members have attempted to use a blended format, there is still a need to develop a comprehensive formal blended strategy (Maeers, Personal Communication, 2011).

UR Courses is one of the more basic and frequently used formats, using a content management platform called Moodle. Moodle is an open source system that has been designed to harness the constructivism approach to learning in the online environment (Rice, 2006). This content management system is based on the principle that the student learns and retains information when there is greater interaction with the course materials (Rice). Some of the key forms of interactive materials that are used in the Moodle system include but are not limited to the “uploading of assignments, forums, quizzes, video clips and links” (Rice, 2006, p.9).
The UR Courses environment consists of a front page which a student navigates after having logged on. Additionally, users will notice the site description, the list of “available courses, course description, calendar and other important navigational links” (Rice, 2006, p.14). The look and feel of the class in this environment in many ways is determined by the professor and the course designers, as well as the desired learning outcome experience needed to be created for the student. The online environment, Porter (2004) indicates, becomes the foremost part of the hub in which the learning process evolves. No longer can the use of technology be seen simply as a supplemental tool of instruction but the vehicle which dictates the result of the individual’s learning experience (Rice, 2006). Berge (1997) postulates that in some aspects with the introduction of online learning into the curriculum, students have the possibility to learn at their own time and pace as well as from a flexible learning framework.

The findings in the University of Regina Distance Education Task Force Final Report (2010) previously presented, as well as in the literature reviewed, indicate the increasing need for the adult learner to continuously access new opportunities for convenient forms of learning (Rosenberg, 2001; Allen & Seaman, 2011). Although the literature reviewed indicates this growing demand for online learning in higher education the reader must also be aware of the pedagogical implications that are generated as a result of this form of instruction which will be reviewed in the next section.

2.10 Current pedagogical implications of online learning

In their findings, Campbell and Khalideen (2007) highlight that students who participated in online courses at the University of Regina were very concerned with course content, structure, and online support. Similarly, Porter (2004) finds that one of
the areas of concern with online instruction is ensuring that the needs of the learner are taken into consideration during the course design. The needs of the learners are unique and are influenced by their motivations whether intrinsically or extrinsically. The research further indicates that a student’s motivation critically determines how successful the learner will or will not be in the online environment (Porter).

Another important factor that also needs to be considered according to Porter (2004) is the need to develop a teaching philosophy that is “organic” and inherently facilitates the social construction of knowledge through the exchange of ideas and concepts. To develop an environment for the social construction of knowledge the instructors must be aware of the diverse personalities who are present in the learning environment (Porter). The instructor must also be willing to continuously “adapt the technology to the students’ unique learning needs” (Porter, 2004, p.71). Porter further explains that at times members of the professoriate have a tendency to develop and design online curriculum that mirrors their personal levels of comfort and not the needs of the students. However, an instructor who wants to ensure that the learners are successful will ensure that their unique learning needs are explored through the use of appropriate course content that is meaningful and relevant (Porter). Priority must always be given to the learner during the process of curriculum development and design.

The online experience of the students must also facilitate higher levels of interaction and connectivism whereby the students feel they are part of a learning community (Siemens, 2004). Miller (2006) also points out that in addition to forming connections online the instructor must focus on developing the individual’s mind, body, and soul. Miller defines this process as “timeless learning”. Timeless learning is an
approach to learning that incorporates the affective and cognitive elements of the learner and gives greater meaning to development of knowledge (Siemens, 2004).

Timeless learning is very important to the learning process as it requires the professor to be fully aware of the learning gaps with which each student enters into the online environment. By addressing the learning gaps in the online environment the instructor actively facilitates the construction of knowledge through social interactions thereby permitting the student to move to new levels of understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky highlights that through the process of social interaction and connection a learner is able to move to a higher level in his zone of proximal development. Siemens (2004) also shares that through the process of connectivity learners are able to nurture and facilitate learning. Porter (2004) describes this as a process of inciting learning and meaning through constructive interaction. As a result, it is pivotal that extreme care and attention is given to the development of good student and teacher relationships in the online environment.

Another area of concern with online classes relates to the economic viability and quality of the online curriculum. Porter (2004) explains that some members of the professoriate have shared their concerns in regards to whether or not online instruction allows the student to gain a similar or even better learning experience than in the traditional classroom environment. In the online environment the instructor has to adapt a flexible and creative approach to his/her teaching philosophy. By the professor giving the students clear expectations from the onset of the online, better equips them to effectively navigate the workload which has been assigned during the online course. Not only will this enhance the learner’s performance but also will reduce the level of frustration a
potential learner can face when he or she is not able to properly assess the outcome of the online course (Porter, 2004). It is for this reason Porter stresses that the professor should take greater care to clearly communicate from the onset of the course his/her expectations to the students.

2.11 Critique of online learning

For some students, e-learning or online distance learning may attempt to help in reducing barriers of time and distance (Gunasekaran, McNeil & Shaul, 2002). However, despite all the positive aspects of e-learning or online distance learning, educational institutions should be mindful about providing access to online courses at a reasonable cost to the student and not be overly concerned by the high economical returns associated with the provision of online courses to students. Allen and Seaman (2011) indicate that at times one of the limiting factors to accessing online learning is the cost of the service. For example, Sweet (2010) indicates in her study that on average an online bachelor’s degree can cost a student up to $50,000 U.S. At the University of Regina, on average, students spend approximately $75,000 CAN on Post Secondary Education (University of Regina Distance and Online Learning, 2012). Sweet (2010) further states that although the cost may have dropped in some instances, a minimum wage earner, a single parent, a person living in poverty, or people with limited access to technological resources, may still find online learning options costly. Therefore the role of the educational institution is to ensure that students have access to more affordable online courses (Sweet). The development of the Massive Open Online Courses will certainly assist in reducing the high cost of classes (Coursera, 2013).
Additionally, Sambataro (2001) postulates with the growing use of online learning, some learners have been resistant to make use of this form of learning. Research indicates that with adult learners whose needs are diverse, there is a preference for the face-to-face interaction in conjunction with the online experiences (Snyder, 2009). Yukawa (2010) further states that, although the online learning environment affords the learner varied tools for intellectual stimulation, it minimizes some forms of non-verbal communications such as tone, voice, and body language. Similarly, Remtulla (2007) warns that with the introduction of e-learning and the knowledge based economy, many adult learners feel displaced, alienated, and powerless. He claims that e-learning reinforces a philosophy of “one size fits all” and neglects the learner’s ability to choose what and how they learn. One can safely state that the emergent force behind the widespread introduction of e-learning and online distance learning is the cost effectiveness and its financial impact for educational institutions (Nocente & Kanuka, 2002). Therefore, although e-learning increases accessibility and provides a variety of learning opportunities, user acceptance has not been very high (Imamoglu, 2007).

Such varied levels of acceptance depend, in great part, on the perceived usefulness, ease of use, and intention of the learner (Imamoglu, 2007). In today’s information-driven society the adult learner is more concerned with developing problem solving skills which he/she can incorporate into his/her daily life (Vigentini, 2009). Davis (1989) affirms that the varied beliefs and interests of adult learners have a considerable influence on their perception of e-learning. As a result, if the diverse needs of the adult learner are not being met through an online learning forum there will be
difficulty in getting the student to actively engage in his/her learning process (Vigentini, 2009).

Kanuka and Anderson (1998) further suggest that although e-learning has helped to reduce cost and is widely accepted by commercial organizations and educational institutions, it is not always widely accepted by the participants. As a result, online course delivery may not be successful in some forums (Pailing, 2002). Therefore the concern which emerges from such research is whether or not online learning actively meets the needs of its end users (Pailing). Does this environment create a unique learning experience for students? Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer (2001) state that learning is a social process which requires significant interaction as well as dialogue between facilitators, students, and peers.

2.12 Summary

In this chapter a cursory overview outlining the various modalities of online learning has been shared. Additionally, the unique characteristics of the adult learner have also been presented. The research also indicates that a more social approach to online learning should be considered. Despite the existence of various models of online learning students who have a positive experience in the online environment speak to the importance of being connected and feeling part of a community of inquiry whereby knowledge is socially constructed.

The current chapter also presented to the reader the challenges or contradictions that are discussed in the reviewed literature and how the research findings have compared and differed in many ways to explain some of the possible factors which contribute to the
students’ perceptions of online learning. The research methodology that informs this present study is presented subsequently in Chapter III.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The following chapter is organized in two areas. First, the epistemological framework which orients this research is presented. Second, the interview protocol, participants, data collection, data analysis, and the emergent theory process used to ground the current research finding is examined.

3.1 Epistemological Framework

The focus of the interpretivist model is to allow the researcher to develop the “ontological and educative authenticity” of his or her reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 207). It is through this process that the researcher co-constructs and attempts to understand the participants’ reality.

One of the greatest merits of qualitative research is that it allows the researcher a greater level of flexibility to move in and out of the data free of preconceived ideas, by creating the opportunity to listen and journey with the participants while they share their experiences. Unlike the mechanical positivistic approaches, the researcher is exposed to the individual experiences of the research participants and is not subjected to the indifferent objectivity that has been evident in previous social research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

The ambiguity of the process allowed me, from the beginning of my journey, during its process, and at the end, to understand the results that would eventually be co-constructed as my research findings. Charmaz’s (2006) encapsulation of grounded theory permits the researcher to be open to the richness of the experience each participant
brought to this dialectic process of knowledge construction. Every word, pause and silence, not only made the data come alive for me but also gave the participants numerous opportunities to reflect on their own personal experiences.

By using the theoretical underpinnings of grounded theory as proposed by Charmaz (2006), the researcher is able through an inductive approach to co-construct useful and relevant theory from the words of the participants (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). It was important to use this methodological approach as the majority of the studies previously conducted on online distance learning were of a quantitative nature, and students felt that they had not seen any significant improvements in their classes.

Prior to commencement of this research an ethics board application was submitted and approval was granted for this current study in August, 2011 (see Appendix D). The first part of the data gathering process was the recruitment of suitable participants for the study. Through the process of purposive sampling relevant research participants were identified. The term purposive sampling as defined by Neuman (2006) is a process whereby research participants are intentionally selected because of their relevance to the study. By intentionally selecting the participants the researcher is able to better focus the research on the matters relevant to the students who have been exposed to online learning at the University of Regina. It proved difficult to find committed participants who made themselves readily available for the interview process; as a result, a snowballing process was also employed where current participants referred other relevant participants to me. Neuman (2006) defines this process as a qualitative tool in which members of a research group are referred to or put into contact with possible participants who have had similar experiences.
The final process used for recruiting participants was through the use of mass e-mails and Facebook messages to the university community. After the participants were recruited individual meetings were held to explain the nature of the study and to review and obtain informed consent.

3.2 Interview protocol

One of the key elements of grounded theory is the use of a one-on-one interview. Charmaz (2006) and Kvale (1996) define the interview as a process where through the use of semi-structured questions the researcher is able to explore the thoughts and experiences of the participants. By using the one-on-one interview approach the researcher is able to give an analytical edge to his/her research. The interview also creates an excellent opportunity for the researcher to actively observe the participants’ verbal and non-verbal cues while they are sharing their story. One of the greatest merits of the one-on-one interview is that it does not lock the participant into rigid silos but facilitates a process of self-observation and exploration during which the participants have the opportunity to revisit their past experience (Charmaz, 2006). To this end, a one-on-one interview of 30-60 minutes took place with each of the twelve (12) participants. These interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed (See Appendix A for interview protocol). The interview covered the following areas: general background information, initial experiences within online learning, benefits, drawbacks and the relationships among the student, teacher, peers, and online content.

3.3 Participants

The participants selected consisted of 12 University of Regina students ranging in age from 24-45, 4 from the undergraduate level and 8 from the graduate level. There
were nine female and three male students. The participants ranged from various cultural backgrounds including: Canadian, Indian, Jamaican, Australian, Thai, Chinese, and Venezuelan. The area of studies consisted of Education, International Studies, Economics, Business Administration, and Human Resource Development.

3.4 Data analysis

After the participants were selected and interviewed, 12 interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. During the process of transcribing the interview I was able to take an initial cursory view of the information that was being presented. It is during this process of constant comparisons that insights, connections, and critical ideas from the data were generated. The initial stage of the research journey consisted of several moments of self observation and self reflection which created the opportunity to understand what the data revealed about the experiences of the participants with online learning at the University of Regina. Charmaz (2006) describes this stage as being actively involved in the data gathering process and not as a passive observer who seeks scientific neutrality.

At every step of the journey the researcher is immersed in the data, moving back and forth, questioning whether sufficient information has been gathered, and if the data reflect the multiple views of the participants and captures what lies beneath? Through the process of questioning the data and my own assumptions, the research becomes organic and fluid ensuring that I tell the story of my participants. The focus of grounded theory, Charmaz (2006) states, is to constantly reshape and redefine the data. Glaser (2002) states that all data is relevant and there is much to be learned.
The data analysis process consisted of initial coding, focused coding, and memo writing as presented by Charmaz (2006). The process of initial coding is defined by what the researcher observes, his/her initial impressions, ideas, or thoughts that have emerged after taking a preliminary review of the transcribed interviews. This is a critical part of the analysis process as it is vital that the researcher remains open to “all that is data” (Glaser, 2002). At this point I navigated the data in order to attempt to understand the individual perceptions of the students with online learning. As I reviewed each line, looked for similarities and differences I moved into a process of focused coding. The term focused coding is defined as a deliberate analysis and synthesis of the emergent data into relevant categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Focus coding is another crucial point of the data analysis process as the researcher carefully examines the data and is able to question how the co-constructed categories contribute to the development of the grounded theory. This non-linear process consisted of a constant movement back and forth through the data to connect fresh ideas. It was also during this process that I encountered a series of revelations that led to greater insight into the data. I noted with each new participant that the data evolved bringing fresh insight about the students’ perceptions of the online learning experience at the University. Grounded theory is a flexible process that truly allows a researcher to critically think about the data in new and creative ways (Charmaz, 2006). The research is organic and through focused coding I was able to keep very close to the data and to keep the codes alive thereby preserving the richness of each participant.

The data analysis process also consisted of memo writing. Charmaz (2006) defines memo writing as the process whereby the researcher is able to connect and
construct while moving the data from the information stage to the presentation of the research findings. The researcher prepares a draft of initial ideas, thoughts, questions, and themes that have emerged from the data. Throughout this journey the researcher is constantly reshaping or redefining and thinking about the data presented by the participants. It is also via the process of constant memo writing that the researcher captures the dialectic evolution of the data. Memo writing allows the researcher to strengthen the emergent categories which, in turn, will contribute to the further development of the putative theory. Through the process of memo writing the researcher has a creative and flexible working space to build on previously unseen connections which enriches the emergent themes and co-constructed categories. In fact, one of the greatest benefits of qualitative research is the great level of flexibility and creativity it affords a researcher.

Throughout the data analysis process I experienced several “aha” moments which contributed to a new level of understanding of the emergent data and this was achieved as a direct result of the free flowing nature of memo writing. I was aware of my preconceived notions but remained open to what the data should be saying and allowed for the opportunity to dig deeper and fully explore the categories that I had constructed. Charmaz (2006) further explains that the entire process of memo writing allows the researcher to be open to contradictions and the haziness that evolves from the data. It is truly a process of exploration and discovery (Charmaz, 2006).

During the memo writing process, I identified the overarching themes and co-constructed categories, which assisted me in presenting the rich, unique particularities the twelve students shared about their perceptions of online distance learning at the
University of Regina. It is also important to note that these interpretations form impressions which are unique to the participants in the study at the time of the interview.

3.5 Relevance
In the current study, I explored students’ perspective of online learning using the systematic and flexible approach of grounded theory as presented by Charmaz (2006). Through this inductive approach the researcher is able to explore, discover and co-create with the participants (Charmaz, 2006). The rich data which is unique to these participants will make a contribution to the extant literature. The current study is not intended to create a generalization of the research findings and any attempt to do so will simply minimize the unique experience of each participant. Therefore my mandate as a qualitative researcher is to strive to facilitate an environment to allow the participants the opportunity to share their experiences freely in a trustworthy environment (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). For this reason a grounded theory framework, Charmaz states is most valuable in the current study as the researcher gains a firsthand insight into the students’ experiences with the online learning environment.

3.6 Summary
In this chapter, I explained the methodological approach that orients the current study. The methodology used for this study was grounded theory as presented by Charmaz (2006). Twelve (12) University of Regina students from the undergraduate and graduate levels were selected through the process of purposive sampling to participate in a 30-60 minute one-on-one interview. Each participant was given an informed consent document which explained the nature of the research and Ethics Board approval was
received to conduct the current research. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The process of data analysis consisted of initial coding, focused coding, and memo writing. Initial coding was the preliminary step in which the researcher is able to sift through the data with an open mind and develop first impressions of the data. Through line by line coding the researcher is able to examine the data more carefully and begin to develop or conceptualize ideas and thoughts and questions about what the participants are sharing. It is through the memo writing process that I was able to identify leads and patterns within the data.

The second part of the data analysis process consisted of focused coding. Focus coding allowed me to develop the overarching themes and co-constructed categories that emerged from the data. Neuman (2006) defines this as a process of sifting through large amounts of data and synthesizing it. This is a guided process that allowed me to synthesize the emerging data as well as to make relevant connections between the themes and categories.

The third part of the data analysis process which enriched the current study is memo writing. Charmaz (2006) describes memo writing as a pivotal part of the data analysis process whereby the researcher develops the framework that encapsulates the dialectic and organic nature of the data. It is the point whereby themes and categories are enriched. Memo writing allows the researcher to dig deeper and make connections between the emerging themes and categories. The very nature and flexibility of this
process allows the researcher the opportunity to think freely to explore and discover the richness of each participant’s experiences (Charmaz).

By using a grounded theory approach, I was able to explore students’ perceptions of online learning at the University of Regina. Despite the ambiguity of the process, as the researcher, I gained insight from the unique experiences of the twelve participants which will make contributions to the field of online learning. Next, the research findings of this study are presented in Chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The research findings will be presented in two main sections. In the first part of this chapter a cursory overview of the participants’ profiles will be presented highlighting their work experiences, educational background, and student experiences at the University. In the second part, the main findings outlining the students’ perceptions of online learning will be presented. The participants explain the benefits and drawbacks of online learning and more importantly the factors necessary to ensure success in an online learning environment. The findings section further examines how the students’ motivations have an impact on their perception of the online learning experience.

4.1 Demographics

The twelve participants for this study comprised eight females and four males, ranging in age from 24 to 45 years old. The research group comprised of four undergraduate students and eight graduate students. Their programs of studies encompassed International Studies, Economics, Education, Public Administration Policy, Human Resource Development, and Business Administration. The participants originated from different countries, such as, Thailand, Venezuela, India, Canada, Australia, Jamaica, and China. In order to ensure confidentiality generic names or pseudonyms have been assigned.

4.2 Participants’ profiles

To encapsulate the unique richness that each participant brings to this research a preliminary view into their background, educational and work experiences will be provided in order to help the reader better understand their individual experiences with online distance learning.
1. **Sherry** is a twenty-nine-year-old, female graduate student from India. She has been at the University of Regina for about two years completing her second Masters Degree in Curriculum and Instruction. During her program in Curriculum and Instruction she has taken a total of 10 classes, half of which were online or in a blended learning format. Although she was comfortable learning in the synchronous and blended environment, she recalls one of her experiences as negative because she was not able to get the necessary feedback from her professor especially in the online course. This participant responded to a call for participants for this research through an online post on Facebook.

2. **Ariel** is a twenty-four-year-old female undergraduate student from Thailand. She has been in Canada for more than two years and is currently in her second year of her Bachelors of Arts Degree in Economics. During her program at the University of Regina she has taken two online classes; a 100 level class and a 200 level class. She describes her experience with her online classes as challenging due to the fact that she was in Thailand at that time and was concerned about working on additional credit hours. Ariel recalls her experience as being one that was quite frustrating and not as easy or flexible as she would have liked it to be. Ariel was recruited for this research through the process of snowballing.

3. **Laura** is a twenty-five-year-old female graduate student from Venezuela currently pursuing her Masters in Human Resource Development. Initially, she came to Canada as an English as a Second Language Student (ESL) and upon completion of her language program began her Master’s Program in 2009. She has been in Canada for over three years and recalls her first online experience as being “shocking”. Emotionally, Laura describes her experience with online learning as being a sad one which still haunts her to
this day and has made her question her ability to do well in this type of classroom environment. Laura was referred to this study through snowballing.

4. **Jenni** is a twenty-four-year-old female Canadian undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Arts Degree majoring in Spanish and Economics. She describes herself as a student who has had to work ever since she was fifteen years old to go to school as she has never been eligible for student loans. She recalls having to work two part-time jobs when she first started her University career. It became a lot easier for her to work and attend classes when she was able to secure a full time job on campus. During her experiences at University, Jenni was primarily concerned with the lack of availability of weekend or evening classes. She questions the quality of the evening and weekend classes as she is not sure if similar emphasis is being placed on them as would a regular class. Jenni shares that her first online class was taken in May and June of 2011 and describes her overall experience as being one where she did not feel engaged. Jenni was part of the purposive sampling targeted for this research. Jenni was selected for this research through personal contact.

5. **Bailey** is a twenty-four-year-old, Canadian, female undergraduate student who is a single mother currently pursuing an Arts degree in French and History. She speaks of her three-year-old daughter as her primary motivation for coming back to school as she wants to ensure that she is more than able to provide financially for her and eventually realize her personal dream of becoming a teacher in a French immersion classroom. Bailey is the first of three girls in her family but does not live at home with her parents. She works, takes care of her own household and attends university. Bailey’s first online experience occurred in the Spring/Summer Semester of 2011 where she took a 100 level class in
Canadian History. This was her very first online class during her program at the University of Regina and she describes her experience with mixed emotions especially primarily because her professor never responded to her concerns about losing some of her work when she had technical difficulties during her final exams. This greatly affected her views towards the class. Bailey was identified for this study through snowballing.

6. Chloe is a thirty-year-old, Canadian female graduate student in Educational Psychology. She holds a Psychology degree from the University of Saskatchewan and also a Bachelor of Education Degree from the University of Regina. Currently, Chloe teaches in the Regina Public School Division and is hoping to complete her Master’s Degree in the next year. She recalls her experience with online learning during the time in which she was trying to get into the Bachelor of Education program and she needed a mathematics class because she was lacking the required credit hours. She lived in a northern community which was 6.5 hours outside of Regina and it was neither economically feasible nor convenient for her to come to the city in order to take that one mathematics class. She describes her overall experience as negative and felt that she would have done much better if she had been in an on campus class. Chloe was referred to the study through snowballing.

7. Kelly is a twenty-four-year-old, Jamaican, graduate student who immigrated to Canada over ten years ago with her parents and brother. She completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, where she majored in Political Science, History and Caribbean Studies. Currently she is completing her Master’s Degree in Public Administration and Policy through the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy. Kelly began her program in the winter of 2010 and has taken one online class at
the University of Regina. She also brings additional experience to this research as she has also completed an online program through Ryerson University. She worked while she completed her program. She describes her online experience as very positive and attributes a lot of it to the skill in which the professor was able to make the learning process as engaging as possible. Kelly was referred to this study through the process of snowballing.

8. David is a twenty-six-year-old, Australian, undergraduate student who immigrated to Canada at the age of 16. He is currently in the third year of his Bachelor of Arts Degree in International Studies. David started his program at the University of Regina in the winter of 2009. His work experience varies from having worked in construction industry, night clubs, and currently in the Oil and Gas field as a foreman for a company based out of Calgary. His job takes him outside of the province frequently and taking an online class is one of the better options available to him. David did not specify whether his experience was either positive or negative. David was selected for this study through purposive sampling.

9. Ken is a forty-five-year-old, Canadian male graduate student who recently completed his Master of Human Resource Management. He has been a student and a full time employee at the University for over 25 years. His work experience includes over 20 years in the career services field. Ken also holds a Bachelor of Administration in Public Policy which he completed in 1990. He speaks of his first online class experience as something that he had tried to avoid throughout his Master program. However, he was in his final semester of classes and needed to take an online course in order to complete his program. His overall experience was positive and he attributes this to the ability of his professor to
keep him engaged throughout the process. Ken was selected for the current study through purposive sampling.

10. **Jewell** is a twenty-eight-year-old, Chinese female graduate student who is currently working on her Master of Business Administration in Leadership and holds a Bachelor of Law degree from her home country. Jewell’s work experience consisted of over five years working with the Chinese Government in Beijing, focusing on management issues, labour relations, and general administration. She has been in Canada for a little less than a year and is currently enrolled in her first online class at the University of Regina. She describes her online experience as average. Jewell was identified for this study through snowballing.

11. **Tara** is a thirty-three-year-old, Canadian female graduate student who is currently enrolled in the Master of Business Administration in Leadership. She is a stay-at-home mother of two kids. Tara has over seven years experience as a call center manager and has worked for companies such as Jump.ca, 24-7 in touch, Staples, and CIBC. She started her program at the University of Regina in 2009 since the company she was employed with closed its operations. She recalls that her first online class was taken in the Fall of 2009 and it was also the same semester in which she gave birth to her second child. She indicates that her online experience was as good as it could have been simply because of the convenience it afforded her as an at-home mom. Tara was referred to this study through the process of snowballing.

12. **Igor** is a thirty-three-year-old, Canadian, male graduate student who is currently pursuing his Master in Adult Education. He is a father of two kids and also works full
time while he is completing his program. Igor started his Bachelor’s Degree at a previous University in Canada and then transferred to the University of Regina in 2000. He recalls that his entire undergraduate program was done through night school. He worked in a dot com company for ten years during the dot com craze, and then moved over to SaskPower for under a year and a half, then to the University of Regina Career Centre for six years and finally to Notre Dame College in 2011. He has completed all the mandatory courses for his Master in Adult Education and is currently working on his thesis. Igor has taken two online classes during his program at the graduate level and preferred the face-to-face on-campus classroom setting. Igor did not describe his online experience as either positive or negative but stated that he preferred the on campus class experience. He was referred to this study through the process of snowballing.

It is beneficial that the reader is able to take a cursory view into the educational background, working background, and personal lives of each participant. Despite the fact that all participants were told from the beginning of the study that the research would focus on their perceptions and attitudes of online learning at the University of Regina, three participants had experiences at other Universities and had also taken classes fully online and in the blended format. The main findings of the study will be examined in the following section.

4.3 Main Findings

The main findings will consist of the themes and categories that have emerged from the data. The findings of this study are organized under the following themes: the benefits and drawbacks of online learning, the role of the professor in facilitating the
online experience, and the impact of the motivating factor on students’ success in the online environment.

4.4 Benefits of online learning

According to the participants the main benefits of the online learning experience was related to cost effectiveness, convenience, and flexibility. Ten (10/12) participants stated the primary reasons for selecting this format of learning was due to cost effectiveness, convenience, and flexibility they found with an online course. One (1/12) participant indicated that this was the only option available to him in order to complete his program. Another one (1/12) of the participants stated that she selected the online class as she did not want to fall behind in her academic program while she was out of the country. The first category that will be examined under the current theme is the cost effectiveness of online learning.

4.4.1 Cost Effective

The twelve (12/12) research participants identified online learning as a cost effective option to pursue their post-secondary education. Bailey shared: “I was thrilled that we did not have to spend additional money on textbooks as most of the material that was needed for the class was readily available online. We simply accessed the uploaded files and data links the professor places on UR-self service”. Similarly, Chloe stated: “I lived 6.5 hours outside of Regina so it was [relatively] impossible and not cost effective for me to drive in to come into the city just for one class”. Her reason for selecting the online learning format was directly related to the financial impact traveling into the city would have had because of the cost of fuel for a weekly commute to the city as well as getting time off her job to get to the classes in a timely manner.
Chloe also stated “by taking the online class to earn the extra credit was what I needed and this was not only a cost effective but also a convenient option for me personally”. Ken shared “I work on campus so I needed one more class to complete my program so taking an online class made it easier for me to continue working so this option worked best for me”. As well, Igor shared “I work outside the city so this was most cost effective for me option”; the cost of the commute would have been an additional expense for him during his studies. Similarly, David who works in the Oil and Gas Industry stated “it’s cheaper to take an online class so why not” as there was no loss of wages for him during the times he needed to be out of the city for work. Jenni and Kelly also viewed taking an online class as cost effective as they were able to continue working and not lose the revenue from their job. Whereas Ariel, Jewell, Sherry, and Laura saw it as a cheaper option for classes as International Students who pay higher tuition for a regular on-campus class. Ariel states “I was able to earn credits while I was in Thailand and that’s important for me”. In the case of Tara, an online class was a cost effective option as she shared “I am a stay-at-home mom and was glad I was able to take the classes and not worry about finding extra help with the children”.

4.4.2 Convenience and flexibility

The second benefit described by the research participants is the ease and convenience the online class afforded them. In the asynchronous learning format the students felt they were able to work at their own pace, to better develop their ideas and share without the prejudgments that can be experienced in the in-class environment. 10/12 participants shared that the option of an online class allowed them to work at their own pace which also consisted in having additional time to process the information and
respond to questions or discussions in the online forum. Bailey specifically stated: “…I am an evening person and observed that I felt less pressured in the online class since I had enough time to process my thoughts and I was able to work during my peak times which were at night”. For Bailey the asynchronous online format allowed her to work at a preferred time where her productivity was higher. Laura further shared: “… this was also a convenient way as I could work more on my writing skills and not be too concerned about being judged because I sounded differently”. Kelly shared: “…the online class afforded me more time to do additional research and contribute in a more meaningful way to the online forum; I found that I had more time to read up on the material because I wanted to make sure that I had something to say… so it was good to be able to do that”.

On the other hand, Ariel and Tara, at times, found the online class--more specifically the online forum--very inconvenient. Ariel who was currently out the country struggled in keeping up with the online forum as there was a significant time difference between Thailand and Canada; she shared “I would have to wake up early just to be able to post a response”. In Tara’s case being a mother of two young children she found it a bit challenging at times to post regularly on the forum and was not sure if this was a good way to evaluate students’ learning.

Nine (9/12) participants interviewed were all full-time employees with demanding careers, two (2/12) were mothers, and one (1/12) participant was an English as a Second Language student. These students stated that the online classes afforded them some flexibility to complete their work obligations during the day time, manage their household and families in the evening, in addition to completing their educational
requirements. Ken stated that his success in this learning format was greatly determined by “…what took place in my life at that time” the less busy he was with work and personal matters the more time he had to dedicate to his online class. Tara shared “having a young child at home made it a lot easier to take an online class than having to come into the classroom”. Laura also shared that English is her second language and at times worried about how differently she sounds to her other classmates. By taking the online class she was better able to strengthen her writing skills and not worry about the reactions of her classmates. The participants indicated that despite the positives of the online environment, some of the drawbacks which affected students’ success must also be highlighted.

4.5 Drawbacks of online learning

The research participants highlighted that according to their online experiences the greatest challenges were the lack of feedback from the professor, not feeling engaged, the lack of interaction they felt, poor technical support, the evident loss of extra visual cues, and the possibility of academic dishonesty.

4.5.1 Lack of feedback

For all the participants the lack of detailed feedback from the professor was an area of great concern. The eight (8/12) described the lack of feedback from the professor as insufficient in some cases or as the four (4/12) indicated the feedback was very unclear. Not being given a clear idea of what could be done to improve their assignments in many instances increased the students’ anxiety as they were not sure how well they were doing or not doing in the class. Ariel shared her experience with the professor’s feedback as follows: “do the assignment and get a grade…no feedback…sigh”. The students felt that
the grade they were given in many instances did not reflect the amount of work or effort they had put into the class. Ken shared “at times when you got back your grade you were shocked”. The “lack of detailed feedback” as indicated by Tara was something she felt strongly was missing during the online experience and not having adequate feedback from her professor really concerned her during the program. Chloe shared she felt very frustrated especially when she needed clarification with one of her math assignments in which she approached her instructor for clarification. She stated “he answered my questions, but I was still not sure what he meant so I sought help from another math teacher at my school”. Similarly Tara shared “I would’ve liked more comments on my assignments”.

The examples mentioned previously reinforce how much importance students place on receiving detailed feedback from their professors as the feedback gives them a better indication of how well they are doing in the online class. Sherry stated that the class which caused her the most stress was the one in which she got “absolutely no feedback” from her professor. David described his concern with feedback slightly differently from the other participants; he explained “[my professor] gave good guidance…but sometimes I was not sure about the course content”. Overall all the participants stated that with more feedback from the professor they would have felt more connected and engaged with the course materials. A professor giving detailed feedback will also assist in keeping the online learner connected and engaged with the course material as well as allowing the learner to identify how they are progressing with the course materials. As a result, the next drawback presented will review the drawback of student engagement in the learning environment.
4.5.2 Not feeling engaged

According to the participants they did not feel fully engaged in what they were learning. The four (4/4) undergraduate students stated that they “felt lost” or “disinterested” in what they were being taught. Ariel stated “I struggled at times because I was not able to relate to the cultural issues that were being discussed as I was in Thailand and was not aware of what was currently happening in Saskatchewan”. The inability to connect meaningfully with the course content caused Ariel to feel isolated and frustrated with the online course material. Sherry, David, Ken, Jenni, Kelly, Igor, and Tara specifically shared that the more engaged they felt in the environment the more likely they were motivated to go the extra mile and do additional work for the class. Kelly and Jenni shared that when the professor was excited and enthusiastic about the class the more engaged and connected they felt. However, at the graduate level, seven of (7/8) the students indicated that the professors used various strategies and web-based technologies such as Skype, video chats, and blogs to keep them continuously connected as well as engaged during the learning process. What was interesting to note that one (1/8) graduate student who had taken a class with similar content described her experience as being just “average”. Tara shared: “I would have enjoyed the program a lot better if the material was newer to me and more creative;” this would have made it easier for her to connect in a more meaningful way with the other members of the online environment.

The findings also indicated that the students who were in a synchronous environment where they had weekly group chat sessions felt less isolated and more engaged with the content. Ken shared “I really appreciated our group chats… it really helped me to feel like I was actually a part of a group”. However, the asynchronous environment left the
students frustrated and disconnected. As a result, it is important that the online class, either through creative teaching strategies or web-enabling technologies, fosters a learning environment that supports interaction and connectivity in the virtual learning environment.

4.5.3 Lack of interaction and social presence

The third drawback which the participants discussed is the lack of interaction and loss of social presence from the professor and peers. Some of the students expressed their concern with the lack of interaction and that they felt isolated or lost in cyber space. Ten (10/12) participants shared that the professor introduced themselves on the first day of class and simply disappeared into the cyber world. Whereas, two (2/12) participants emphasized that they felt that the professor was with them throughout their learning journey. The participants also placed a great deal of emphasis on the professor as being the pivotal factor in developing the interactive environment either through the use of web-based technologies or creative teaching strategies. The four (4/4) undergraduate students shared that the professor presented himself/herself at the beginning of the course, explained the timeline for assignments, and then somehow seemed to have disappeared into the woodwork. Bailey, David, Ariel, and Jenni recall how frustrated they felt as there was no clear guidance and limited or no interaction during the class. Bailey stated: “the professor introduced himself the first day of class and completely vanished after that”. The eight (8/8) graduate students had a mixed reaction to how connected they felt in the online environment. For example, Ken, Sherry, Tara, and Jewel shared that their experiences were a bit more positive than negative due to how their previous experiences with online learning prepared them to supplement the class using more interactive web-
based technologies and working in smaller synchronous groups. Ken shared: “the professor had taught before in this environment so she was aware of the issues from the onset and divided the group into smaller groups to do weekly chats”. He further describes this type of interaction in many ways made them feel that the professor was connecting with the class. Whereas, Laura specifically stated that although they were required to post weekly in the online forum, she strongly believes that there “is not enough interaction in the class”. Igor described the online class as “huh okay… the online forums did not do much for me... I still prefer coming to campus for class”. Igor stressed that being able to connect through extra verbal cues is a very important part of his learning process and for this reason he described the online interaction in his class as average.

4.5.4 Technical Support

Another area of concern for the research participants was the inadequacies of technical support during the online experience. Three types of technical support issues were identified. The participants expressed concerns about pages timing out, the technology not being up to date, and delays in IT technical support. Twelve 12/12 participants stated that the greatest level of anxiety faced during the online class was felt especially during the final exams and having a web page time out. In fact the most moving story shared in this research was Bailey’s final exam in which her web page timed out for fifty minutes and she lost a significant part of her exam. She recalled:

“..my biggest challenge came during my final exam because it was an online final..but for some reason on the online final I lost a whole chunk of time. I lost everything I was writing on a question..it was all essay questions and was quite an extensive period to lose.. I contacted the technical people the second it happened.. it would have helped if [they] had contacted me back at all”
Bailey clearly demonstrated how the reliability of the website caused her much anxiety as well as the difficulty in getting the required technical support to complete her final exam. Tara shared similar concerns “I was constantly worried about how reliable the network connection was as I was using a dial-up system and feared that at any moment my page would time out… and was not sure who I would have been able to contact for help”. She further states “…the webpage timing out really scared me and caused me great anxiety”. Laura also shared “at times it was difficult to navigate the technical issues with the webpage and honestly at times I worried about how quickly I would have received a response from the IT support”. Sherry stated “my only biggest concern with my online classes was getting technical support… or if I had any issues like that”. Igor, David, and Ken all shared that the technical issues were also a concern especially when assignments or forum postings were due for submission. Ariel, who was out of the country, was concerned about two things and shared: “I was worried about my connection in Thailand and not knowing what to do to get help since there was a big time difference… it was tough being away”. Jewel also shared: “I was slightly worried about it but there was links on the webpage on how to get help so that helped a bit”.

4.5.5 Loss of extra non verbal cues

The participants also stated that in the online environment, they felt that the extra verbal cues such as facial expressions, gesticulations, and socio-cultural cues were lost in the online environment. Igor stated “my learning style requires me to have that physical contact with a person as this enriches the debates and conversations”. However, due to the missing physical interaction he describes the online forum postings as well as the overall online class experience as “average” and at times found it difficult to follow the
questions online. Chloe, Tara, David, Bailey, Ken, Laura, Jenni, and Jewell also share a similar concern. Laura shared: “...at times I found it difficult to follow the postings whereas in the traditional classroom setting one has the option to see the person while he/she are expressing their idea”. However, Kelly, Ariel, and Sherry did not believe that this adversely affected how they interacted or connected in the online environment. Kelly stated “I really enjoyed the online forum and the back and forth exchanges with my classmates…it was good to read their ideas and further build on the content.” Therefore although the online learning environment for some participants may take away the visual cues needed to better engage, other participants saw the lack of visual cues as an opportunity to use creative approaches to make the learning experience more fulfilling. The preference for an online learning environment as opposed to a traditional classroom is also dependent on the preferred learning style of the participant.

4.5.6 Academic Dishonesty

The final drawback expressed by one (1/12) participant in the current research is the question of academic dishonesty in the online environment. Jenni was the only participant who expressed her concerns about the measures that needed to be put in place to mitigate against dishonesty. Jenni questioned whether the professors were able to ascertain without a doubt whether the student was actually the one who completed the online class and why students chose this form of learning. She shared: “I think the biggest thing like you need to focus on or not focus on but maybe realize that there is that academic dishonesty with [online learning]… how does the prof really know if you are the one who wrote your exams or not”. Jenni expressed these concerns and questions whether professors were aware that this could possibly occur in the online environment.
and what measures needs to be put in place to mitigate against this academic dishonesty in the online environment. Of course the same can be said of research papers or projects in a face-to-face classroom.

4.6 Key success factors for the online learner

After sharing their experiences with their online classes the research participants felt that it was also necessary to highlight what they considered the key success factors for a fulfilling online experience. The participants highlighted that a successful online learner (as with face-to-face instruction but perhaps with greater consequence due to the very nature of the online environment) needs to be someone who is self-motivated, highly self regulated, independent, organized, and very communicative.

4.6.1 Being self-motivated

The research participants indicated that the main reasons for being self-motivated consisted of their need to complete the program in a timely manner, to create better opportunities for their children, to not fall behind in their program, and to meet all work obligations. Twelve (12/12) participants shared that their motives either intrinsically or extrinsically influenced the level of effort and commitment placed into the online class. Despite the participants having varying influencing motivating factors they all stated that for them to be successful in getting the results they needed it was highly important they were motivated to learn in this environment. For the students who had more at stake a greater effort was made to connect and engage in the learning process. A good example of self motivation is highlighted in Ken’s story where he shared: “this was my final core class for my Master of Human Resource Management program and had no choice but to take this class”. As a result of the high relevance of this class to the completion of his
program, Ken was highly motivated as he needed to ensure that he was successful in completing his program requirements.

Similarly, Ariel shared: “…I want to earn credits while in my country and not fall back in my program… so despite the twelve hours difference I made sure to wake up early to post in the forum”. Kelly also shared: “I found myself putting in the extra time to research topics and use the additional resources suggested by the [prof] because I wanted to ensure that…I looked smart in front of my peers”. Bailey, a single mom, shared: “I need to get through the program so that I could provide financially for my three year old daughter”. David, Tara, Jewell, Laura, Jenni, Sherry, Igor, and Chloe were motivated to take this class as it allowed them to work, continue with their daily routines, and study at the same time. Chloe shared: “I was committed to the class as I did not have to commute such a long distance to take a class which I needed to enter the Bachelor of Education program”. Tara, a mother of two young kids who fully committed to taking an online class, stated, “so that it did not affect my role of caring for my new family as well as my working from home”. David whose job takes him out of the city constantly committed to taking his online class shared: “I want to complete my [student] career and at the same time fulfill my work obligations… as I use this money to pay my way through school”. It is important to note that the reasons which influence the participants’ decisions to take an online class are strongly related to their intrinsic or extrinsic motives which also regulates their attitude to this new form of learning.

4.6.2 Being self-regulated

Another important factor which determines whether the student is successful and at the same time has a positive experience in the online environment is their ability to be
disciplined or to self-regulate in the online learning environment. The twelve (12/12) participants acknowledged with the flexibility of the online class, and the opportunity to learn at one’s own pace, breeds a tendency to procrastinate and fall behind on the readings. The participants all shared that their online class consisted of weekly readings, online links, and weekly assignments which also consisted of reading responses that needed to be posted in the online forum. Igor stated “...it would be most helpful if the student approached the online class with the same discipline as an on campus class so make sure to block certain time periods in which they complete readings and forum posting”. The development of a study schedule for the participants was one of the better ways to ensure that all readings and assignments were done by the required deadlines.

Ariel shared: “it was hard to keep up with the reading and posting because of the significant time difference between Canada and Thailand; I was in Thailand and did not know what was going on in Saskatchewan”. Based on their responses Sherry, Laura, Kelly, Ken, Chloe, Bailey, Tara, Jewell, Jenni, and David strongly encourage future students to maintain a high level self-discipline and ensure that one stayed on top of the class readings if they are to be successful in the online class. David suggested: “keeping an agenda really helped me”. Chloe suggested: “booking the same time every week to do assignments…create a routine I think”. Bailey also suggested “I am a night learner so I make sure I put aside some time at night after I have put my daughter to bed to read the postings and make my comments… but it could be hard to keep up”. By having the flexibility in their schedule not only allowed the students to plan out their tasks but also helped them to keep track of how well they were doing in their program. Ken also shared: “stay on top of your work and do not procrastinate”. Laura, on the other hand, found,
even though she put aside sufficient time to do her readings, a great deal of her insecurities with the language contributed to her procrastination. She shared: “I would take longer to post because I was ashamed what the class would think for errors in my English…at times I just did it last minute… I doubted myself a lot you know”. Jenni and Jewell stated that they needed to be very organized since they worked and went to school. Jewell shared: “I kept a schedule of all assignments and due dates for my class, it also helped that the information was also available on the UR courses as well”. Jenni shared: “I started on my tasks early because most of my day was spent at work”. Sherry shared: “in the online environment you have to work much harder than face-to-face”. In summary, based on the participants’ responses, the key to a successful online learning experience is to ensure that one is organized and aware of how much time needs to be allocated to the class in order to be successful. The participants also indicated that the workload in an online class was much higher than a regular traditional classroom and students should not underestimate the amount of workload required for an online class.

4.6.3 Being an independent learner

A student who is an independent learner has a good understanding of his or her individual learning styles as well as the resources needed to be successful in the online environment. The participants indicate that understanding their metacognitive styles contributed to their independence in the online environment. The eight (8/8) graduate students found that in most instances they needed to take the initiative to access additional resources in order to ensure that they were fully engaged with what they were learning. Kelly more specifically recalled that in her International Trade and Policy class she took it upon herself to find additional resources for her class. She stated: “I was able
to look at more case examples and give more to the actual group setting”. Overall, she felt that the class required her to do more on her own. Similarly, Chloe stated: “if I was not able to get the clarification I needed, I took it upon myself to find other avenues of support”. Ken also stated: “I made sure I asked lots of questions so that I was clear on what I needed to get done”. Igor shared: “I knew what I needed to get done so I just did it”. Tara stated: “I had done some of the material before so it was like a revision so I knew what to do if I could not get the responses from the professor”. When examined together it becomes evident that there was a higher level of independence in the graduate students as compared to the undergraduate students. The four (4/4) undergraduate students followed closely the assigned curriculum and did not deviate to acquire any additional information that may have been required for the course.

4.6.4 Stay organized

The twelve (12/12) participants emphasized that another key success factor for a student in this online environment rests in the students’ ability to stay organized. Due to the flexible nature of the online courses the participants all shared that there was a tendency to let their work get behind. As a result they highly recommended that if the person was not by nature an organized individual it would be in their better interest not to take an online class. Bailey, Tara, and Ken shared that it was important to “know your timelines” especially when assignments needed to be handed in or forum postings were due. Tara suggested that it may be helpful if at the onset of the class the professor provided a cheat sheet to students with tips on how to be organized and learn in the online environment. Sherry shared: “staying organized consisted of knowing when something was due”. Kelly also indicated that she made it her duty to check the forum
daily to see what her classmates were posting; she shared: “I made sure I reviewed everyone’s posting with enough time so when it came to making my comments I brought new insight to the forum”. Laura shared “I was not very organized…and I think my insecurities with the language made me waste more time in getting my postings done”. Jewell described being organized as “watch out for yourself... as there will not be anyone to push you”. Jenni shared “there will not be that extra push from the professor… so I would really emphasize time management”.

4.6.6 Communicate

As stated by the research participants another important factor which influences a student’s online success is their ability to reach out and communicate. All twelve (12/12) participants reiterated that a large part of the students’ overall success relates to the timeliness in which they reach out. Laura shared “my greatest difficulty came because I did not trust myself to seek out the help I needed from the professor because I was struggling with the class”. Ariel similarly shared “never once did I communicate to the professor that I was in a different time zone and faced challenges when I was required to post in the online forum”. Sherry second guessed herself and questioned whether she should ask for clarification from her professor. Chloe, Tara, Jewell, Kelly, and Jenni who did not encounter these challenges were able to communicate their ideas in a clear and non-threatening manner because the professors ensured that a rapport and a sense of trust were developed within their learning environment. For example, Kelly shared “the professor created a video to introduce himself to class…it was very personable video and he was very approachable when I had questions”. As Ken stated, his experience was very positive because his professor “over communicated” and encouraged the students to do
the same. David in his experience also shared “my professor created several opportunities to dialogue and communicate and that was very helpful for me,” whereas Bailey felt that her professor was “lost in cyber world” and indicated how hard it was to communicate especially after her computer issue during the final exam. Throughout the research the students often identified the pivotal role of the professor in the online environment. It is therefore important to examine the role of the professor as identified by the participants.

4.7 The role of the professor in the online environment

The participants identified the following elements as essential if a professor is to teach successfully in the online environment. The students stated a professor who is very organized, readily available, knowledgeable, facilitates interaction through the use of creative teaching strategies, as well as incites participation, contributes to the development of an engaged online community of learners.

4.7.1 Being organized

The eight (8/8) participants at the graduate level shared that they enjoyed the class and had a more positive experience especially if the professor was very organized. From the onset of the class, the professor who clearly communicated his or her expectations, carefully outlined the structure of the course, and clarified the assignments was better able to keep their students connected. For example Kelly shared “I really enjoyed the class because the professor was so organized”. The level of organization demonstrated by the professors in the online environment in many ways is a result of their previous experiences teaching in the online format. Additionally, four (4/4) participants at the undergraduate level stated that they found the class a bit frustrating at times because they were not certain about the structure of the course or what was required of them. Ariel,
David, Jenni, and Bailey felt that the overall class was simply a series of readings and forum postings.

4.7.2 Availability

Another important factor that needs to be considered by the professor is their accessibility and availability to the students. The twelve (12/12) participants stressed that the availability of the professor either through e-mail, Skype, or telephone during the online program significantly impacted how they felt in the online environment. Chloe, Ken, Sherry, Igor, Kelly, Tara, Laura, and Jewell shared that they felt the professors made themselves available either via e-mail or when the students worked together in their small groups during the synchronous group chats. However, Ariel, Bailey, David, and Janelle at times felt that it was a struggle to connect with the professor to share their concerns or seek assistance with the course content. One example that was shared by Bailey pertained to an incident which occurred during her final exam where her page timed out. In her panic she contacted her professor to explain her situation and “to date” the professor has not responded to her query. The lack of communication or responsiveness caused greater levels of frustration in the students. Ariel also shared: “I found there was always time delay in my professor getting back to me”. Therefore, it is very important for the participants to feel that their professors are accessible.

4.7.3 Being knowledgeable

The students who had more positive results in the online environment attribute it to the knowledge, skill, and ability of their professor to effectively teach in the online format. The eight (8/8) graduate students shared that their professors were quite knowledgeable of the class content and demonstrated their expertise in the ways they
were able to bring the material alive. One good example of this is shared by Kelly who recalls that her International Trade instructor was also a practitioner and she enjoyed the fact that he was able to incorporate a lot of his practical experiences into the class. The four (4/4) students at the undergraduate level did not share the same experience and felt that, although the professors had the theoretical knowledge, there was a marked disconnect in finding ways to apply their knowledge in the online environment.

4.7.4 Facilitates interaction

One of the most important roles of the professor in the online environment is to facilitate connections among the students, their peers, and the course content of the online class. The twelve (12/12) participants identified one of the things that lacked the most during their online experience was the inadequacy of interaction. Kelly, Tara, Jewell, Igor, Kevin, Sherry, and Laura all stated in addition to posting in the forum the professor set up specific times online when they were able to connect. Kelly shared: “every week our professor would set up discussions topics, videos and group chats to connect with us”.

However, Ariel, Chloe, Bailey, David, and Jenni further shared that there was very little interaction between the teacher and the students, as well as peers, which at times left them feeling “isolated” or “lost” in cyber space. By stimulating interaction, it would appear the instructor is building connections and fostering a community of learning. Another key to successful facilitation online is the use of creative teaching strategies that engage the students. This will be examined in the following section.
4.7.5 Creative teaching strategy

Another important characteristic to consider as a key success factor for the professor in the online environment is the use of a creative teaching philosophy. All twelve (12/12) participants strongly suggested that it is important for the professor to tailor the teaching philosophy to the unique learning needs of the student as well as the socio-cultural differences and also to make the learning more relevant to students’ daily lives. Ariel shared a very moving example when she stated: “I recall feeling so lost in the online forum discussion regarding the issues teachers were facing in Saskatchewan as I was away from Saskatchewan I had no clue what I should have said”. Ariel felt that she could not relate to the cultural issues that were very specific to Saskatchewan and this made her feel excluded. The professor needs to be fully aware of the students in the online classroom even more so than in a traditional face-to-face setting to ensure that the students remain connected and engaged as well as ensuring that their learning needs are being met.

Ken and Kelly who shared positive experiences attributed their success online to the creative strategies such as group chats and Skype sessions used by their professor to engage the classes. Kelly in particular stated that the use of practical applications by her professor also made her experience more enjoyable. The overall objective of the professor who assumes the role as facilitator in the online environment is to ensure he/she builds strong connections and develops effective communities of learning. The following section will explain the importance of building community through communication.
4.7.6 Building community through communication

An instructor, be it a regular faculty member, sessional, or term appointment, if teaching a distance online course, should be able to facilitate a strong, positive online experience that fosters the development of an organic community of learning where students can engage, connect and exchange ideas or concepts. The twelve (12/12) participants were very concerned about being isolated and not having the time to connect with their peers and with their professors. Laura and Kelly stated it was important to feel comfortable and free to communicate in the online environment. Although Laura did not trust herself to reach out for help she indicated that if the professor facilitates an online environment which is open to communication the more willing she would have been to seek out the help she needed.

David, Ken, Jenni, and Jewel felt very comfortable communicating in the online environment because their professors over-communicated and gave clear guidance throughout the online class. Therefore, one of the ways to develop a community of learning is by ensuring students have the space to exchange ideas in a safe and trusting environment. When the student feels overwhelmed, he or she needs to know that it is safe to talk to the professor of the class. The research findings further reiterate that any professor who is able to effectively communicate will create greater social presence online, which is needed during the learning process.
4.8 Summary

In Chapter 4 the findings were presented. First, the demographics and participant profiles were illustrated. Second the benefits and potential drawbacks of online learning were presented. The main benefits of online learning are the ease, convenience, and flexibility it affords the students. The drawbacks discussed were the lack of feedback, not feeling engaged, lack of interaction, difficulty with technical support, loss of extra verbal cues, and academic dishonesty.

In addition to identifying the drawbacks the research participants also shared the key factors which contributed to their success. The participants also suggested a student who is organized, self-regulated, independent, and communicates effectively as well as being motivated has a higher tendency to be a more successful online learner. Another important part of the online experience for the participants was the pivotal role of the professor as one who successfully facilitates learning in an organized, knowledgeable, and connected environment.

Next, in Chapter 5 the discussion of the findings will be presented and how these findings are in agreement or disagreement with the extant literature. Also presented will be the implications of the research for the University, delimitations, and possible directions for future research.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The discussion chapter will cover two areas. First I present an integrative narrative which presents the current findings in relation to the extant literature will be presented. First, the benefits and drawbacks of online learning will be examined. Second, how the benefits and drawback impacts on the students’ motivation and perceptions will be discussed. The role of professor, student, and peers in the development of a learning community will be examined. The current research has been guided by the research questions which explored the students’ experiences with online learning, their attitudes, and perceptions as well as identifying the perceived benefits and drawbacks of learning in this format according to the participants. Although the literature reviewed in chapter II focused on the online learning environment, the research findings indicate that the students focused more on the online teaching quality which will be discussed in the following sections.

5.1 Student experiences with online learning

The literature reviewed indicates that a student’s online experience is influenced by several factors, namely: his/her motivations, individual perceptions of the class content, as well as the professor’s ability to successfully instruct within the online environment (Porter, 2004). The participants in the current study who had a positive experience attributed a great deal of their success to the professor’s ability to effectively communicate his/her expectations, his/her availability to respond to questions, and most importantly his/her creative strategies to keep the participants fully engaged in the online environment. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2004) point out in their research that the professor plays a pivotal role in ensuring there is adequate social presence online.
either through the use of relevant course content or innovative technological strategies that allow students to connect and actively engage in the exchange of knowledge and ideas. The development of collaborative online learning communities also enhances the students’ experiences as they are given the platform to exchange knowledge, ideas, and concepts in a shared space (Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2007).

The research participants who shared examples of negative experiences indicated that the contributing factors were a lack of detailed feedback from the professor, the professor’s inability to effectively communicate clear expectations, as well as the lack of accessibility of the professor either through e-mail, telephone, or Skype. The students also shared that another area of great concern was the lack of social interaction that was felt within the online environment. Yukawa’s (2010) research indicates that although during the online experience the learner has access to various tools for intellectual stimulation; the role of the instructor becomes critically important as he/she is responsible for creating the environment needed for effective communication and group connectivity.

Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001) also state that the creation of social presence in the online environment is highly relevant to ensure a learner’s success in the virtual environment. It is through the development of social presence online that students are able to connect with the course material, their peers, and professors (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Additionally, by creating social presence online, students are able to connect in a meaningful way and engage not only with the course content but also with their peers and professors (Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2007). Porter (2004) also concludes that a successful online experience is one where the unique learning needs of the students have been met by the professor and for this reason it is
important that students have access to their professors as well as to receive the detailed feedback concerning how well they are doing in the online courses.

5.2 The benefits of online learning according to the participants

The second research question examined by the current study was the students’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of online learning at the University of Regina. Campbell and Khalideen (2007) stated that the primary reasons why individuals access online learning opportunities is due to the level of convenience, flexibility, and cost effectiveness they affords the students. For example, in the findings presented previously in Chapter 4, Ken, David, Chloe, Jenni, Laura and Kelly all described the reasons they took an online class was the fact that it did not affect individual work schedules; as also the online class did not affect personal and family situations that were going on during their lives. Allen and Seaman’s (2011) research indicates that there is a growing number of individuals who are either single mothers living in poverty or students working to pay their way through school who have accessed higher learning opportunities as a result of the increased need for new skill sets in highly technological societies. As a result of this Allen and Seaman state learners are seeking out post secondary experiences that are cost effective and at the same time work with their daily lives.

Additionally, Allen and Seaman (2011) state the increased offerings of online courses at the post secondary level is part of the long-term strategies for the viability of Universities in the present turbulent economic times. Similarly, Dykman and Davis (2008) point out those institutional administrators who seek to keep universities globally competitive have resolved to increase online course offerings in order to keep educational institutions viable. Sweet (2010) states that with the increased cost of traditional on-
campus degrees, the changing demographics of the adult learner is attracting more students who are seeking convenient forms of learning which will certainly contribute to increased revenue for universities in North America. Although the move towards increased online class offerings forms part of the organizational strategy of universities, evident in the literature reviewed, none of the research participants indicated that this was a benefit. However, Ariel did indicate that taking an online course was a cheaper option for her financially since she was an international student who paid three times the tuition. Taking an online course in her home country of Thailand was a lot cheaper than taking an on-campus class. The majority of the research participants felt that the online class allowed for the pursuit of higher education with minimal negative impact to their individual family and work lives.

5.3 The drawbacks of online learning according to the participants

The literature reviewed indicated some of the major drawbacks of online learning relate to the quality of the experience, the lack of social interaction/presence online, and technical support issues.

5.3.1 The quality of the online experience

Jones, Chew, Jones, and Lau (2009) research highlighted that at times faculty question the quality of an online class as compared to a traditional classroom. In fact, Jones, Chew, Jones, and Lau described the introduction of online learning as turbulent times which have resulted in an increased demand for more creative and engaging teaching strategies to connect online. The participants in the current study described the lack of detailed feedback as one of the elements which affected the quality of their online
experiences. For example, Chloe stated that the lack of detailed feedback caused great frustration during her class.

Additionally, the quality of the online experience can be enhanced by the use of newer technologies and applications which may come at an additional cost to the student; therefore a student who has economic power is better able to purchase more support materials (Callahan & Sandlin, 2007). Callahan and Sandlin further argued the introduction of online courses at the post secondary level may still increase the socioeconomic gaps between various learners. Although none of the research participants expressed concerns about accessing the technology, the primary concern was on the quality of the experience. The participants felt that the quality of the online experience was greatly influenced by how well the professors facilitated the class and the level of expertise he/she demonstrated with the course content.

5.3.2 Lack of online interaction

Yukawa (2010) points out the lack of online interaction where there are inadequate opportunities for dialogue and exchange of ideas may result in the students’ superficial understanding of key concepts. As a result Snyder (2009) and Siemens (2004) stressed the importance of online connectivity through community in order to reduce the possible issues of isolation and disconnectedness students may experience in a virtual environment. Siemens (2004) and Porter (2004) state in the online environment the primary role of the professor is to facilitate the exchange of ideas and concepts by the students in a safe, non-judgmental environment, that keeps students motivated and engaged either through web-enabling technologies that facilitate greater social presence or interaction online. For example, the research participants Sherry, David, Ken, Jenni,
Kelly, Igor, and Tara stated the more engaged they were in the online environment the more motivated they were to interact and engage in the online forums.

5.3.3 Technical support

Another issue presented in the literature as a drawback of online learning was concerns about the effectiveness of technical support during an online class. The research participants indicated that the lack of technical support was a huge area of concern and caused great anxiety especially during exam times. For instance, Tyler-Smith (2006) found in his research that the major concerns regarding technical support is the reliability of the technology which at times is used in the classroom. Tyler-Smith further stated that improvements in technology as well as the increased responsiveness of technical staff will help to reduce the attrition rates in an online classroom. In fact, the research participants in the current study expressed that their concerns with the technological resources in the online environment were directly related to the reliability of the software which was used in the class as well as the internet connectivity issues.

5.3.4 Academic dishonesty

The final drawback expressed by one research participant is related to the possibility of academic dishonesty in an online class. Olt (2002) indicated in her research that with the changes in course delivery, online classes should not be subjected to the same scrutiny as the traditional classroom for academic dishonesty issues as the professor is better able to access the students’ abilities with the course content. Olt stated that an issue of academic dishonesty becomes a question of rigorous evaluations and the professor’s ability to be proactive and design “cheat proof” examinations for students especially in the online environment. It is therefore very important in the initial stages of
the class that the professor not only states clearly his/her expectations but also outlines as within face-to-face classrooms their academic dishonesty policies (Olt).

The findings have indicated that the benefits of online learning as a convenient, cost effective, and flexible approach to learning is not without its drawbacks. The main drawbacks of online learning identified in the current research such as lack of interaction, lack of detailed feedback, and social presence online, have influenced the students’ perception of online learning experience at the University of Regina. However, an additional component which also influences the students’ attitudes is their individual motivations. The following section has explored the dynamic relationship which exists between perceptions, motivations, and attitudes.

Although the current research was focused on identifying the students’ perceptions of the online environment, the findings indicated that students expressed great concern for the teaching quality in the online environment. According to the participants the teaching approaches used made them feel that their needs as a learner were not fully met. As a result of this it was important to identify what students characterized as good teaching. In the literature students define a good teacher as one who is respectful, helpful, fair, concerned with a willingness to assist, professional, and one who can inject personal experiences into the classroom (Delaney, Johnson, Johnson & Treslan, 2010).

5.4 Perceptions, motivations and attitudes towards online learning

The third research question which has guided the current research was to identify the perception and attitudes of the students towards online learning. The findings indicate
an existence of a dynamic relationship between the students’ perceptions and their motivations. The students’ reason for taking the online class at times influences their attitudes and perceptions towards the class. For example, an intrinsic motive for a student such as Ken was to successfully complete a final requirement of his degree, therefore the student was more likely to commit and connect with the content, as was in the case of Chloe who was motivated to take an online class in order to fulfill a requirement to get into an education program. On the other hand if it is about “looking smart” in front of their colleagues, a student such as Kelly is extrinsically motivated to put in the extra time and effort to succeed in the class. The findings also suggest that the students with a more positive attitude in the online environment can somewhat be attributed to the ability of the professor to keep them motivated, connected, engaged and comfortable in the online learning environment.

Keller (1999) presents an interesting model which focuses on four critical elements that influence the student motivations in the online environment. Keller states that if the material is relevant to the student, the students have a tendency to feel more engaged in their learning process; resulting in a more confident, satisfied, and attentive student. In her research, Keller further reiterates that keeping students motivated places a great deal of responsibility on the professor whose primary role is to keep the student actively engaged in their learning process. Bellon and Oates (2002) examine various tools that can be used by the professor to motivate the online learner, such as introductory e-mails, where students can present themselves to the group, or the use of chat rooms, and forums. According to the participants, one of the challenges faced by the students during the online environment, as similar to the traditional face-to-face classroom, is not feeling
motivated or engaged in what they were learning. By understanding the needs or motives of the student from the onset the professor is able to capture and maintain students’ interest. The research participants indicated there was greater enthusiasm for the online course especially when the professor used varying strategies to engage and connect; for example, Kelly and Bailey shared they felt more actively engaged in their learning because the professor included several additional materials such as articles, videos, and Skype chats to create a positive community of learning.

Bellon and Oates (2002) state that another important part of keeping the online learner motivated is by creating a curriculum and online environment that is inviting and well organized. Students tend to become a bit frustrated if they feel that the class is poorly structured or similarly if the professor is not organized and has not clearly communicated class requirements. The current study found that the students who felt motivated to work in the online environment attributed some of their success online due to the high level of organization of the professor. Bellon and Oates further state if the professor is able to tailor the classes to the personalities that exist within the environment the learner will be more willing to learn in this format.

An individual’s motive can significantly influence his/her attitude and perception of the virtual learning environment. To further understand how a student’s motivation enhances his/her individual online experiences, the following section will explore the important roles the professor and the students play in the online environment.
5.5 Understanding the teacher – student relationship in the online environment

The current research has indicated the importance of the teacher-student relationship in the online environment. In fact the finding previously reviewed has shown that the more positive the relationship between teacher and student the more positive the students’ attitudes and motives towards learning in the online format. The participants in this study also indicated that a successful instructor in an online environment is one who is organized, knowledgeable, readily available, and facilitates meaningful student interactions. As can be expected this in no way differs from the characteristics of a successful instructor in the face-to-face classroom; however, additional strategies need to be incorporated into the online environment to ensure connectivity and social presence (Siemens, 2004).

It important to note that the process of learning is individualized and must be meaningful and engaging to the student (Swan, 2003). The professor in the online environment must strive to create the space that allows the students to share their ideas (Porter, 2004). The creation of a comprehensive online environment in no way indicates that the learning process is the sole responsibility of the professor; however, the professor plays a vital role in designing, delivering, and evaluating the student.

Another important part of the teacher-student relationship in the online format is the importance of giving timely feedback to students. The participants in this study indicated that one of the drawbacks of their online course was the lack of feedback from their professors. Porter (2004) states that it is vital to provide the students with feedback so that they are in a better position to assess their progress and not be shocked by the end result. Porter further explains that giving feedback to the students can come in various
formats such as an email discussion, continuous evaluations, or even on the forums. The most important aspect of feedback is that the student receives it immediately. It is also through continuous feedback the student is able to clarify the expectation of the professor.

Another important part of the teacher-student relationship is to communicate clearly. Porter (2004) defines the professor’s role as the communicator and facilitator of learning. In her research, Porter indicates that it not so much a point of communicating but doing so in a clear and effective manner. A skilled and knowledgeable professor is able to lead his/her group in riveting discussions which will also keep them motivated and eager to learn. Some examples of online learning tools and models which can be delivered in either the synchronous or asynchronous format from the literature reviewed include the use of e-mails, Skype, forums, Blackboard, Massive Open Online Courses and Flipped classrooms (Gobry, 2012; Hrastinski, 2001; Porter, 2004). The majority of the research participants in the current study primarily used Skype group chats and an online forum through UofR courses. An effective teacher-student relationship is one which is built on continuous clear communication in which students feel engaged and have clear understanding of the professors’ expectations.

Another important factor which sustains a strong teacher-student relationship in the online environment is based on the agility, knowledge, and skills the professors bring into the learning environment. Porter (2004) and Swan (2003) suggest that a professor who is adaptable, flexible, as well as competent in the use of the web-based technologies is better equipped to modify his/her curriculum in order to create greater presence online which further enhances the students’ learning experiences. In fact, one of the participants, Ken, stated that he felt that he had learned more from his online class because of his
professor’s ability to use innovative educational technologies which kept him engaged as well as created a deeper understanding of the course material. Another important relationship that also needs to be examined in the online environment is the student relationships with their peers, which will be discussed in the following section.

5.6 Understanding the student – peer relationship in the online environment

The student-peer relationship examines the individual relationships between the students in the online format. The participants in the current study felt that because of the structure of the online class they lost out on opportunities to connect and pick up on the richness of the extra non-verbal clues of their classmates. One student in particular, Igor, stated that he dialogues best when he can see the other participants’ reactions to what he is saying and felt that a great part of this was lost in the online environment. If he had a choice he would prefer to connect face-to-face. Swan (2003) highlights that the physical distance between students creates less of a social presence and with less presence the professor must facilitate interaction either through the use of interactive web-based technologies or simply by creating a safe space for dialogue. Swan further explains that for students to feel that they are part of a learning community extra care must be taken to nourish the individual perception of their connectedness. The concept of collective learning becomes even more critical in the online environment and as a result peers play a vital role in the social construction of knowledge. The research participants placed great value on the social interaction online and stated it was imperative for the learners to remain involved in the online environment. Not only is it important to analyze the student peer relationship in the online environment but also to analyze how the online learner connects with the course content.
5.7 Understanding the student – course content relationship

The final contributing factor that influences the students’ perceptions and motivations towards online learning is related to the relevance or interest he/she may have in the course materials. Keller (1999) postulates that students who feel more confident or comfortable with the course materials are more likely to be more attentive or engaged with learning the material. As found in the current study, participants expressed their concerns about being bored with the material due to familiarity with the content or the excessive use of text. As Keller stated the material must always be engaging, relevant, and applicable to the daily lives of the student. As a result, Swan’s (2003) research suggests that greater care must be taken on the part of the professor to develop a curriculum or course design which is clear, innovative, and engaging. Similarly, Porter (2004) states that an adaptable or flexible curriculum will have the potential to assist in reducing the level of disconnectedness that can occur when the course content is not having a positive learning outcome for the students.

5.8 Online learning revamped

The literature reviewed and the conclusions from the present research it appears that online learning is indeed a new area of research which is not without its many contradictions (Swan, 2003; Toliver, 2011). Aiming for engagement in an online environment, the instructor might connect students with course materials that are relevant to their daily lives, as well as ensuring the material used equips students with the necessary skill sets that keeps them employed in this modern technological society (Pailing, 2002; Sweet, 2010; Wende, 2002;).
Despite the overall benefits of online learning identified by the research participants, students’ success and reduced attrition in the online environment is as a direct result of the intrinsic or extrinsic motivations which contributed to their reasons for learning in this type of format (Kelly, 1999; Porter, 2004). A student’s motivation can vary from the need to complete a degree on time or not falling behind in their program while he/she was on holidays or in other instances as simple as making sure they are perceived in a certain manner by classmates.

In summary an effective online learning experience is not only determined by the participants’ ability to self-regulate in the environment or by the professor’s ability to create community through communication but most importantly through the creation of a social presence which keeps student constantly interacting and connecting in a meaningful way with the course content and their peers. It is through an efficient use of the online environment that communities of practice can develop (Lave & Wenger, 2002)

5.9 Implications for the University

The current research explored the students’ perceptions of online learning at the University of Regina. The main findings indicate that students expressed concerns about the professor’s ability to engage and connect. The research participants also indicated that not having easy access to the professor either though video chats, telephone, and emails as an area of deep concern. The students also shared that the lack of communication and detailed feedback, at times, caused great anxiety during their online courses as they felt a lack of guidance from the professor in terms of expectations for the class. Another issue which was highlighted in the current research is the need for more reliable technical
support for students. Students felt that the lack of easy access to technical support staff especially outside of regular work hours caused them great anxiety during their online class.

After reviewing the main findings, some of the implications identified for the university relate to: 1) the skills or abilities of the professors to use creative strategies to fully engage and connect students in the online environment; 2) other areas of concern expressed by the students relate to elements of the course content and design which should meet the unique learning needs of the students; and 3) the University should ensure there is adequate 24/7 technical support for students taking an online class. It is evident from the findings that the majority of the participants commented on the professor’s ability to teach in this new environment. There is an urgent need for professors to receive the requisite training or education that would allow them to develop their skill sets as online teachers.

5.9.1 Participants’ Suggestions

The participants suggest that an introductory class on Moodle should be mandatory for all students taking an online class for the first time. By ensuring such a mandatory course students would receive the basic training to be more competent in the online environment. Second, the professor should include an introductory video in the class in order to provide classmates with the opportunity to put faces to the names which can assist in facilitating better connection in the online environment. Using more creative technologies that facilitate more meaningful connections among students, professor, and peers would enhance the online experience. The possibility of including a face-to-face
component into the online program would be ideal to foster better group cohesion. Many of the participants stressed the importance of interaction in the learning process and their concerns about losing the non-verbal cues like facial expressions, gesticulations, and tone of voice, all which are absent in most virtual environments. As a result suggestions have been made to move towards a blended option of online learning.

5.9.2 Moving towards a comprehensive community of learning

The concept of blended learning as presented by Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia and Jones (2008) consists of including a face-to-face element to an online class. This hybrid model, as it is also defined within the literature, allows students to connect both virtually and physically. One of the greatest benefits of a blended approach is that it fosters better interaction and communication between the professors and their students (Porter, 2004; Singh, 2003). Currently, the University of Regina is still working on formally institutionalizing a comprehensive blended learning model that can be centrally supported and administered. However, some individual faculty members have demonstrated a keen interest in developing a comprehensive blended learning framework (Vi Maeers, personal communication, December 5, 2011).

Other forms of creative communities of learning can be achieved through the use of Massive Open Online Courses and Flipped Classrooms (Gobry, 2012; Machielse, 2013). Innovative changes to online course delivery are serving the needs of the students who are either not financially ready to fully commit to classes on-campus but are keen on learning at their own pace (Machielse). Similarly, with the introduction of the flipped classroom students gain both face-to-face as well as the online experience (Gobry, 2012).
Throughout the current research it can be concluded that the students’ perceptions of the online learning experience are influenced by their motivations and attitudes towards the class. Students who are successful in this type of environment highlight the importance of being engaged and feeling connected with the professor and peers. Participants indicated that the benefits of online learning consist of the ease, flexibility, and convenience which it affords the students. Learners who are single parents or work and go to school at the same time rely heavily on having access to higher education opportunities. Although online courses open up post secondary opportunities for persons in remote communities, it is still evident that some adult learners will still encounter difficulties in trying to afford taking online classes as a result of the cost of some of the educational technologies needed to complement the course materials in the online environment (Sweet, 2010).

The research participants highlighted that the drawbacks of online learning were lack of feedback from the professor, not feeling engaged in their learning process, lack of interaction, issues with academic dishonesty, and the loss of non-verbal clues which play a vital role in enriching the student or group interaction. The research findings also suggest that successful learners in the online environment are highly organized, communicators, self-regulated, motivated, and independent learners. However, despite the active role the student must play in the online learning process, a great amount of pressure can be placed upon the professor to ensure he/she facilitates and creates a safe space where students can connect, feel supported, and are able to share their ideas or concerns. Engaging online is as important as engaging in the traditional classroom;
however, in the online environment greater emphasis must be placed on building connectivity and online community.

5.10 Delimitations

The findings in the current study are limited to the experiences of twelve (12) students from the University of Regina learning community in 2011. The emergent themes are relevant to the research participants who have been exposed to online learning. I am also aware that the biases, as well as my personal experiences as a former trainer in educational technology who advocates for the use of educational technology in the learning process, have shaped and influenced the theories and findings that will be developed from this current study. Coming from a corporate banking background technology formed a mandatory part of the daily work routine; I was surprised to learn that some adult learners where online learning was optional were not very open to its use. Additionally, the students primarily focused on the perceptions of the participants of the online environment; however, the findings indicated that a lot of the negative perceptions portrayed by the students appear more often to be reflective of poor teaching quality rather than strictly the online environment. In retrospect this should also have been considered during the collecting of data, and I could have asked the participants to be more specific about the type of online environment in which they were enrolled.

5.11 Direction for future research

As the researcher, I was very committed to finding out more about participants’ experiences with their online classes. My overall objective is to use the results of the current findings to contribute in a meaningful way to the improvement of the online experience for current and future online learners at the University of Regina. The results
of the current study will be presented in a mini report to the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Distance Learning Division and the Centre for Continuing Education so that instructors are aware of the students’ perceptions of online learning at the University. Although the findings are evident of online learning at the University of Regina in 2011, the negative feedback from the students does set the grounds for additional studies to be conducted on the pedagogical principles that orient online teaching at the University.

The current findings also suggest that there is still a need for other qualitative studies to explore further avenues to enhance the online learning experience for students at the University of Regina. It is also proposed that the findings will be shared with relevant stakeholders in the University community through presentations in order for course designers, administrators and professors to further examine teaching strategies and curriculum design for the online class especially at the undergraduate level.

5.12 Summary

According to the participants of the current study, the perceived benefits of online learning allowed for single parents, living in poverty, the convenience and flexibility to access post secondary education in somewhat of a cost effective manner. Although online courses are not as expensive as the traditional on campus class offering there is still some cost associated with getting the required complementary technologies to optimize the learning experiences. It is hoped with the introduction of creative online models such as Massive Open Online Courses some of the affordability concerns of post secondary education will be addressed (Coursera, 2013).
The research participants indicated that drawbacks such as lack of feedback, lack of interaction, social presence, and technical support influenced their perceptions and attitudes towards online learning. It is important to note that although the current study was focused on the students’ perceptions of the online environment, the findings indicate that the majority of the students who had negative experiences, or felt that their learning needs were not fully met, focused primarily on the professor’s ability to instruct in the online format. With the rapid increase in the knowledge explosion in the technology age, students are seeking out more diverse opportunities for learning in a cost effective and convenient format (Ho, 2009). By creating greater access to this form of learning higher education institutions are able to target more students (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Throughout the literature reviewed, and from the findings of the current study, teaching in an online format requires a specialized level of skills for the professor and higher levels of self-efficacy on the part of the student (Bandura, 1993).

The findings from this research have indicated that students in the online environment as well as in the traditional classroom place similar emphasis on the quality of the teaching in both learning environments. If the students feel that their unique learning needs are not being met the more likely they are to assess the quality of the learning experience as a negative one. As a result, according to Swan, Garrison and Richardson, (2009), creating presence online is as equally important to the traditional face-to-face environment.
REFERENCES


Toliver, F. (2011). My students will facebook me but won’t keep up with my online course: The challenges of online instruction. American Communication Journal, 13(1).


University of Regina. (2010). *Distance Education Task Force Final Report*: University of Regina Distance Education Strategy. Regina, SK. University of Regina.


Appendix A

Interviewing Guide

1. Tell me about yourself?
   - Work Experience (if applicable)
   - Educational Background
   - Experience as a student at the University

2. Tell me about your experience with online/distance learning?
   - When was the first time you used online learning?
   - Have you participated in any online classes recently?
   - What was your best experience? What did it look like?
   - Were there any challenges for you?

3. Do you think online learning is an effective learning tool?
   - Have you been in an environment where an online tool was used in the training/classroom setting?
   - Tell me about this experience?

4. Tell me about your best learning experience?
   - Was this in a traditional classroom setting or was it an online experience?
   - Why was this your most enjoyable learning experience?
5. As an end user how has online learning affected you as an individual?
   - How did you feel when you participated in the virtual classroom?
   - How do you see yourself now after having participated in this environment?

6. Was there any point in which you became uncomfortable with how you were learning?
   - Did you feel comfortable using the online resources?
   - Did you feel that you had enough support during your program?

7. Do you think the use of online resources has improved your access to learning?
   - Do you feel more engaged in your learning process?
   - Do you feel that you have better access to learning opportunities?

8. After being exposed to online learning would you recommend this to another colleague/friend?
   - What advice would you give to that colleague/friend?
   - Why would you recommend/not recommend this approach?

9. What is your overall perception of online distance learning?
   - What are your thoughts on the use of online/distance learning?

10. Is online distance learning an effective training learning tool?
    - Does it meet your individual learning needs?
- How did you feel about your teacher/student relationship during your online course?
- Was this interaction necessary or not necessary for your learning process?

11. Is there anything you may not have thought about online/distance learning before that occurred to you during this interview?

12. Is there anything that would help me to better understand your thoughts on online learning? Do you have any questions that you would like to ask me.
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Faculty of Education
University of Regina

Project Title: “Friend, Foe or Both”: A Grounded Theory Study of University of Regina Student’s Perception on the effectiveness of online distance learning at the University of Regina: Student Perspective

Researcher(s): Martha Mathurin, Graduate Student Educational Psychology; Faculty of Education; Tel: 306-585-5082, Martha.mathurin@uregina.ca

Supervisor: Marc Spooner Ph.D, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education; Tel: 306-585-4880, Marc.spooner@uregina.ca

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:

• What are the experiences of the adult learner with online distance learning
• To examine the adult learner perceptions and attitudes on online distance learning at the University of Regina
• Does the adult learner consider online distance learning as an effective learning experience

Procedures:

• Participants in this study will be required to participate in a 60 – 90 minutes semi structured interview which will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher with the participants permission
• Participants are free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Funded by: No Funding

Potential Risks:

• There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.

Potential Benefits:
• The results of this findings will be shared with Distance Learning Education and Teaching Development Centre to further enhance the learning experience of University of Regina Students

**Compensation:**

• There will be no compensation for this research.

**Confidentiality:**

• All information shared will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this research
• Information will be stored digitally in password protected files and kept under the safe keeping of the researcher
• **Storage of Data:**
  o Digitally recorded and transcribed files will be kept by the researcher for a period of three years
  o The information will be discarded after three years of storage

**Right to Withdraw:**

• Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
• Your decision to participate or not in this research will have no effect on your position [e.g. employment, class standing, access to services] or how you will be treated.
• Should you wish to withdraw due to illness and unavailability of time your information will not be used for this research. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until August 1, 2011(results have been disseminated; data has been pooled, etc.). After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data”

**Follow up:**

• A brief summary outlining research findings will be provided to participants. Names will be kept anonymous so that there can be no clear linkage between participants in this research.

**Questions or Concerns:**

• Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1;
• This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the UofR Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at [585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca]. Out of town participants may call collect.
Continued or On-going Consent:

- Participants may be required to do a follow up interview only if it is necessary to clarify information that was received during the initial interview process.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

______________________________  ________________________________  __________
Name of Participant        Researcher’s Signature        Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix C

Research Participants Needed

Have you ever taken an online class at the University of Regina? If you have we would like to hear about your experiences. If you are interested to participate in this research initiative, please contact Martha Mathurin at Martha.mathurin@uregina.ca or by telephone at 306-585-5082.

We look forward to your participation. All information will be kept confidential.

Thank you in advance

Martha Mathurin

Graduate Student – Educational Psychology
Appendix D

University of Regina

OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES
MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 9, 2011

TO: Martha Mathurin
4602 Queen Street
Regina, SK S4S 5Y9

FROM: Dr. David Senkow
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: "Friend" or "Foe" or "Both": A Grounded Theory Study of University of Regina Student's Perception on the Effectiveness of Online Learning at the University of Regina: A Student Perspective (File # 06S1112)

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

☑ 1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F), ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.

☐ 2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. **Do not submit a new application.** Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB. **Do not submit a new application.** Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. David Senkow, Acting Chair

cc: Dr. Marc Spooner - Education

**supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 109) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca**

Phone: (306) 585-4775