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Describing Spiritual Growth in an Online Religious Education Course: A Phenomenological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

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An estimated 33% of all college students take at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Online classes are offered across a wide range of domains, including courses designed for spiritual development. Little research exists examining students' experiences in these types of classes. The purpose of this research is to help address this gap by describing the phenomenon of spiritual growth in an online religious education course.

Brigham Young University-Idaho (BYU-Idaho) offers online courses designed to help students grow spiritually. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students who took one of these classes and who reported positive gains in spirituality as a result of the course on an end-of-course survey. Interviews focused on two major ideas: First, how did students describe the difference between previous face-to-face religious education experiences and their experience in the online course? Second, what elements of the online course encouraged spiritual growth? Ideas from each interview were combined to create some key observations and a potential model for online religious education that reflects these observations.

Findings suggest participants took a great deal of ownership of their own spiritual journey. The online course encouraged this through a curriculum that was flexible enough for students to explore, yet at the same time provided a structured environment for growth. Reflection through writing appeared to be important for students' success. Participants felt online instructors played a less prominent role in their spiritual journey than face-to-face instructors. The online course appeared to change the traditional role of the instructor from one who provides direct instruction into one who acts more as a guide and a facilitator. Interactions between students appeared to have minimal impact on spiritual growth as this particular course was designed, but some interviews suggest this is an area for potential impact.

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Chapter 1: Spiritual Growth in Online Religious Education

The Internet has grown tremendously since it was first developed. It took approximately 75 years for the telephone to reach 50 million users and only four years for the Internet to reach the same number (International Telecommunications Union [ITU], 2001). A Pew research study reported an increase of Internet users in the United States from approximately 15% in 1995 to 74% in 2009 (Rainie, 2010). Educators in institutions of higher education have taken advantage of the Internet as a tool for teaching and learning. At the end of 2013, 7.1 million university students were taking at least one online class. This represents approximately 33 percent of all college students (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Online course offerings are available in a wide variety of subject areas, which increasingly include religious education. This study focuses on the experience of students who have self-reported spiritual growth while enrolled in these courses; the intent is to seek a better understanding of what it is like to grow spiritually through online, religious education.

Religious education has a wide variety of intended outcomes depending on the instructor and the sponsoring institution (Hella & Wright, 2009). Spirituality was selected as the outcome of study because, as defined by Fowler (1995), it forms the foundation for how we construct meaning and make sense of our world. As such, faith and spirituality have great power in our lives to motivate, inspire and empower. Fowler's belief seems consistent with other research that indicates college students generally care very much about spirituality (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011).

According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU, 2001), the promise of online learning is that it is a low-cost mode of reaching large numbers of people across the globe. Given Fowler's (1995) position on the importance of spirituality and the ITU's view of the

potential of online learning, understanding online, religious education that emphasizes spirituality can be seen as an important area of inquiry. In addition, spirituality is an affective learning outcome, and understanding how it develops through online courses may lead to applicable insights into learning and teaching other affective traits online.

The advent of online learning raised a wide variety of questions related to religious education designed for spiritual development. For example, what is the experience like when students don't go to a traditional classroom with other students and an instructor who is physically present? Do students need to be more self-directed and take more ownership in their spiritual path? If so, does self-direction result in opportunities or barriers to connecting with deity? How do students perceive the value of the face-to-face class versus the online class? How do students describe the role and influence of fellow students in an online class compared to a face-to-face class? Frye (2012) explored the issue of community as an important aspect of religious education. Do students feel a community supporting spiritual growth develops in an online religion course? Do students feel more or less free to explore views that diverge from norms in an online religion course?

Problem Statement and Study Purpose

A Higher Education Research Institute report (Astin et al., 2011) on a multi-year study of spiritual development in over 112,000 undergraduate students across more than 230 university campuses concluded:

> [The university] has increasingly come to neglect its students' "inner" development—the
> sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and of
> self-understanding. . . . the relative amount of attention that colleges and universities

devote to the "inner" and "outer" aspects of our students' lives has gotten way out of balance (p. 2).

With little focus from universities on the "interior" aspects of students' development and an increasing number of courses online, an opportunity exists to support students as they develop in the spiritual domain. Little research exists describing how university students grow spiritually when religious instruction is conducted online. The purpose of this study was to address this gap by seeking the perspective of students who report high gains in spirituality as a result of an online religious education course.

Research Questions

More specifically, two research questions guided this study:

1. How do individuals who have had both online and face-to-face religious education courses describe the difference in the experiences?

2. What elements of the online course experience encouraged spiritual growth?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Online learning in higher education has seen significant growth over the past decade (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Religious education programs are part of this growth as educators look to the Internet as a tool to build faith among current and potential believers. This literature review provides context for the current research on understanding spiritual development through online religious education. Four areas are considered: definitions of key terms used to discuss spiritual development, trends in the study of religiosity and spirituality, theoretical perspectives of spiritual development, and online religious education.

Definitions

To better aid an understanding of spiritual development, this section offers definitions of faith, spirituality, and religiosity as they will be used throughout the study.

Faith. A comprehensive and widely agreed-upon definition of faith is difficult, if not impossible, to discover within existing research (Barry, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010). Still, the challenge to find or adequately articulate a single, agreed upon definition of faith need not call into question faith's power or significance, nor should it disqualify it from study. As W.C. Smith (1991) put it, "Without yet knowing what it is, we may nonetheless affirm with confidence that there is some personal and inner quality in the life of some men, and to it we give the name faith" (p. 170).

Biblical teachings describe faith as the thing that moves people to belief without the assurance of rational evidence: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1, King James Version). The remainder of the chapter describes faith as an enabling power. For example, it is through faith that Enoch overcame death (vs. 5), Noah built an ark (vs. 7), Sara conceived in her old age (vs. 11), and so forth. Developing faith

requires patience (Heb. 6:12), is the reward for those who "diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6) and grows through faithful acts (James 2:22).

Fowler (1995) provided a useful insight into faith by noting humans are distinct from other animals in that we seek to find meaning and significance in life experiences. He pointed out that we are not motivated by instincts to seek food, shelter, procreation, and so forth alone, but we carry the added "burden," as he called it, of needing to find purpose as we go about the business of living. Faith fills this need by providing a running string of coherence that connects life experiences. In Fowler's view, faith is how we find meaning in life and how we see ourselves within the context of the human experience. Faith "shapes the ways we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties" (p. 4-5).

Religiosity and spirituality. A useful approach to understand faith is to examine religiosity and spirituality. In *The Meaning and End of Religion,* W.C. Smith (1991) explained religiosity in terms of a person's "cumulative tradition" (p. 156). These are observable actions, traditions, practices, ceremonies, community norms, and so forth. Cumulative traditions are things that "can be and [are] transmitted from one person or one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe" (p. 156). He discussed religious art, poetry, and music as clear expressions of the faith that is inside the creator (pp. 176 - 180). He further argued that one better understands the inward faith of an individual by observing outward practices: caring for the needy, participation in religious ceremony, engagement in religious cultural norms, and so forth (p. 174). This understanding of faith aligns with the biblical teaching, "I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

Spirituality, on the other hand, is generally regarded by scholars as one's more intimate, personal experiences. It is described in literature as a sense of awe, gratitude, mercy, connection

to the transcendent, discernment, and deep inner peace (Underwood, 2011). Spirituality should be seen as a legitimate form of knowledge (Court, 2013) but it is harder to observe than religiosity because it is experienced on a personal level and may have little or no outward expression. The idea of spirituality is captured in the biblical injunction, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Although spirituality and religiosity are clearly overlapping constructs (Miller & Thoresen, 2003), a variety of scholars discussed religiosity by emphasizing the observable behaviors and practices in which a person engages while viewing spirituality as a person's inner, transcendent experience (Barry et al., 2010).

Much of the literature used the terms faith, religiosity and spirituality interchangeably. Although the terms faith and religiosity are certainly included and appropriate in this study, the focus is on understanding how religious education online impacts the inner experience of students, so the term spirituality is used most often.

Religiosity and Spirituality: Trends and Implications

Over 50 years ago, at the completion of a multi-year research project examining the religious values of American college students, Jacob (1957) observed,

> The undergirding of the Puritan heritage on which the major value assumptions of American society have rested is inconspicuous, if it is present at all. Perhaps these students are the forerunners of a major cultural and ethical revolution, the unconscious ushers of an essentially secular (though nominally religious), self-oriented (though group-conforming) society. (p. 4)

Recent research into the religious and spiritual dispositions of college students helps us assess the accuracy of Jacob's statement.

Astin et al. (2011) conducted a multi-year project to study the spiritual development of college students starting in 2001 and continuing through 2010. Over 112,000 students participated across 236 colleges and universities. Contrary to Jacob's (1957) prediction, approximately 80% reported having an interest in spirituality. Approximately 66% associated their spirituality with a sense of joy. Just under half of the students indicated they viewed opportunities to grow spiritually as essential or very important. Approximately 75% said they were "searching for meaning and purpose in life." Arnett and Jensen (2002) found corroborating results with 82% of college-age youth indicating their religious beliefs were somewhat (30%), quite (22%) or very (30%) important to them. These data seem to support Fowler's (1995) assertion regarding the need to find meaning through faith.

On the other hand, and consistent with Jacob's (1957) prediction about self-orientation, is a finding common in the literature that college-age students tend to shy away from prescribed or institutional doctrine. Arnett and Jensen (2002) noted emerging adults, "tended to view participation in any institution as a compromise of their individuality" and that they believe, "whatever they choose for themselves" (p. 463). Furthermore, religiosity as measured through church attendance has been shown to decrease during early adulthood (Barry et al., 2010).

An important point emerges as the findings from these studies are considered together. Apparently, college-age students care very much about spirituality, but they are not looking to organized religion to find it. This is important as one considers formal religious education sponsored by a university. It raises a question: How do students, who by-and-large are charting their own spiritual paths, experience a university-sponsored course designed to teach them religion? This becomes an especially interesting question if the goal of the course moves beyond knowing facts about religion and instead has the loftier goal of helping students to grow in their

spirituality. Said another way, can a planned curriculum in a university setting help students feel a connection to deity? These types of questions are best addressed within the context of prevalent theories and models of spiritual development and religious education.

Theoretical Perspectives

Three relevant perspectives are considered in order to provide an understanding of how college students develop spiritually. First, in his Faith Development Theory, which is widely referenced in the literature, Fowler (1995) provided useful insight into developmental stages and processes at work in college-age students.   Second, Loder (1989) provided important insight into the transforming moments that bring a person to know God. Finally, Court (2013) argued that the goal of religious education should be increased spirituality and religiosity and provided a model for how this can be accomplished.

It should be noted that the development of spirituality could be viewed through a number of different lenses. The fields of psychology, sociology and even biology, for example, all make valuable contributions to an understanding of the development of faith. A thorough review from each of these perspectives is not provided since they are beyond the scope of this research. Instead, this review focuses on theoretical perspectives and models most likely to contribute to an understanding of what students experience in courses designed to encourage increased spirituality.

Faith Development Theory. One of the most widely referenced theories about the development of a person's faith is Fowler's (1995) Faith Development Theory (FDT). FDT has been referred to as one of the more influential theories in faith development (Barry et al., 2010). In 2001, the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* dedicated an entire volume to a report on a symposium held about FDT. FDT has served a variety of purposes from improving counseling (Parker, 2009) to informing efforts to establish inter-faith dialogue (Ok, 2004).

FDT is a developmental theory informed by Piaget's (1970) work in cognitive development and Kohlberg's (1976) work in moral development. Fowler (1995) identified six stages of faith, which a person may pass through as faith develops. Although Fowler's stages cover birth through adulthood, stages three and four are of particular interest to this research because they usually occur during adolescence and young adulthood.

Stage three: Synthetic-Conventional. Fowler's (1995) third stage is called Synthetic-Conventional: "Synthetic" because faith is unexamined and perhaps even fabricated in order to be a "conventional" member of a group (p. 167). This stage usually begins during early adolescence and correlates to the time when a person develops the ability for self-reflection. This capacity to look at and critically examine oneself from an outside perspective comes with an understanding that others can see and critically examine one as well (pp. 152-153). This creates recognition that one may or may not "fit in." Concurrent with this stage of development, the teen-age and college years are often a time of exposure to expanding influences such as popular culture, a widening peer group, and perhaps a religious community (p. 154). The cumulative effect is a desire to be accepted within one or more of these spheres of influence.

Reacting to this desire, a person in stage three sees authority to determine right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and not acceptable, and so forth as external to self. Decision-

making authority regarding what is and isn't moral is often located in a peer group, popular thinking, or an institution (p. 154). Abdicating authority outside of self is a hallmark of stage three. Conformity to the authority's perspective and socialization within the group or institution strengthens personal identity during this stage. Those who do not adhere to the same authority and perspective are seen as outsiders during stage three. Critical examination of the religious perspective and ideology that often forms during this stage is rare (p. 162). Many people remain in stage three throughout their lives (p. 161).

  Stage Four: Individuative-Reflective. Fowler's (1995) fourth stage is known as the Individuative-Reflective stage. Movement from stage three to four may occur when a person encounters traditions or ideologies that are appealing, but inconsistent with that of the group he or she has sought conformity with during stage three. A person often begins to enter stage four as he or she reflects on the belief systems of those to whom he or she has abdicated authority and becomes disillusioned. Stage four is about becoming personally responsible for one's own beliefs and authority regarding moral issues and moving from external sources of authority to self. A person in stage four is not content to please or fit in; rather, his or her desire is towards ideological autonomy. The person in stage four often deconstructs religious symbols so that he or she no longer views the symbols themselves as powerful or sacred, but instead seeks conceptual understanding of what symbols represent (p. 182).

  Movement from stage three to four is often precipitated by major changes in life circumstances such as leaving home to attend college (Fowler, 1995, p. 173). Entering stage four can be disorienting and include feelings of guilt, inner tension, and conflict (p. 178). Faith communities can facilitate a healthy transition from stage three to stage four by encouraging exploration of and reflection on the ideologies they teach (p. 161). Fowler would likely explain

the Astin et al. (2011) findings referenced previously as typical in the transition between the third and fourth stages of faith development as young adults experience transition and seek an ideology that is more of their own making.

Faith development research. Fowler's (1995) theory developed through interviews conducted by trained researchers with 359 individuals conducted over nine years. Analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in a categorization of the individuals into either one of the six stages or as in transition between stages. Researchers achieved inter-rater reliability at approximately 85-90% agreement.

Green and Hoffmann (1989) provided evidence of construct validity for Faith Development Theory by examining how people viewed members of "in-groups" and "out-groups." The researchers administered a survey that measured college students' stage of faith development and asked them questions regarding college applicants who varied in their religious orientations. When compared to individuals in lower stages, individuals in stages four and five were less likely to rate the applicants higher based on religious similarities to their own. Barnes, Doyle, and Johnson (1989) also found evidence for construct validity through their work in developing a survey instrument designed to identify stages of faith development. The researchers found a correlation between responses to survey questions that clustered around the interpretation of symbols and the expected stage of faith development as discovered through Fowler's interview approach. As expected, individuals in the higher stages of faith development reported more symbolic interpretations of religious beliefs when compared to individuals in the lower stages of faith, who tended to have more literal interpretations.

Critiques of faith development theory. James Loder, a contemporary of Fowler, offered several critiques of Fowler's work in a paper co-authored by both Loder and Fowler in which

they discuss FDT (Loder & Fowler, 1982). His foremost critique was a concern that Fowler studied *stages of human development* through the lens of faith rather than faith itself. Loder questioned what Fowler contributed to an understanding of faith and argued Fowler contributed instead to the psychology of human development. Fowler (2001) himself acknowledged that his theory straddled theology and psychology, noting, "Faith development theory stands at the convergence of developmental psychology and liberal theology deriving from Christian origins" (p. 159).

In Loder and Fowler's (1982) discussion paper, Loder also suggested that Fowler offered little in regards to biblical faith, that is, the type of faith meant to instill certainty about the purpose of existence, move one to endure through hardship, empower through a oneness with deity, and so forth. In Loder's view, Fowler reduced faith to simply a human need to make meaning of lived experiences when, as Loder argued, there is more to faith than this.

Streib (2001) called into questions FDT's Piagetian foundation of cognitive-structural development. Similar to Loder's concern, Streib does not believe a theory based on hierarchal and sequential stages of development is equipped to explain the richness or diversity of the religious experience. This view is shared by Heywood (2008) who also argued, like Loder, that FDT uses a weak concept of faith. Heywood argued that "meaning making" is not faith, as Fowler described it, but rather a natural process recognized in post-modern thinking wherein context, perception, and community shape and create a person's reality.

Critics of FDT suggest or imply important limits to its application. Still, Fowler's work makes valuable contributions to the purposes of this research. Its foremost contribution is an understanding and description of the spiritual place in which many college students often find themselves, namely in transition between Fowler's third and fourth stages. This understanding

provides a valuable description of the target audience and a point of reference as issues of spirituality are addressed.

Transforming moments. Although Loder (Loder & Fowler, 1982) offered critiques of Fowler's emphasis on stages of spiritual development, his own work (Loder, 1989) seems to complement Fowler's work in some respects. Loder's work focused on events that bring a person to a new level of spiritual understanding. "Transforming moments," as he called them, are critical moments when a person moves from a current accepted reality to a new accepted reality. Transforming moments expand a person's previous belief system and ways of making meaning. According to Loder, it is what happens during the transitions between plateaus in faith that explains how faith is developed. With this in mind, Loder's work could be seen as a deeper look into the processes at work as one moves between Fowler's stages of faith.

Loder (1989) outlined five steps common to these transforming moments. First is *conflict-in-context* when a person's way of knowing is challenged. There is an internal and unrelenting dissonance brought on by competing truths or other failures of a person's belief system. In Loder's words, "the deep movement of the human spirit begins in restless incoherence, dichotomy, or fragmented situations which defy our elemental longings for coherence" (p. 3). The second step Loder identified as an *interlude for scanning* in which, "the spirit begins the search for resolution" (p. 4). The search initially leads people to look for answers within their current paradigms, but if the conflict is severe enough and if current paradigms are insufficient, people are often led outside their current ways of knowing. Third is an *insight felt with intuitive force*. This is the finding of resolution that brings peace to the inner conflict. Ending the conflict is more important than retaining old beliefs. Fourth is *release and repatterning*, which Loder describes as the "Hosanna" effect when people feel relief and begin

altering their belief system to account for the newly found insight. The final step is *interpretation and verification* in which people test and retest the new way of knowing within the original and new conflicts. This step is often accompanied by an outward declaration of the new-found truth. Loder's work is valuable because it provides a perspective on how spiritual growth occurs.

    Religious education designed to develop spirituality. Fowler and Loder both focused their attention on understanding the processes at work as one matures and grows spiritually. Although this information provides an important foundation, the purpose of this research requires an understanding of how these processes relate to religious education.

    Court (2013) applied the vast literature on spirituality into a model for religious education. Her contribution focused on three aspects: first, epistemological considerations as a framework; second, curriculum that values spiritual aims; and third, the role of the religious instructor. Court's contributions are centered on a philosophical, rather than an empirical perspective for understanding religious education designed to build spirituality. It should be noted that it is difficult to find empirically-based research applied to religious education generally (Astin et al., 2011, p. 2). This appears to be a weakness in the current body of literature. Still, Court's work offers valuable insight by providing a framework relevant to this research.

    Epistemological considerations as a framework for religious education. Court (2013) argued that the goals of religious education should include bringing students to a religious "attitude of the soul" where one aligns oneself with the will of God. Two core issues of this study, spirituality and religiosity, are reflected in her position. Developing an "attitude of the

soul" aligns with the spiritual, inner domain of a person. Bringing one's actions into compliance with the will of God implies outward behavior and relates to religiosity.

Court's (2013) model for accomplishing these goals draws upon both an acquisition and a participation metaphor of learning as described by Sfard (1998). In the acquisition metaphor, knowledge is similar to a physical object: it can be acquired, gained, developed, mapped and so forth**.** In religious education, important "things" to be acquired might include an understanding of the history, core doctrines, rituals, stories, and community norms of a given faith tradition. Court referred to these types of examples as religious knowledge.

In Sfard's (1998) participation metaphor, engagement is a form of knowing. Learning is synonymous with terms like legitimate participation, apprenticeship in thinking, communities of practice, and so forth. Learning means interacting with and being a part of a context. Learners are influenced by but also influence the context. With this in mind, knowledge is seen as an evolving aspect of participation that changes according to the participants. Court (2013) expressed this kind of participation, participation that included experience with a higher power, as religious experience.

Court's (2013) ideas about religious education focused on the interplay between the acquisition and participation metaphors. This is evident in a question she posed: "What is the relationship between religious knowledge and religious experience?" (p 251). In Court's view, religious knowledge (and the obtaining of it through the acquisition metaphor) is valued for its ability to unify a community through a consistent doctrine, provide intellectual justification for faith, and instruct in rituals; all designed to focus adherents in a way that invites religious experiences (p. 254). More succinctly, acquired knowledge leads to meaningful participation with deity. The most important role of religious knowledge, Court argued, is to create an

environment where "religious/spiritual experience is enabled" (p. 254). For example, religious knowledge of how to pray enables a person to pray; prayer, in turn, may lead to a religious experience of feeling connected to deity. For Court, the knowledge of how to pray and the connection to deity are both valid forms of knowing and should both be goals of religious education.

Religious knowledge served another important purpose according to Court (2013). Religious education that relies solely on the participation metaphor has the potential to embrace every spiritual experience as equally valid. The danger of this approach becomes clear as one considers extreme cases of cult leaders who claim a spiritual experience to recruit followers. Less extreme examples also underscore the issue. For example, a person with little or no religious knowledge may have difficulty making sense of a religious experience.

Court (2013) pointed out that religious knowledge provides a necessary framework for understanding and judging spiritual experiences much as artistic knowledge provides a framework for judging art: "Art is expressive and affective but it is by no means without standards, criteria of value and knowledge" (p. 256). In the same way that art critics refer to a body of knowledge about what makes good art, spiritual experiences can be measured and understood according to religious knowledge as found in sacred texts, commentaries, and norms of the faith tradition.

In summary, Court (2013) laid a foundation for her model of religious education by considering the epistemology of religiosity and spirituality. This framework relies on the interplay between the acquisition of religious knowledge and participation in religious experiences.

Curriculum. Court's (2013) epistemological considerations and the interplay between religious knowledge and religious experience lead very naturally into issues of curriculum design. Court pointed out that traditional methods of instruction are appropriate when teaching religious knowledge: "All of these aspects of religious knowledge can be accommodated within an acquisition of knowledge framework. A rich, well-constructed curriculum whose goals, content, student activities and methods of evaluation address all the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy would be a fine achievement" (p. 257).

Religious experience, on the other hand, is not so easily addressed. In Court's (2013) view, religious educators cannot plan instruction to create or assess religious experience, arguing it is "ineffable [and] essentially unprogrammable" (p. 257). A successful curriculum is concerned with "providing students of religious education with the knowledge, the methods, the environment, the encouragement and the human relationships that *may* make religious experience available to them" (p. 258). Court (2013) encouraged curriculum that provided space for religious experience by providing opportunities for reflection, exploration and sincere questioning and dialogue (p. 259).

With this in mind, Court (2013) encouraged practitioners to be very explicit with students in stating that, while religious experience cannot be guaranteed through the design of a course, it should be the major and most important goal of religious education. In her words,

> A religious life sustained only by habit or fear, by community, security or stability or by the acquisition of an extensive body of knowledge is not a full religious life. While we cannot teach, promise, evaluate or verify religious experience, we must include it as a revealed and valued aim. Clearly this is not an aim that can be broken down into goals and behavioral objectives. No 'behavior' is intended" (p. 257).

The religious education instructor. Recognizing the limitations of preprogrammed curriculum, Court (2013) turned her attention to the role of instructors in fostering an environment that can lead to spiritual experiences. She set a baseline for good religious education instructors by turning to the work of Stronge (2007), who described characteristics of effective teachers generally. According to Stronge, effective teachers are prepared, have a strong content knowledge, and are constantly improving their skills. They care about their students. They are gentle, nurturing, respectful, and instill excitement for learning (p. 1-23).

Stronge's (2007) description applies to teachers across disciplines, but for religious educators, Court (2013) added additional criteria based on her emphasis that students should experience religion rather than just learn about it. Court believed the ideal religious educator should be a devout and successful seeker of spirituality in order to guide students in that path. He or she would be childlike and free from cynicism (p. 261). The ideal instructor would be committed to one religion--its canon, norms, traditions, rituals, and so forth (p. 261). There would be interreligious appreciation, but recall Court's position that religious knowledge provides both the seedbed and the boundaries of religious experience. With this in mind, it naturally follows that Court's ideal religious educator would belong to a specific religion, which would serve to frame his or her own religious experience.

Court (2013) argued instructors should avoid "authoritative moralizing" (p. 259) but instead help students connect religious knowledge with their own lived experiences. The ideal teachers view their roles as helping students experience religion on the students' terms and timeline. Good instructors regard their role as sacred. They fulfill their roles by encouraging lively, but respectful debate. The ideal teacher is deeply invested in helping his or her students grow spiritually: "Such a teacher will be truly present in his or her classroom" (Court, p. 260).

Court's (2013) vision of the need for influential religious educators has been discussed in related literature. Lindholm and Astin (2008), for example, identified faculty as the "primary adult agents of socialization in the college environment" (p. 199). They concluded faculty have a major impact on students' moral development, values, beliefs, behaviors, intellectual curiosity, and interpersonal skills. In addition, Lindholm and Astin argued that faculty members indirectly influence students in that they set the culture and climate of the university in their roles as leaders in the institution.

Cannister (1999) found positive results related to spiritual development in new college freshman through a mentoring approach. Students were randomly selected to participate in a faculty-mentoring program that focused on spiritual development during their freshman year. The treatment group participated in a twice-a-week, faculty-led seminar consisting of up to ten students. The seminars provided an opportunity for faculty members to help freshman students who were in a new environment and at the same time challenge them to grow both academically and personally. Pre and post survey results showed significant differences ($p < .05$) in measures of spiritual well-being between the mentored group and a control group that did not receive mentors. Cannister's study discussed the need for mentors who support but also challenge students by offering different perspectives from those held by students.

Lindholm and Astin (2008) and Cannister's (1999) findings indicate the potential for faculty to make a positive difference, but this potential appears to be underutilized. Barry et al. (2010) reviewed a wide variety of studies on the topic of faculty influence on spirituality and concluded that while some faculty do make a significant contribution to the spiritual development of students, most students are dissatisfied with the opportunities faculty provide for spiritual reflection.

The root of this dissatisfaction may relate to what Walvoord (2008) described as the "great divide" between students' goals and the goals of religious education instructors. In a study involving over 12,000 college students taking introductory religious courses, Walvoord found:

> Even in public and private non-sectarian institutions, more than half of the students ranked . . . religious/spiritual development (51 percent) as "essential" or "very important" course goals. In religiously–affiliated institutions, that number rises to almost three-fourths: . . . 70 percent chose religious/spiritual development. (p. 21)

> In contrast, only eight percent of faculty at public/non-sectarian institutions and 42 percent of faculty in religious institutions listed religious/spiritual development as "essential" or "very important" course outcomes (Walvoord, 2008, p. 18). Walvoord's findings suggest a possible misalignment between what students are hoping to get out of their religious education courses and what faculty feel is important to provide. This is problematic within the context of Court's (2013) ideas because faculty may not perceive an opportunity to fill an important need felt by students.

Synthesis and questions. Considered separately, the work of Fowler (1995), Loder (1989), and Court (2013) each provides valuable insights into the development of spirituality. A synthesis of their ideas, however, illuminates important connections, questions and opportunities related to this research.

The Astin et al. (2011) study pointed out two important ideas. First, college students are seeking spirituality. Second, they are looking inwardly to define their spirituality and eschew outside influences, especially religious organizations. Court's (2013) work pointed out the challenges of this approach by suggesting religiosity is an important part of developing

spirituality because of the path it lays before students, but also because of the boundaries or framework it establishes. Further, Fowler (1995) described spiritual growth as a process that typically involved pain, abandonment from existing beliefs, guilt, and sometimes separation from ideas and people that had previously been a source of stability and support. Loder's (1989) description of how people mature spiritually included similar upheaval. Walvoord (2008) has suggested that many students are looking to religious education classes to help them develop their spirituality and yet many faculty members teaching those courses have different goals in mind.

With all of this in mind, it could be argued that college students are on a painful, and seemingly fruitless spiritual journey. Several questions emerge: Can university religious education show students a potential path to spirituality that also respects their personal search? Does spiritual growth have to involve pain and rebellion? Could religious education at the university facilitate a more healthy approach to spiritual development by leveraging the influence of faculty?

Court (2013) outlined an approach that addressed some of these issues, but what does her approach look like at scale? Court concluded her paper with this statement about the ideal instructor: "Such a teacher will be truly present in his or her classroom" (p. 261). She is likely referring to a traditional brick and mortar classroom, but what is the student experience like when a program designed to help students develop spirituality is conducted online and with large numbers of students? She noted that the elements she outlines would ideally be applied systematically throughout a religious school (p. 261). When this is done, and done online, what is the student experience like?

Online Religious Education

To address questions of religious education conducted at scale, we look to the literature related specifically to online religious education.

Institutional outreach. Leaders of religious institutions have a long history of seeking to expand their reach through distance education. The epistles in the New Testament were written with the intention of teaching newly formed congregations when and where church leadership could not be physically present. Sacred texts in general could be considered some of the more powerful examples of breaking down barriers of both time and geographic location (Frye, 2012). In recent times, the Internet has dramatically increased the opportunities for religious leaders to reach more people.

Segments from all of the world's major religions engage in some sort of online religious education effort with Christians as the most active adopters (Rogers & Howell, 2004). Institutional leaders report using online education as a way to keep pace with other institutions, reduce cost, and fulfill an organizational mission. Some view the use of distance education as a mechanism for narrowing the gap between secular and religious education, especially as public education leans increasingly toward the secular. Others see the Internet as a tool for increasing exposure to diverse religious perspectives. Educators at Fuller Theological Seminary, for example, seek to bring religious education to students who are not capable of coming to their campus. Their online offerings have allowed them to teach courses on the New Testament to students across the globe. Erickson, a professor at Fuller, highlighted the value of this diverse student body: "We had a Rwandan student who had lived through Hutu violence. That was an enriching perspective on what life is really like. It really made a big difference in how we read scripture" (Wood, 2013, p. 31).

Although very little research has been done in the area of online religious education courses, there has been some work with an eye toward understanding how representatives of various religions are using the Internet to share their message. Helland (2002), for example, categorized religious sites on the Internet as first, providing information about the religion or second, providing a space for engaging in religious activities (unmediated discussions about faith, participation in rituals, prayer). Of the two approaches, Helland found the vast majority of religions provided information about the religion and only a few provided a space to actually engage in religious activities. No literature appears to be available that describes *what* individuals experience when online resources are designed to promote religious experience.

Online religious education and spiritual growth. Although Helland's (2002) research did not investigate the processes of spiritual growth in these later examples, his insights into how religions currently perceive and use the Internet as a tool offer an important perspective. Helland argued that religions using the Internet simply as a way of disseminating information in a "top down," highly controlled approach miss a valuable opportunity. He stated, "People do not just want official information about religion when they are online; they also want to dialogue about their beliefs, and to express or experience their religious feelings through the medium" (p. 296). Considering this idea in the context of online religious education courses designed to develop faith, his statement is consistent with Fowler's (1995), Loder's (1989), and Court's (2013) positions. Recall, for example, that Fowler noted the role communities can play in encouraging exploration and reflection with others about ideologies being taught (p. 161). Loder explained the tendency of individuals to share publicly the resolution of individual crises of faith (pp. 3-4). Court stressed that students should have the opportunity to share expressions of spirituality (p.259). Helland envisioned the Internet as a tool well-suited for these types of interactions.

With Helland's (2002) view of the opportunities presented through the Internet for religious education in mind, it is helpful to consider the design of online religious education courses. Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski (2011) advocated for online religious education courses that are designed as student-centered constructivist learning environments. In these environments, students are embedded in a community of fellow-students or others outside of the class and have a place to test, discuss, and consider a variety of perspectives as a major focus of the learning process. Delamarter et al. advocated not just for online religious education courses that are designed in this way, but entire programs that support the building of community through a cohort model. Their contribution is consistent with Fowler's (1995), Loder's (1989), and Court's (2013) ideas about the development of faith discussed previously in that each scholar pointed to the need for a community in which students can encounter challenges, discover and test resolutions against differing views, and celebrate religious experience. Together, their ideas paint a picture of what may work when religious education designed for spiritual growth is conducted online.

Research in online religious education. Very little research appears to have been done having to do with university online religious education. The limited research that has been done provides initial evidence that online courses may be a valid tool for fostering spiritual growth. Hilton, Plummer, Fryar and Williams (in press) compared the spiritual outcomes of face-to-face and online sections of religious education courses in which both modes had spiritual growth as their overarching outcome. Using an instrument designed to measure the impact of religious education courses on spirituality, the researchers found no significant difference between the different modes.

Hilton et al.'s (in press) findings provide encouragement that online religious education can succeed in building students' spirituality. A logical next step is to seek a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of spiritual growth in the setting of an online course. This understanding is valuable for those interested in developing scaled programs that support the spiritual domain of college students.

Unfortunately, there appears to be no research addressing this issue. Rogers and Howell (2004) indicated the topic of online religious education is "relatively unexplored and un-researched" and yet it is important because it "holds significant promise" (p. 12) in its potential to impact the spiritual growth of individuals. With this in mind, this research seeks to describe the phenomenon of spiritual growth in students enrolled in university-level online religious education courses. To accomplish this, two specific research questions were addressed. First, how do individuals who have had both online and face-to-face religious education courses describe the difference in the experiences? Second, what elements of the online course experience encourage spiritual growth?

Chapter 3: Methods

Research that seeks to provide rich, detailed descriptions is best accomplished using a qualitative approach (Creswell, 1998). More specifically, I used a phenomenological approach, which is valued for its ability to illuminate the lived experiences of individuals related to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). Phenomenology is commonly used in sociology, psychology, and educational research (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). It has been used to understand the nature of caring between nurses and patients (Cresswell, 1998, p. 271) victimization through violent crimes, exclusion (Moustakas, 1994 p. 142), and so forth. Phenomenology is well-suited to address the research question in this study because the focus is on understanding a specific phenomenon.

The term phenomenology is used to describe a philosophy, a qualitative tradition, a research framework, and a variety of other things, depending on the context and author. Use of the term phenomenology can be further complicated by the various and nuanced varieties of phenomenology: transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic to name a few (Patton, 2002, p. 104). This research drew upon phenomenology mainly for its methodological framework as described by Moustaka (1994) and Van Manen (1990).

Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and how they perceive those experiences (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). Perception is emphasized because phenomenology holds that consciousness is the only lens through which humans can access outside reality. Therefore, phenomenologists consider a person's perception to be reality since no other mechanism exists to understand reality for either the participant or the researcher (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). With this in mind, researchers are interested in perceptions and experiences from participants directly, in their own words, and from their frames of reference.

Moustakas (1994) identified three major phases of phenomenological research: methods of preparation, methods of collecting data, and methods of analyzing data (p. 104). These activities provide the overarching organizational framework for the remainder of this chapter.

Methods of Preparation

Three areas of preparation were required for this research: selecting the phenomenon and its context, selecting the participants, and bracketing my assumptions.

Selecting the phenomenon and its context. BYU-Idaho is a private, undergraduate institution offering certificates, associate degrees and bachelor's degrees. Sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the mission of the university includes helping students develop spiritually (BYU-Idaho, n.d.-a) in addition to traditional educational goals common to most universities. BYU-Idaho offers 11 online bachelor's degrees, six online associate degrees and nine online certificates. All students are required to complete religious education courses.

Online courses at BYU-Idaho are designed and developed by full-time faculty members with content expertise and an instructional designer. All sections of an online course share the same outcomes, assessments, and content. Remote instructors facilitate the course as designed by the full-time faculty and instructional designer so that students generally have the same curriculum regardless of the online section they are in. Remote instructors provide feedback on assignments, engage with students on the discussion boards, and provide limited course content in a page designed to introduce the topics for the week.

Participants were selected from BYU-Idaho's foundations of religion (FDREL) 121 course. This course covers the first half of the Book of Mormon, a sacred text for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The first outcome for this course highlights its

focus on developing spirituality as an intended outcome: "Increased faith in Jesus Christ, and a deeper conversion to His gospel." Assignments required students to study the Book of Mormon, consider the application of principles in daily life, engage in discussions with the instructor and other students about what they are learning, and so forth. Each online section of FDREL 121 has approximately fifty students.

Selecting the participants. The survey used in the Hilton et al. (in press) study (Appendix A) has continued to be used in FDREL 121 to provide instructors and administrators ongoing insights into the effectiveness of the course. I used results from the survey from the Fall 2014 semester to identify students who reported the course had a large impact on their spirituality as measured by an overall average of greater than five on all questions. This approach followed Patton's (2002) "intensity sampling" (p. 234) and was useful in identifying participants who had rich experience with the phenomenon. I intentionally selected only participants for follow-up interviews who reported favorably on the Hilton et al. instrument since this research specifically sought to describe cases where participants reported experiencing spiritual growth. Participants also had to have previously enrolled in at least one face-to-face religion class since many questions required that point of reference. Fifty-four students fit these criteria. Potential participants were randomly selected and then invited to participate in the study. BYU and BYU-Idaho granted approval for this research through their respective institutional review boards and participants signed a consent form (Appendix D).

Patton (2002) argued that qualitative research does not require a large number of participants when purposeful sampling is done appropriately and when the research is intentionally focused on thick, rich description (p. 245). He further suggested an approach in which researchers estimate the minimum number of samples required to cover the topic at the

outset and make adjustments as needed if it becomes clear that more participants will be

beneficial (p. 246). Consistent with this suggestion, I initially conducted five interviews and

then decided five more were necessary in order to better understand the phenomenon. By the

tenth interview, it appeared no substantively new themes were emerging and that saturation had

been reached (Mason, 2010). I conducted three interviews over the phone and seven in person.

Bracketing assumptions. Researchers will inevitably have preconceived ideas about the

topic of research that may compromise the quality of the research produced. Patton (2002),

Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Van Mannen (1990) all pointed out the need for qualitative

researchers to explicitly state their biases at the outset of a research project. This allows readers

to take these stated biases into consideration as they read research results. Explicitly stating

biases also helps the researcher become self-aware of his or her own biases and, to the extent

possible, avoid skewing the results in favor of conclusions that are not based in solid evidence.

This process of setting aside biases is known as "bracketing" (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). I provide

the following statements to make visible potential areas of personal bias relevant to this study

and to assist in my own process of bracketing.

- I am a life-time member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I believe

  in its teachings.

- I believe in a God who is keenly interested in the lives of the students I will be

  interviewing and their success in spiritual development.

- I spent the first eight years of my career as a religious educator for the Church of Jesus

  Christ of Latter-day Saints teaching courses designed to help students in their spiritual

  development.

- I believe developing spiritually is something very personal between God and an individual.

- I believe instructors and a well-designed course can assist and even encourage the process of spiritual development, but individuals determine how or if they will grow in the spiritual domain.

- I believe spiritual growth requires an engaged student who is willing to see the requirements of a religion class as more than an academic exercise.

- I believe distance education designed for spiritual outcomes can be effective, but there is much to learn about how best to design online curriculum.

- I believe a solid mentoring relationship between a student and a teacher in religious education is an important part of the process of spiritual growth. I expect to find that students will miss the face-to-face relationship. I believe it is challenging, but not impossible, to establish strong relationships online.

- I believe some religious education instructors are so persuasive and have such strong personalities that students can orient themselves to the instructor more than they do to God.

- I believe it is possible that students may report the loss of a face-to-face teacher required them to rely more on their own search for spirituality and less on an instructor's strong personality.

- I believe students will report missing the face-to-face interactions with other students but that they felt they learned a lot from the online interactions with others in the class.

- I believe students will report frustrations with the design of FDREL 121. This belief comes from conversations I have had previously with students in this course.

Methods of Data Collection

Epoche is the freedom from supposition and is an important element of phenomenological research. Epoche requires phenomenologists to set aside bias, preconceived ideas, previous experience, etc. as discussed previously and to hear the experience as if for the first time. The phenomenon speaks for itself and is not contextualized in prior knowledge by the researcher (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 84–85). In this study, the Epoche meant I encouraged the participant to discuss faith development in the online class as if they were explaining it to someone totally unacquainted with the phenomenon, on their own terms and in their own way.

This approach was an important principle throughout the interview process. In seeking to obtain an epoche perspective, the participants were free to discuss their experience without undue adherence to the interview protocol. However, an interview protocol was important to develop prior to meeting with participants in that it helped structure my thoughts, plan possible probing questions to go deeper into an issue, and ensured that the questions I asked focused on answering the research questions. The remainder of this section outlines how I constructed and utilized the interview protocol.

The interview protocol was designed to provide a description of spiritual growth in online religious education courses by addressing the two research questions in this study: (a) How do individuals who have had both online and face-to-face religious education courses describe the difference in the experiences? (b) What elements of the online course experience encourage spiritual growth? The protocol assumed spiritual growth had occurred since students were selected based on their positive responses to the questions on the instrument.

Phenomenological research typically follows an informal, interactive, open-ended interview process where the researcher prepares a contextualizing statement and a series of

questions designed to help the participant provide a comprehensive account of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher is not, however, bound to use these questions if the participant is able to convey a full account (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). With this approach in mind, I used a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. I stored transcripts and any information related to participants on a password-protected computer, and I stored hard copies of transcripts in a locked cabinet.

Methods of Analyzing Data

Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (1998) offered steps for phenomenological data analysis that formed the approach for this research. I noted the significant overlap with Van Manen's (1990) description of phenomenological data analysis throughout.

Thematic analysis. Van Manen (1990) described thematic analysis as useful for capturing the lived experience of a phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) recommended a process similar to thematic analysis with the purpose of providing a "pre-reflective description of things just as they appear" (p. 91). I derived significant statements that seemed particularly revealing of the phenomena via three perspectives: First, through a holistic reading of the transcripts from which I deduced major themes; second, by searching for specific statements that seemed to stand out as particularly representative of the phenomenon; and third, through a line-by-line study of the transcripts in which I asked what each sentence, or group of sentences, revealed about the phenomenon.

Linguistic transformation. Thematic analysis provided the building blocks from which I produced a written description, or "linguistic transformation" (Van Mannen, 1990, p. 95), of the phenomenon. The purpose of this step was to create as complete a description of the phenomenon as possible. This was accomplished using the themes discussed previously.

Interpreting themes through conversation. Van Manen (1990) advocated a relationship between the researcher and participants in which participants often act as co-researchers. This requires an ongoing conversation in which the researcher and the subject discover together a full description of the phenomenon in question. This is similar to member checking in other approaches to qualitative research. In the context of this research, I accomplished this by following up with participants and inviting them to review the written descriptions discussed previously. Seven of the 10 responded and either confirmed my description accurately captured their experience or provided additional insight.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is established by successfully addressing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility. I enhanced the credibility of this research by making visible my own biases, through prolonged engagement, triangulation, member checks, peer debriefings, and negative case analysis.

Making bias visible. Making my biases visible accomplished two important things related to credibility. First, it created self-awareness so that I was careful not to allow those biases to unduly influence the findings. Second, it allowed readers to consider how these biases might have influenced my findings, despite my attempts to prevent them from doing so.

Prolonged engagement. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest spending "sufficient time" within the research context (p. 301). This was accomplished by (a) taking the necessary time during interviews to build trusting relationships, (b) ensuring I had the necessary information from participants via interpretation through conversation (as described previously), and (c) spending sufficient time with interview transcripts during the data analysis phase.

Triangulation. Triangulation contributes to the credibility of qualitative research by addressing multiple perspectives and points of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). This was accomplished by (a) interviewing multiple students, (b) comparing the experiences of those students to one another, (c) thoroughly consulting the literature related to spiritual development, (d) analyzing interview findings in light of the survey data, and (e) analyzing interview data in light of the literature. In addition, triangulation occurred as members of my committee reviewed data and offered insight into their meaning and interpretation.

Member checks. Participants were given the opportunity to review and influence the interpretations and findings from this study. This occurred as part of the process of interpretation through conversations described previously. I sent participants my written description of their experience based on our interview, and seven of the ten responded with either confirmation that I had accurately captured their experience or additional insight or correction.

Peer debriefing. Members of my committee reviewed my work and offered insight into my findings. This ensured data collection and interpretation were appropriate. An important benefit of this close collaboration was to help ensure my own assumptions did not overly influence my interpretation of the interview data.

Negative case analysis. I used negative case analysis throughout the interview processes by exploring with participants responses that seemed to contradict the emerging themes.

Enhancing transferability. Phenomenological research should naturally draw in a reader so that he or she feels compelled to participate through interest and reflection on the subject under investigation (Van Mannen, 1990). I sought to produce this kind of research so that transferability would occur as readers naturally projected findings from this context into their own contexts and areas of interest. I accomplished this through the literature review, which was designed to frame the research questions in such a way that they were meaningful, compelling, and important. I also provided rich descriptions of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which provides readers the opportunity to arrive at their own interpretations and conclusions.

Enhancing dependability and confirmability. I kept an audit trail to track research decisions, follow up questions for participants, advice from my committee, research progress and so forth (Appendix E). This worked in tandem with the peer debriefings and member checks to address the criteria of dependability and confirmability.

Chapter 4: Findings

The research questions in this study were:

1. How do individuals who have had both online and face-to-face religious education courses describe the difference in the experiences?

2. What elements of the online course experience encouraged spiritual growth?

The narrative that developed from students in this study generally touched on three aspects of the online experience: the curriculum, the instructor and fellow students. These three aspects form the organizational approach for reporting the findings, and the research questions are addressed within the context of each of these aspects of the online experience.

General Themes

First, however, it is necessary to address two important themes that permeated all aspects of the participants' online experiences: spiritual growth and the Holy Ghost, and self-direction. Students discussed these themes across all aspects of their online and face-to-face course experiences, and so they are considered together. These themes represent such a foundational part of the findings that a fruitful discussion of the specific research questions requires their consideration first as groundwork.

Spiritual growth and the Holy Ghost. Threaded through each interview was the underlying, implicit position that spiritual growth comes from a direct experience with the divine. Latter-day Saint (LDS) doctrine holds that people grow spiritually as they are tutored personally by the Holy Ghost, a member of the Godhood. Responses by participants were so oriented around this idea that explicitly addressing it is necessary in order to consider the research questions in their proper context. I consider three topics: Latter-day Saints' understanding of spiritual growth, sources of the Spirit, and fruits of the Spirit. Each topic

includes representative quotes demonstrating how this idea was infused in the participants' responses.

Latter-day Saints' understanding of spiritual growth. All research participants were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS church), which teaches that the Godhead consists of God the Father, his son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. Important roles of the Holy Ghost, who is often referred to as the Spirit or the Comforter, include bearing witness of God the Father and Jesus Christ and teaching truth. A witness through the Holy Ghost provides, "more certainty than any communication we can receive through our natural senses" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-a).

This doctrinal position explains how Latter-day Saints view the process behind spiritual growth; that is, spiritual growth occurs through an interaction or experience with the Holy Ghost. Evidence of this view regarding how people grow spiritually was either explicitly stated or clearly implied in every interview. For example, as Erik explained how instructors helped him grow spiritually, he stated, "I don't know if it actually necessarily comes from the teacher so much as it's really a connection with the Holy Ghost for that to take place." Craig said, "[For an online discussion board] to actually have impact, you have to be feeling the Spirit." Diane indicated an instructor helped her during a challenging time to, "really rely on the Spirit that I was feeling." These types of comments were common throughout all the interviews and demonstrate that for these students, the core of increased spirituality is an experience with the Holy Ghost.

Accessing the Holy Ghost. Participants pointed to sincere actions they took as putting them in a position to feel the influence of the Holy Ghost. An experience from Fae, who took the online class along with her husband, illustrated this point. She talked about taking a trip with

her husband and listening to an audio version of the Book of Mormon in order to complete a reading assignment from the course:

> It was just so amazing that our attitude changes when we read, and we get deeper insights about the gospel. And when we read, we're able to feel the love that Heavenly Father has for us. And we're able to give it back to him, and I think that's why we read so deep. Just because we felt that change in our hearts, and we felt the closeness we had as spouses but also with Heavenly Father.

In this example, Fae pointed to a deep engagement with the scriptures as the action that opened the opportunity to feel the Holy Ghost. Other participants made similar statements regarding acts of service and commitment. Intent appears to matter as well. Erik noted that "[learners] can choose to experience the guidance of the Holy Ghost or not." He referenced the need for humility as evidenced by sincere questions as an important prerequisite to a meaningful experience with the Spirit.

Participants also felt accessing the Holy Ghost was often facilitated through interaction with others. This became especially apparent when participants were asked what advice they would give friends who were struggling with their faith as they considered signing up for a face-to-face class or an online class. Although advice about which class to take varied between participants, many of the responses centered on getting the student into a supportive environment surrounded by people with strong faith. Isaac's response represents a typical reply: "Maybe there's somebody in that class that would really help him because at this point, I feel like he would need to be strengthened by other people." Craig supported this understanding, suggesting that sharing "testimonies is one of the bigger parts that could build faith in a classroom setting."

Participants saw instructors as especially influential in helping students feel the Holy Ghost. Dianne responded to the question by discussing how instructors could help individuals by sharing their own feelings and thereby "touch their heart." Erik described his experience teaching online as a missionary: "You have the guidance of the Holy Ghost to perceive those kinds of things [the needs of the investigator]." Diane and Erik's experiences align with the LDS teaching that some people are blessed with the ability to teach by the power of the Holy Ghost, and others are blessed to be able to believe their teachings (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.-b).

It should be noted, however, that spiritual growth did not happen, according to participants, *because* of an instructor. Instructors may guide and direct, but they do not *cause* spiritual growth in others. Erik's statement highlights this point:

Thinking about it, the instructors that I have face-to-face experiences with only feel like [we] have a spiritual connection because they were there when I was learning from the Holy Ghost. . . . As far as the spiritual connection, I don't know if it actually necessarily comes from the teacher so much as it's really a connection with the Holy Ghost.

Fruits of the Spirit. Fae's earlier comment highlighted some of the fruits of the Spirit. She mentioned, for example, that her attitude changed for the better, she received deeper insights, she felt an increased closeness to her spouse, she felt love from and towards Heavenly Father increase, and she mentioned a "change in our hearts." Fae explained additional wide-spread benefits of feeling the Spirit:

We took this class last semester, not much after we got married. And it was so strong that when we were reading together, I think it helped us; it helped our relationship because we were just starting out. We didn't know where to go, what we wanted to do

because we were at [another university] and weren't happy, and then when we got to BYU-Idaho, we saw a huge difference, and so I feel like when we saw that difference, we wanted to make that experience even better. So we engaged in our classes—it wasn't just in Book of Mormon, but it was in all of our classes—reading deeply, and understanding everything, and I feel like the classes at BYU—no matter if it's online. . . or on campus— you get a deeper feeling and you get a deeper understanding because you're doing it through Heavenly Father.

Fae's description was consistent with themes that emerged from other participants, namely that the fruits of the Spirit touched many aspects of their lives.

Summary. Considering Latter-day Saints' view of the Holy Ghost, how to access the Holy Ghost, and the fruits of the Holy Ghost is important because these issues undergird the remainder of the findings. Participants described growing spiritually and experiencing the Holy Ghost as synonymous, and they used the vocabulary interchangeably. Participants experienced the Holy Ghost by engaging in scripture, as a confirmation of right action, and through interactions with their instructors. Further, participants understood the experience of feeling the Holy Ghost as not just a confirmation that God existed, but as a "change of heart," an increased motivation to do right, and an increased connection to God and those around them. For the participants, this theme set the standard for successful religious education, regardless of whether it was conducted face-to-face or online. More specifically, participants judged the success of religious education (online or face-to-face) in terms of how well the class helped them experience the Holy Ghost and its fruits.

Self-Direction. That is not to say, however, that students in this study relied on classes, or anything else for that matter, to connect them to the Holy Ghost. Perhaps the most prevalent

theme was the need for students in online classes to be self-directed. This was such a common thread that one could say, based on this research, that success in an online religious education class depends much less on the mode of course delivery, curriculum, instructor or classmates, and much more on the individual student. Participants expressed self-direction in three categories: intrinsic motivation, integrity, and charting their own spiritual path.

Intrinsic motivation: I wanted to succeed, so I did. Research participants demonstrated a high level of intrinsic motivation. Although getting a good grade did play a minor role in motivating their efforts, it was evident that students genuinely wanted to grow spiritually. Erik illustrated this point well as he connected his motivation to succeed in the online class with the motivations of Joseph Smith, who founded the Latter-day Saint Church:

> I would say [courses that are less teacher-dependent are] definitely healthy. I mean, that's how the restoration started with Joseph Smith looking to further his spirituality. That's how we really gain a testimony of the Book of Mormon, is from having independence and seeking after truth.

More succinctly, Erik later stated, "I wanted to succeed, so I did."

I observed this notion of intrinsic motivation woven through a variety of participant comments. Note the benefits students believed they received by choosing to engage meaningfully in the course:

- I believe . . . the biggest influence each [part of the online course] has on me is based on my willingness to learn from it. If I'm short on time and just get the work done, I won't have a very good experience. But if I spend the time to actually soak up something from either what somebody said or the teacher's

feedback or what I read, then it does have a different effect. So it's mainly based on my willingness to get something out of it.

- I remembered one week my teacher recommended some readings that went well with my studies, and that wasn't required by any means for me to do, but I did read them because I was interested in gaining a little more spiritual insight into something that I talked about in one of my assignments. And so because of that, I feel like [the online class] fosters a sense of independence that I feel like I'm going to use for a very long time.

- [I said to myself,] "I'm going to try and do this, and hold myself up to those goals." So I challenged myself to do random acts of service for three other people that week that were not in my room, not my roommates. It was good. I got at least two I was proud of.

Although the participants' motivation was largely intrinsic, grades seemed to provide an initial incentive to engage students in assignments that would help them feel the Holy Ghost. Craig expressed this point well, explaining that the grade, "gives you a reason to start doing it [the assignments], which then makes it happen [feeling the Holy Ghost]." We see in Craig's statement the idea that the grade is merely a catalyst towards connecting students with the Holy Ghost rather than a legitimate end goal in and of itself. None of the students equated a good grade in their course with a successful course experience; in each interview, there was an implicit understanding that the real goal was to draw one closer to the Spirit.

Integrity: I have a conscience you know? As seen in the following examples, students were motivated by a sense of integrity to report the work they were doing honestly and to make the experience positive:

- It just goes back to the honor code, whether we're going to be honest or not. . . . It's their own fault if they [students who aren't doing the work] don't learn anything because they didn't do their reading.

- I have a conscience, you know? I don't want to be dishonest, so if I need to read that ten pages, I'm going to read that ten pages.

Brad talked about how his experience as a missionary impacted how he viewed commitments he makes and what motivated him to take the online course assignment seriously:

[As a missionary,] you ask people do something, and it's so easy [for them] to do it. . . . I mean, you challenge someone to read the Book of Mormon, a couple of verses, so you talk about it the next time you come over. They don't make their appointment. They didn't read, even if they are there, and it's stressful, and you think about it, "Well, they said that they'd do it. Are they not a man of their word or woman of their word?" I think that's what stressed me out the most. I had a truly humbling experience. Before the mission I was [a] cocky son of a gun, and now I just come home really humbled, and I'm willing to keep to a commitment that I'm set to. So I come to this meeting on time and stuff like that [Note: Brad arrived fifteen minutes early for the interview]. . . . That's just what I got from my mission. That's what it trained me to do--to be more diligent and use your own time. That's what it is. You're held accountable for yourself.

Brad's comment highlights how integrity, which he developed during his church mission, prompted him to take the assignments seriously. He felt strongly that he would not have gotten as much out of the online class before his mission because he had not yet developed the kind of integrity he described.

Students' paths: It was all on me. Another important sub-theme relating to self-directed students was that they took ownership of their own spiritual journey. Most participants had the sense that they were personally responsible to seek out and learn from the Spirit. They did not abdicate this responsibility to an instructor, and in fact were resistant to an overly prescribed curriculum. David and Hannah, for example, almost used the same words as they described who was responsible for learning in online versus face-to-face courses.

> When I was in a [face-to-face] class, we would go the right way, and we would have a discussion in class, and it would end up being good, but it's. . . I don't know. . . . For me, with online, it's more like it was my obligation to make sure it went the right way while in a class setting it was the instructor's obligation to go the right way.

Notice the similarities in how Hannah described the same issue:

> I think it really just depends on the teacher [in a face-to-face class]. And then going back to the online it's just, for me, it was all on me. So I learned because it was all on me, but in a classroom, it's all on the teacher; a lot [depends] on the way they teach.

Isaac also showed a desire to lead out in his own spiritual journey.

> It's one of the great things about the world we live in. We can be so independent with our knowledge and with our education. And so I feel like spiritually, on my own, I can go and research a specific topic. I can look up faith in the scriptures and look more into that. Or I can read some talks on it and gain more. It's not just dependent on being at church on Sunday and learning from a Sunday school teacher about faith. It's something I know I can do on my own.

Negative case analysis. It should be noted that not all participants showed the same level of self-directed motivation and learning. Craig, for example, made the following comment:

I hopped into the second semester of an online course, and it was simple, but it was—I wouldn't say meaningless—but it depended a lot on what the person wanted to get out of it, which is kind of why I don't like it because I want to go into a religion course to get somebody else's view on the scriptures, to see something else that I hadn't. 'Cause I don't wanna just reread them and do my own personal study 'cause I do that on my own time. So going to the class, I was expecting new insights, new stuff about the Book of Mormon that I hadn't thought of or heard of before.

Craig's response indicated he was looking outward, to the class, for insight into the scriptures. In considering this deviation from the theme of self-direction, it should be noted that even though Craig's responses on the end-of-course survey qualified him as a participant, from my perspective, his responses during the interview did not strongly show that he grew because of the class experience. The intent of using the end-of-course instrument was to focus interviews on those who grew spiritually because of the class. It may be that the instrument did not work well in Craig's case, and his response was not representative of those who had a successful experience in the class. Still, it is interesting that Craig acknowledged, "It depended a lot on what the person wanted to get out of it," which supports the idea that students who did grow spiritually through the online course needed to be self-directed.

Summary. Being highly self-directed appeared to improve the degree to which students in this study grew spiritually through the online course. Students who were self-directed were intrinsically motivated, showed integrity, and displayed a willingness to take responsibility for their own spiritual growth.

Curriculum

In addition to the theme of self-direction, students repeatedly mentioned the importance of online curriculum that engaged them in scripture, encouraged reflection, and provided an appropriate amount of structure. Students reported these activities connected them to the Holy Ghost and formed a critical part of a successful experience. For example, David's answer to a questions about what helped him grow closer to God focused on the curriculum: "For me, it just seemed like I was getting closer [to God] as I did assignments." This finding is noteworthy because it highlights what matters and what doesn't matter when designing online religious education courses.

Scripture. Reading the scriptures was the online course assignment students most frequently cited when asked what helped them grow spiritually. Fae, who took the class along with her husband, described the impact of studying the scriptures:

We would read the scriptures every night and be able to stop whenever we wanted and talk about a scripture together. And that really was awesome for me because I got to learn more about my husband and see what he gets out of the scriptures, and then he also got to learn more about me. And I feel like when you have a marriage, and God is in that marriage with you guys, it makes it so much stronger, and reading the scriptures helps that. So when we have to read the scriptures for a class and come up with a scripture that really touched us, it was easier because we were able to talk about it and have insights come to us from Heavenly Father and be able to share with one another.

Greg made a clear connection between reading scripture and receiving guidance from the Holy Ghost: "My understanding was increased just by reading. . . . I guess it creates that link in your mind where you can be guided by the Spirit and be inspired to do things in your life."

Alice observed that scripture study, whether it is part of a face-to-face or an online class, is an important catalyst for connecting students with the Holy Ghost. I explained the results of the study comparing online and face-to-face courses conducted by Hilton et al. (2015) and then asked her why she thought there was no significant difference. She stated, "…it just comes down to the Book of Mormon, would be my guess." In her view, the Book of Mormon is, "obviously the top priority" and for her was a fruitful activity regardless of the type of course.

Reflection and writing. Assignments that invited students to reflect in writing on what they were learning appeared to encourage spiritual growth. Isaac's comment was representative of many statements made by other participants:

Writing down what I learned really helped me to gain a lot of spiritual insights rather than just reading the scriptures. . . . The Spirit was more able to bless me with insights about the verse that I was reading.

Brad saw reflection and writing as a way to help him keep commitments to himself, "If I write it down, then it's like a goal." Hannah described the benefit for writing about what she learned:

One thing that I really loved in the class is the journal entries. For me that was a huge thing because I got to think about all the things I learned that week and really just talk about it in my own words to myself and get some more insight from me and goals I want to set.

At another point in the interview, Hannah stated,

The journal kind of helps you teach yourself because you get concepts in your mind, and you think about it, and then as you write in a journal, the ideas and what you're trying to learn kind of develop more. . . . For me, anyways, they did. So I would get a lot more out

of stuff once I wrote in the journal because I would be like, "Oh yeah. This concept

makes more sense now," or I expounded more on it, or I thought about it more.

Diane described how the assignment in the online class to read and then reflect on scripture

differed from some previous face-to-face courses she had taken.

Focusing on one chapter at one time. . . . It was mind blowing to me because in [my face-

to-face] class we would read maybe five chapters and say, "What do you think about

that?" And it's harder to read it, think about it, and then say it . . . cause in the class

setting you can get really confused, and you can mumble, and you can ramble on and on.

If you're able to type it out and reread what you've read, and reread what you write, and

edit the things you think you know are true at the beginning . . . in an online class you can

really focus on what you learned and why, like why you feel the Spirit in that situation.

While writing assignments can clearly be part of an online or a face-to-face class, it

appeared they played an important role in the online class for these students. This may be

because greater accountability was required through the online class for these types of

assignments, or perhaps simply because writing was the main method of communication online

and so it was required more often than in face-to-face classes.

Although many participants mentioned writing was a helpful activity, Craig did not find a

lot of value in writing. He described it as "weird" and "busy work" and seemed unsure of the

purpose of the journaling assignments. As noted previously, Craig may not have been an ideal

candidate for this study in that his interview responses did not reflect an awareness of spiritual

growth as a result of the course. However, his negative experience with writing may indicate

that students who are not inclined towards reflection through writing will not do as well in an

online religious education class.

Structured design. Students could have completed the activities noted thus far--reading and reflecting on scripture through writing--outside the context of a course. I asked students if they felt the course added any real value to their experiences since so many of their responses related to their own independent activities. Their responses revealed an important and noteworthy theme: Course structure and thoughtful design can provide an effective framework for spiritual growth.

Hannah, for example, benefited from the synergy between the various assignments. While describing the journaling assignment, she commented, "It was all together, and it was all one thing." I asked her to expand on this, and she explained how the journaling assignment served as a way to tie together everything she was doing and learning: "I liked writing throughout the week, so every time I did something I would write about it. So that way the journal wasn't . . . busy work. I [wrote] a paragraph every day or whenever I did my work." It is noteworthy that she found value in journaling as it became a daily part of her life.

Isaac found the weekly rhythm of the course helpful. Many of the assignments were due on Saturday, and they helped him reflect on the spiritual progress he had made during the week. This helped him focus on new goals each Sunday. In this example, he reflected on how the structure of the course helped him integrate scriptural principles in day-to-day living.

[I would] look at how my week [went] right before I would go to church the next day. And so I'd report on how I did, and then make a conscious goal for the next week. I felt like that was just very conducive to improvement.

Erik expanded on this idea by noting how the online class helped him engage frequently with the Holy Ghost. He also pointed out a difference he saw between online and face-to-face courses:

The face-to-face [course] provided an opportunity to learn in the hour there or hour and a half that I'm there by the Spirit, and to learn what's going on in that moment. The online curriculum, for me at least, particularly with the Book of Mormon class, provided an opportunity to experience that same spiritual growth, but in a way of creating specific daily tasks that I was given.

David also described how frequent online assignments helped him:

[The online class] was just right there, [all week long]. So . . . I have that insight. I would just get a word document, and I would type up what I learned. Then on Tuesday, I could turn it in. While with a classroom setting, it seemed like it wasn't expecting me to come prepared. . . . It seemed like I was going to go in, have a lecture that was going to open up to a discussion, we were going to close the discussion, and that was the end of the class. While with the online, it was a week-long.

The online course design appears to have helped these students incorporate the assignments to read and reflect into a consistent part of their daily routine more so than face-to-face courses they had taken in the past. It should be noted that there is nothing about having a structured design as described here that is necessarily unique to the online course and it may be that this is an area where face-to-face courses could benefit from this finding. For example, face-to-face instructors might consider frequent writing assignments where students relate what they learn in class or through personal study to their own situations.

In some cases, the structure seemed to go too far. Hannah's comment represented this sentiment:

Sometimes I think it needs to be simpler, though. Sometimes I think they get so caught up in making it an academic class that you do get away from actually gaining something

spiritual out of it. No matter what, you have to post four posts. . . . There is a word limit, and you can't just express your feelings.

Flexibility. As discussed previously, students who grew spiritually seemed to take ownership of their own spiritual journey. This seemed to be facilitated and enhanced by a course design that provided a high degree of flexibility regarding what topic students studied. In the online course, for example, students were assigned to read from the Book of Mormon. They were then assigned to reflect in their journals on what principles could be gleaned from their reading as well as how those principles could be applied to their own life. Students were left to choose which principles to focus on and how to apply them to their lives. The practicum was another highly flexible part of the course. In this assignment, students picked a principle or attribute, such as prayer or service that they wanted to work on throughout the course. They studied and wrote about this principle and then reflected in a journal on their progress towards developing this principle more fully in their lives.

The ability to select principles they wanted to study and apply them in their own lives appears to have helped students grow spiritually. Issac and David's comments are representative of other responses from the group.

- I think part of [my growth] did come from the independence of the online course. It was like, "I'm going to . . . independently work on something that I'm struggling with right now." . . . I just felt like the course was really well structured in that regard.

- It was charity that I worked on throughout the entire semester, and I think the first four weeks was, "What is charity?" Then the next four weeks was, "How do you develop charity?" and then make a plan. And the last four weeks were implement

that plan. And so I really liked that. That helped me a lot just because I was able to grow more. . . . It turned into prayer halfway through because I . . . needed to learn to use prayer more often in my life, how to use it as a tool.

Erik went above the minimum requirements of the course, because the flexible course design allowed him to discover things that were meaningful to him personally.

You were supposed to read [chapters from the Book of Mormon] and get a principle or a doctrine from them. And the requirement was only like five, but . . . I did like 20 because as I went through each chapter, I tried to find out and piece out and listen, really listen to the Book of Mormon instead of reading it. . . . I would listen for that principle or doctrine, and I'd end up with this long list, and it opened an opportunity for me to approach the Book of Mormon from a different way than just trying to get through it, but rather looking for something specific. The other piece was the practicum. And it's really, "What do you want to do to increase your connection with God?" What I chose to do was I chose to pray for at least five minutes every day, morning and night, and I timed myself. . . . So I pushed myself to kneel there for five minutes until the time was up. And if I ended my prayer and it was three minutes, I kneeled down and kept praying. And I would write down and record my time to make sure I did at least five minutes a day, morning and night. And that in itself provided for an opportunity for my Heavenly Father to reach out to me.

David made a comparison between the flexibility in face-to-face classes and online classes and noted he felt more opportunity to chart his own path in the online course.

In an institute class, the topic is usually those for the entire group that everyone is going through. And with the online class, you could take it your own direction, and that's what

I [noticed], is I would be seeking out answers through my online study. Part of the discussion board was to tell your classmates about what you found . . . that day or that week. And so for me I would always find something that was applicable to me. . . . The online classes gave me an opportunity to find the answers that I need. And sure, with institute I did get answers, but they were answers for everyone--they weren't like specific, personal revelation.

Summary. Even though participants reported being very self-motivated to grow spiritually, they still benefited from a structured course design. Assignments that engaged students in reading and thinking about the scriptures appeared very beneficial. Students reported this to be especially true when they had to reflect in writing on what they were learning from the scriptures. Students also reported that a structured course design encouraged frequent engagement in spiritual activities, which helped them grow spiritually, while flexibility in determining what to study led to meaningful personal growth.

Instructors

Participants reported finding success in a curriculum designed to encourage exploration. I believe they found success because, as discussed previously, these students were very self-directed; they took ownership of their own learning, and so the flexible design worked well. It was interesting to see how self-directed students described the impact of their online instructors on their spiritual growth and the differences they observed in the roles of online and face-to-face instructors.

A legitimate impact: "This is a good thing." Participants' experiences demonstrated that online instructors can make a legitimate contribution in a student's process of spiritual growth. During the interviews, eight of the 10 students identified something specific the instructor did that helped them grow spiritually.

Isaac's account provided an excellent example of an instructor who was able to help a student grow spiritually by feeling the Holy Ghost. He described how he and the instructor would write back and forth about what Isaac had written in his study journal. I asked him to describe that process in more detail:

> [My instructor] would expound on the things I talked about in my study journal, and then he would, at the end, testify very simply and briefly of the truthfulness of what had been talked about. It was almost like he would testify of the discussion that we'd both had of the things that we both learned.

I asked Isaac to explain how he could feel the Spirit through a text-based response, and he began reflecting on the overall potential of online learning and religious education:

> I think that . . . the Lord is definitely using technology to expand our spirituality. . . . The online program is definitely something that God wants and that if both the student and the teacher are putting something into it, they will get something out of it . . . I was a little skeptical initially of a Book of Mormon class online. I was like, "This could be really good or really bad; we'll see." . . . This is a good thing. . . . The experiences I had [with my instructor built] my testimony of the Savior, of the Atonement, and specifically how grace plays a role in our lives, and . . . wanting the Lord to enable us to become better and to handle the stresses of life a lot better. I think that's really what I gained spiritually from it.

Issac went on to explain the excitement he felt after one particular correspondence with his instructor:

I remember reading [my instructor's] comment and then running down to my roommate and being like, "Dude, this is way cool." . . . I felt [the instructor] was spiritually involved in the process, like a stewardship. I've been on [a] mission, [and was] spiritually involved with my investigators. I felt like it was very much the same way--that he felt like he was taking care of the students.

Hannah also had a good experience with her instructor. She felt he helped her feel the Holy Ghost. At one point she said she could feel the Spirit through her instructor's emails; I asked her to expand on that comment:

I don't even know how they do it, but they just do. . . . They're so nice. . . . I cannot explain this very well cause I don't really understand how to explain it, but I know what it was when they would send it [the email]. . . . You could tell that they were missionaries and that they wanted you to learn the gospel, and they wanted you to know, and they're so excited that you had questions. . . . It helped me be excited to learn the gospel. . . . He had the Spirit. He was a really good person, and he cared about his class, and he cared about me as a student, and it was just a few emails. And so I think that's important to make sure you have good instructors.

These accounts demonstrated that online instructors can have a legitimate impact on students and that instructors can help and guide students to feel the Holy Ghost through the online medium.

Teaching online by the Spirit: "A resounding, yes!" A topic that came up in a variety of contexts focused on the way students and instructors communicated and the role of the Holy

Ghost in that communication. In LDS teachings, one "preacheth" and one "receiveth" by the Holy Ghost and both are "edified and rejoice together" (D&C 50:22). In other words, one way faith grows is that a person is inspired through the Holy Ghost to speak things that are true, and another person feels confirmation through the Holy Ghost that what was spoken was true. The notion that they "rejoice together" implies a relationship. Although this process seems intuitive in a face-to-face classroom, it was interesting to see that some participants spoke of this process also working well in the online setting. Hannah and Isaac's statements quoted previously in this section provided evidence of this relationship. Erik, however, offered a more pointed and unique perspective since he had been both a student in an online religious education class and an online missionary trying to help investigators feel the Holy Ghost through online channels. I asked him if he felt he ever had spiritual experiences with people while teaching online:

> With a resounding yes! We were teaching via text, on Facebook, and Skype, and all those other ones. . . . We'd teach entire discussions . . . prayer and all. And when we would teach, the Holy Ghost [was] not limited [in our] communication. It's amazing the spiritual experiences we had as missionaries teaching via text. I think part of it is intent. When I first learned [that] . . . we were going [to be] teaching, prayer and all, it turned me off at first. I was like, "Wait a minute. What? Can we do that?" But as soon as I taught the first lesson, that entire stigma was gone. And I could feel the intent, I could feel the Holy Ghost communicate as I strived to teach via Chat. I could feel . . . I could sense the direction and guidance I received in teaching these investigators.

> I asked Erik if he felt those feelings were reciprocated on the other end.

> Sometimes. One of the unique things about teaching online is that [it's all] about the individual that you're teaching because they can choose to experience the guidance of the

Holy Ghost or not. And at times you could tell by their responses whether or not they were--how involved they were spiritually. So, yes and no. It depended on the individual that we were communicating with.

Erik's response also demonstrated the ongoing theme that online learners need to be self-directed and take ownership of their own spiritual growth. I asked Erik to describe an example of how he could tell an investigator was being taught through the Holy Ghost given the limitations of a chat-based discussion.

Sometimes when they get hung up on something specific. If their perspective or their question has not changed, it's obvious that they're not [as] invested as they could be. . . . They're just listening secularly. But when they're listening with the guidance of the Holy Ghost and inspiration, you can see either their question changes…or they start to understand where it's coming from. You can see the enlightenment that they're having as they're reciprocating the information. . . . We would get people coming online to chat with us, to ask us all the hard questions that they wouldn't feel comfortable asking in person to the missionaries, so we'd get all the oddball questions. But even then you could see where their progression was through the way that they spoke to you via text and how they received it as you communicated. I think part of it, particularly as a missionary, [is] you have the guidance of the Holy Ghost to perceive those kinds of things.

Erik's experience offered one description of how the Holy Ghost can inspire a teacher and a learner through the online medium. However, not all participants shared this experience. Erik himself attributed his spiritual growth more to the design of the curriculum and his own intrinsic motivation than to his instructor. Still, within the framework and focus of this research, his experience offered a valuable perspective because it provided evidence that if learners choose

to engage, online instructors can help connect them with the Holy Ghost, leading to real spiritual growth.

The absent instructor: "Not a lot of opportunity for the instructor to talk." As Erik's successes as a remote instructor illustrated, it may not be necessary for an instructor to be physically present to have a positive impact on students. Four students spoke directly about the benefits of not having an instructor physically present. David, for example, pointed out that students had to rely more on their own approach to learning when an instructor wasn't directly in front of the class:

> I think with the online courses there's not a lot of opportunity for the instructor to talk, and that's both a good thing and a bad thing. I think [online] really opened a lot of discussion up just because the students really had to rely on what they learned rather than to just listen. . . . It depends on each instructor. I've had good and bad seminary teachers and institute teachers…but sometimes it got to a point where it was almost showing off…but [in] online learning, [instructors] would only be able to talk a certain amount. When I went to Institute, they would have a certain set out lesson. They would know what we're going to talk about at minute 45 . . . they have it set. It was a good environment for learning, but sometimes I felt like [the classroom experience] told me what I needed to hear, but it left it off; I needed to go and search out more. So with online classes, I was able to search out completely.

Hannah expressed a similar rationale for why she did not miss having a teacher physically present. Like David, she described how some face-to-face instructors had an agenda for the lesson that could get in the way of students learning what they needed or wanted to learn.

No, [I didn't miss having a face-to-face instructor]. . . . You always have the spirit, and I think you can learn a lot through the spirit. . . . I like not having the teacher always there. . . . For a religion class, it's a really personal experience . . . [so] it never bothered me not having a teacher there . . . because you're not limited by what the teacher is teaching; sometimes they have their lesson plan, and they're going to teach you what they have in their lesson plan. And with online, you're given a broad, "Read this, this and this, and gain whatever you want from it."

Brad followed a recommendation in the course syllabus to find a quiet place for his online study. He noted how this time without an instructor or other students was particularly helpful.

I sat there [in the library] with headphones on but no music [because] it blocks out [any] sounds . . . just a completely silent atmosphere, and to me that was more blissful than what I found in the classroom--the teacher's talking, other people are talking--usually you have no silence. You have an hour to sit and . . . be taught. So to me that was just [a] great medium, having my own spiritual quiet and take things at my own pace. So that to me was magical.

Greg discussed the discomfort he felt when past face-to-face instructors singled him out for praise. The online format made this less of an issue for him. I asked him if he missed having a face-to-face instructor:

Not really. . . . Y'know how some people like to hug and shout, "Hey, I love you!" I'm not that kind of person. I'm more of the quiet person. I'll wash your dishes. I'll make your bed instead of saying those things and hugging. I'm not that kind of person. So me being in a quiet space working on my spirituality, having that kind of instruction [online]

is ideal for me. I don't work well with . . . I don't like praise, y'know? And you might make a comment in a class, and they'll say, "Oh, he's smart," and I don't like that. So saying my comment and being online gave me that little shield.

It should be noted that these comments do not necessarily mean these four students preferred not having an in-class instructor. All the students quoted above acknowledged the value of a face-to-face instructor during other parts of their interviews. I provided these examples to highlight one perspective of their experience and also to view themes discussed previously from a new angle. Notice, for example, the value these students placed on charting their own spiritual path and flexibility in what topics they studied.

Also, not only did these students not look to their instructor as the source of spiritual growth, but they seemed to appreciate that the online instructor had less control over their ability to connect with the Holy Ghost than face-to-face instructors. A comment by Hannah emphasizes this issue regarding who controls the connection to the Holy Ghost in the two types of courses:

I think that when you're face-to-face it all depends on the teacher because I've had teachers that I don't really get anything from because they are so by the book and I get so much more when people do teach by the Spirit instead of the manual. So in seminary, it was always the manual and when I went to college I had institute and this teacher was so good at just teaching not by the book. It was by the spirit, totally. I learned so much from them. So I think it really just depends on the teacher, and then going back to the online it's just, for me, it was all on me. So I learned because it was all on me, but in a classroom, it's all on the teacher.

The role of the instructor: "There to watch you grow." The comments from students in the previous section could be interpreted to show that an instructor's direct involvement in a

course is not necessary for students' spiritual growth. This interpretation should be balanced against the finding that many students in this study reported they benefited tremendously from interactions with their online instructor. This section and the one that follows explore the role of online instructors in guiding students in their path of spiritual growth. A comment from Brad serves as a good introduction:

> For something like Book of Mormon, I feel like a teacher is necessary because they can help you see the Book of Mormon in a different light. . . . You could study all the time, but the Holy Ghost, it teaches us, right? So the more teachers that we have in . . . mortality, the better off we are for changing something or learning something new.

Participants predominantly viewed their instructors as guides rather than as the sources of spiritual growth. A comment from David succinctly captured this idea: "I feel like . . . you need to have the instructor present on some topics that you're not certain about--but when it comes to personal growth, I think that the Lord trusts you." David went on to describe the online instructor as one who supervised the process and who was, "there to watch you grow…"

Greg held a similar view and saw an example of this process at work when his instructor congratulated him on work that was well done and then offered constructive feedback for future assignments. Fae provided an example of her instructor offering guidance by helping her relate the scriptures to her own life:

> I posted [to the discussion board], and my professor came back and [wrote], "This is my favorite scripture also." And then he gave me another scripture to go to. . . . And that scripture . . . helped me relate [the principle] back to my life. . . . and so I think that really helps me when they give suggestions of scriptures or talks or whatever. . . . It helps you gain that relationship with God even more.

Another example of an instructor providing guidance came from Issac, who, as a new freshman, found himself struggling and in need of some help. It is interesting to note in his account that his remote instructor was able to, "pick up on this," which put him in a position to guide and help Isaac.

> At one point in particular, I remember that there was a lot of things going on in my life. It was my first semester here; I was stressed. I had just recently gotten a job and everything, and I felt that I just need the peace that comes from the gospel. And I feel like my instructor, I guess he somehow picked up on it. I don't know what it was, but he picked it up in my study journal, and he recommended some talks for me to read that really helped a lot. I'd read them before, but it was a good reminder of what's important.

In this case, the instructor played the role of an expert in the sense that he had knowledge of additional information that proved helpful, but also in the sense that he was perceptive enough to see it might be helpful for Isaac. The question to which Isaac responded also reveals a helpful insight. I asked him why he took the course assignments seriously rather than adopting a "check-off-the-box" mentality. With this context in mind, it appears Isaac took the assignments seriously because his instructor engaged meaningfully in assignments right along with him. His instructor was present and perceptive enough to pick up on and respond to a challenge Isaac was facing. Isaac's experience demonstrated how a perceptive online instructor supported and guided a self-directed student.

Hannah described the importance of instructors who were willing to guide students not only in their spiritual growth, but simply through the logistics of the course experience, which can sometime be confusing for those taking an online class for the first time:

For many people, online is a new world, and so there's a lot of questions that are asked, and I'm sure [they're] asked a million times. And a lot of teachers get really short about people asking questions, and they'll post things like, "Stop asking questions. People have asked the same thing. Here's all the answers." Sometimes people won't get it the way you say it the first time, and you have to say it over again and different times, and so I think it's important to get [instructors] that are going to be able to deal with all that kind of stuff because it's so confusing.

Considering these comments together along with the theme that participants valued the flexibility to explore and find their own insights, it seems appropriate to summarize by saying students in this study viewed instructors as guides who helped them along their personal spiritual journeys rather than the central, critical elements in the process. This appears to be a key difference for these students' experience when compared to their previous face-to-face courses. It was clear throughout the interviews that participants viewed face-to-face instructors as having much more control over the total experience compared with online instructors.

Relationships matter: "Not casting pearls before swine." An important factor in whether or not that guidance occurred appears to relate directly to how well students knew their instructors and the personal connections they were able to build. Several participants discussed their relationship to the online instructor and how it influenced their course experience. Isaac explained how he could tell his instructor was invested in his learning and how this helped him take the class more seriously. It is interesting to note in this example that Isaac's impression that his online instructor was a good face-to-face instructor was confirmed by his roommates who had taken a face-to-face class from the same instructor. (Note: Most online instructors in this program do not also teach on-campus. This was an exception.)

I had a very, very good impression of my online instructor just because he was always in every discussion board. And just the insights that he gave the class were just really, really good. And I remember when I turned in my second or my third study journal, he made legitimate comments that really helped a lot, and it just made me realize that he was involved in the whole thing. He's not just going, "Yep, yep," and just gave me a grade, but he actually was invested in it, and I thought it was really cool that he conveyed that in an online setting. I just felt like he must be a phenomenal [face-to-face] instructor if I'm able to get that impression of him through study journals and discussion boards. I just felt like he must be a really good teacher, and then I [found] out I had some roommates that have taken [face-to-face] classes from him, and they all say he's the best instructor.

Many students felt that getting to know their instructors made the course a better experience. Brad was the most vocal about this. He and his parents had seen his instructor teach several times at Education Week, a church sponsored conference, years before taking the online class. When it came time to register, Brad picked his instructor because he recognized his name and had enjoyed his presentations. This background with the instructor seemed to make a big difference for Brad and the way he participated in the class:

I felt like I already had a previous connection [with my instructor] because I had attended his class and [could] hear him speaking through his writing, which I think is great. I think every student should at least meet their instructor once. I don't care if it's online, if they could do a web interface. It [makes it] feel like you're not talking to a computer because, I'll be honest, my history class? Never met my teacher, and it felt like I was talking to a computer each week. So I didn't care what he said. I just did the bare

minimum . . . so to me, it was personal enough that I felt the Spirit and knowing the impassioned [instructor's name] was out there listening, I really enjoyed the course.

Brad went on to explain in more depth why this relationship mattered. It is significant that he felt "very fortunate" to have his instructor comment on his discussion board posts because it highlighted the respect he had for his instructor.

If you posted early enough, he commented on yours. . . . I was very fortunate to have a comment or two on mine. So to me, I thought that was very cool. Y'know, he cares about me. He reads what I write. And that puts a little bit of pressure [on], but it's good pressure.

I questioned Brad further about why it mattered to him that the instructor responded. His comment about not casting pearls before swine highlighted his need for a reciprocal relationship with his online instructor. Before he would engage meaningfully in the course, he needed to feel his instructor was listening to him and cared for him. His experience offered another example of how an instructor can support and encourage a student to be even more self-directed.

I guess when you feel like someone is really listening, like you're able to not cast your pearls before swine. . . . I could share a great post, but if I feel like no one is going to read it or cares, why do I care? So . . . to me I could put more soul into what I'm writing or what I'm feeling and set goals for myself that are more meaningful. If I feel like I'm going to be held accountable. In the end, we'll all be held accountable, y'know, for God, but in this class and in this mortality, it just helps so much more if I know I'm being held accountable [by] someone [who is] there and listening, somebody that cares, y'know? . . . And that's important to me for some reason. So that's kind of how it contributed to my spirituality--just knowing that I'm accountable, but that it's also not casting pearls before

swine. And I don't mean to call anyone in my class swine, it's just, y'know, being able to share an important experience because the feeling is right. You know the audience is right. The audience is listening, and the audience is appropriate.

Brad provided an interesting perspective on connecting with instructors. He compared a previous face-to-face instructor with his online instructor and we see in his comment that Brad's brief, in-person connection with his online instructor helped compensate for the challenges of being a remote student:

I remember that I loved [my previous face-to-face instructor] because I felt the spirit as he taught and his passion of the Book of Mormon came through. I feel like online, it's more difficult to feel that, and again, if I hadn't seen [online instructor's name] with my own eyes [at Education Week], I can't imagine the experience that I would have had. I might have been like, "Okay, there's this instructor and he's teaching this online class or whatever and I've just got to do this minimum requirement." But having [online instructor's name], I've heard his passion, heard him bear his testimony of that stuff, and I know, and I knew that it was just as strong as a couple years ago when I saw him at Education Week . . . I had attended his class and so I hear him speaking through his writing.

In a similar vein, Hannah spoke about how she felt a strong connection to some of her online instructors through emails:

I have teachers that I adore through just their emails, and then I have teachers that I really don't like, and I've only emailed with them back and forth, and it's amazing how even just an email can really change your whole experience in the class from day one.

I asked Hannah how she could "adore" someone she had never met. Her response

provided insight into the spiritual impact instructors can have when the student respects them.

>They're just so nice! . . . Just [from] the comments they leave . . . I really like my Book of
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>Mormon teacher, and I've never even met him, but he was super nice, and he was always
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>giving really good feedback and answering questions, and he was prompt, and he was just
>
>so polite. You could tell he was a really good guy, and he loved the Savior, and he was
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>always bearing his testimony, and I just really like that teacher. And so, I don't know. I
>
>think that it's important.

When I asked Diane what kind of class she would recommend to friends who were

struggling with their faith, her answer focused less on the actual mode of delivery and more on

how caring and attentive the instructor would be. We see in her response the belief that

instructors are positioned to act as a guide only to the extent that they are able to build trusting

relationships with students.

>Well personally, I would recommend a teacher that helped me. Like a face-to-face or an
>
>online, it doesn't even matter. It would just be what environment did I grow in, and what
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>do I think could help them? . . . It's not what kind of a class that's going to help, it's more
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>of what environment are they going to be in. . . . They're both good--great.

It appears from students in this research, that some remote instructors gained the respect

of students in their classes. Further, this relationship of trust seems to have encouraged students

to engage more meaningfully in the class, think more deeply, and ultimately grow in their

spirituality.

Online instructors with little impact: "You need that face-to-face." Participants'

positive experiences with their online instructors should be considered alongside examples in

which the instructors had little impact in order to explore ways in which the online environment
acted as a roadblock to spiritual growth.

Alice said her online instructor reinforced things that were shared on the discussion board
and provided additional helps, however she did not feel her online instructor played a major role
in guiding her to a greater depth of spirituality. She acknowledged there were times when the
instructor "made me think," but generally characterized interactions with her instructor as
"superficial." In contrast, Alice spoke later in the interview about how positive relationships
with past face-to-face instructors had been important in keeping her engaged in the class. She
attributed this stronger relationship to how much easier it was to communicate and develop
meaningful relationships face-to-face.

Fae acknowledged this same limitation with online courses when I asked what mode of
class she would recommend to friends who were wrestling with their own beliefs.

> I'd counsel them to take an on campus class. . . . When I was in seminary . . . I learned
> through a teacher, and you learn through teachers online, but it's not the same because
> you don't [have] that face-to-face. And when you're falling away from the church, you
> need that face-to-face. You need that companionship and the guidance from a teacher
> that can help you and see the situation. So I would recommend them going to on campus
> just because then they have that face-to-face.

Brad, who seemed to have had a very positive experience with his instructor, expanded
on this idea. When asked the same question about what type of course he would recommend to
friends who were struggling with their faith, Brad said he would recommend a face-to-face class.
His rationale mirrored Fae's reasoning. His comments were especially noteworthy because he

seemed to have a really good experience with his instructor, and yet he acknowledged the limitations of the online course.

> I feel like a face-to-face tends to be beneficial because . . . if they struggle, it's great to hear feedback from a teacher, face-to-face. . . . I just feel like the spirit can convey so much easier through a face-to-face interaction than through a computer. Emails can be very spiritual and uplifting, bring you to tears and stuff, but I just feel like it's so much more simple and tangible face-to-face. . . . I prefer to work face-to-face more, . . . and [with] online, sometimes it's difficult to feel that presence there.

These examples provided insight into the types of students who might excel in an online versus a face-to-face class. In total, I asked seven participants what type of course they would recommend to a friend who was struggling with their faith. Four recommended face-to-face without much hesitation and three discussed benefits of both, but leaned more towards the face-to-face environment. It is interesting to note that the participants themselves both reported and genuinely appeared to have had a good experience with the online class even though they would recommend a face-to-face class to a friend who struggles. It appears highly self-directed and motivated students required less attention by the instructor, while those same students believe that those who struggle with their faith would benefit from a face-to-face course.

Summary. The study yielded several noteworthy insights regarding online religious education instructors. First, instructors can have a legitimate impact on students' spiritual growth through online education. This did not happen in every case, but the fact that students pointed to their instructors as an integral part of the process is significant. Second, patterns of building faith as described in LDS teachings were reported by participants as both present and powerful through online interactions with instructors. Third, while students did not feel having

an instructor present was required, they noted significant benefits when a trusting relationship developed. Fourth, participants viewed the role of the instructor as being a guide to help them connect with the Holy Ghost, and believed strong, influential relationships between students and instructors were both possible and helpful as instructors acted in that capacity.

Other Students

Interactions between students consisted mainly of sharing insights they gained on a discussion board. There were three deadlines each week for the discussion board: one post was due by Tuesday, one by Thursday, and a minimum of three responses to other students by Saturday. In the initial two posts, students were assigned to share a principle from their reading of the Book of Mormon. In addition, they were assigned to explain how that principle applied to them, to share an experience related to that principle, or to post a question they had about the principle. The final three posts were meant to engage students in a discussion surrounding the principles and doctrines posted on Tuesday and Thursday.

Overall impact. As a whole, students I interviewed did not feel interactions with their peers helped them grow spiritually. Seven of the ten students interviewed did not appear to have been significantly impacted by peers in their online class in terms of their spiritual growth. Hannah was probably the most direct in her response on this topic. I asked her what impact other students had on her spiritual growth:

> Honestly, nothing. I feel like an online class is a personal class. . . . I get so much from myself, and maybe there's a few concepts or ideas that I get from other students, but there's not one thing about online classes that I'm just like, "Oh, I remember someone in the class said that." It's always been from the material and the Spirit or from a teacher.

That's why I feel like discussion boards really are busy work because I'm just

commenting, and I could care less what they have to say, honestly.

Erik and Craig had similar things to say about the lack of impact from other students.

Erik referred to it as "busy work," and Craig said there really wasn't any meaningful interaction

between students.

Although Hannah, Erik, and Craig represented participants' overall impression of student

interactions, their experiences were not universal. For example, Alice stated, "I think my

favorite part was we had lots of discussions . . . where we were just talking back and forth. And

so you got to hear other people's perspective on different things."

Communication barriers. Just as some students reported challenges connecting to

instructors online, participants pointed to obstacles to communication online as one reason why

they felt other students did not have a great online experience. Hannah, for example, explained

that she felt the Spirit could be felt more easily during face-to-face communication.

It's just easier to talk about stuff when you're just talking by the Spirit and just thinking

out loud. And so in a group discussion, you just have like generic questions kind of and

then everyone just talks about personal experiences and things like that, and it's a lot

easier to do that in that type of a setting than it is to write a big thing and then . . . no one

wants to read it. . . . I feel like you're able to feel the Spirit sometimes more if you're

actually discussing something . . . face-to-face . . . when you can actually hear the voices.

Diane shared a similar perspective and remarked that logistical issues in a discussion

board were sometimes problematic because they prevented her from seeing people as

individuals:

There were a ton of people, and you could never go through and see the same person twice, it almost seemed like, and so you'd read all these thoughts on the same principle, and some of them would start to blend together. . . . It's hard to see them as individuals.

Shallow discussions perpetuate shallow discussions. Barriers to communication likely contributed to discussion board assignments that were not seen by participants as particularly valuable. Five students directly mentioned something about how discussion boards were shallow rather than places of meaningful engagement. For example, Erik said, "It felt like I was on there just to post something . . . and my comment was just to fulfill the assignment." Craig stated, "You can [get something out of it] if you want to, and if [other students participate] as well." Brad purposefully ignored some students because they were clearly not putting thought into their responses:

The worthless comments or posts can deteriorate the whole atmosphere. That's why sometimes you just don't go back and read the comments that they put on yours. But if it's someone you know and respect, you realize that they make the same efforts as you, and I really admire that, so . . . that can really detract. . . . If I see a comment that's put online, I don't even bother reading it if it's from some kid who's got 100 words on it, and it starts with "I really liked your comment, and it made me think of this." . . . It seems so cliché--bare minimum work.

It seems intuitive that a cycle develops in which students see little value in engaging in the discussion board, so they just try and meet the minimum requirements. This in turn leads others to see little value in their posts, and they respond by meeting only the minimum requirements. Thus, shallow discussion perpetuates shallow discussion. It appears this pattern

may have undermined students' ability to grow spiritually through their interactions with each other.

Comparing online and face-to-face. It was interesting to hear how participants compared the impact of other students in their online and face-to-face interactions. Craig saw value in the immediacy and spontaneity of the interactions face-to-face.

> …in a face-to-face course, the interaction is right there…everyone's there and everyone's talking in that moment, so you're hearing everything, and everyone has their choice to put in what they want…people will only raise their hands if they have something they feel is worth sharing. So you get higher quality interaction [face-to-face], but less of that interaction [compared to online]. I guess it would be less quantity and more quality.

At one point, I asked Craig what experiences have helped him grow spiritually. His response highlights some of the difficulties presented when communication between people is done online rather than face-to-face.

> Well, from the beginning it's the testimonies of other people. I was born in the Church, so in Church, hearing the testimonies was where it started…So in class, I think, testimonies are one of the bigger parts that could build faith in a classroom setting…in my online class, I had minimal to no interaction with other students, other than posting on two of their comments. And in a face-to-face, well, it's, "Turn to your neighbor and discuss what you learned," and then you hear the whole class talking about the section…So online, there wasn't that sharing, there wasn't that growth coming from other people and face-to-face, you've got that.

Diane offered a valuable insight into challenges of the online environment compared to face-to-face in relation to her ability to connect with fellow students.

I liked, in the class setting, how I was able to influence a room and how other people were able to influence me in a more emotional way, like when I see somebody walking down the street, I see a body, I think, "Oh look, there's my brother or sister." But in an online setting, it's just like, "There's their picture," and I don't get to connect with them on that personal level, and that's something I really thrive on is personal connection. Based on these comments from Diane and Craig, it appears deep connections with other students that facilitate spiritual growth do not develop as readily online as they do in a face-to-face environment.

The potential of online student-to-student interaction. That is not to say, however, that none of the participants in this study found value through their interactions with other students. Six participants made at least one comment suggesting there may be great potential in designing an experience in which students have a significant impact on each other's spiritual growth. Isaac, for example, said, "I remembered a lot of really, really great insight came from the people in my class, and I remember being really impressed with other students that were there, that they were definitely involved."

Having to post his responses for others to see required Isaac to think through his responses carefully. Isaac embraced this and recognized its value in helping him expand on what he was learning:

> I had to consciously pick out the things that stood out to me, so that way I could write them in a coherent way for others and my teacher to understand . . . putting forth the effort to do a little bit more with each verse gave me more spiritual insight.

Fae talked about how she was able to help another student in her class through a challenging time. Her reflections on this experience highlighted the potential of creating space in online religious education courses for students to guide one another in their spiritual growth:

I was able to answer that question because I had been through it, and she was going through the same thing. So I was able to answer that question for her, and she replied and was just so grateful to me that I did that. . . . So we if can help each other out, then it's just awesome because then you don't have to come up with an idea on your own, and you can just have people help you. That's what really came across from [the discussion board], helping people with the same situation that you're in, getting guided by people that are in the same situations that you're in.

David shared a similar idea about opportunities to serve others as part of the online class.

It was really fun to share [my insights] with people around the world--I was having people comment from different countries, and I was like, "Oh, this is cool!" It was really cool to know that I was doing some sort of missionary work, even though it was among other members of the church.

Three students mentioned that they felt it was easier to share deep and perhaps personal thoughts in the online environment. Alice, for example, made the following comment:

I think it's actually easier. I think that sometimes face-to-face you might feel more judged, but when you're online, you're never going to see these people, but you can still discuss, and so you'll get feedback from them.

Fae shared a similar idea.

…when I went to seminary I wasn't as outgoing and I didn't like to share my testimony because I didn't feel that strong…so I would hardly ever share. So I feel like being able to do online religion classes have helped me grow as a person and helped my testimonies grow just because I can read other people's [comments] and see what they're thinking and see what they learned, but then I can deepen my scripture study and figure out what I

really learned from it and be able to take time and not have to rush to get an answer out real quick. I can just take my time and figure out what I want to say and then type it down and not have to raise my hand real quick to answer it.

We see in Fae's and Alice's comments the potential for the online environment to create space for reflection as one considers the ideas of others in relation to their own experience and then carefully formulates a response.

Although this research found that the majority of participants did not necessarily gain a lot from their interactions with fellow students in terms of their spiritual growth, there does seem to be potential in making this an important part of the course design. Such a design would need to capitalize on the varied backgrounds and perspectives of students in the online class, open opportunities for students to address each other's concerns, and take advantage of the increased comfort some students reported in sharing personal feelings online. It may be that a better strategy designed to connect students in meaningful ways would have yielded a better result.

Summary of Findings

Two overarching themes emerged from this research. First, participants viewed connecting with the Holy Ghost as the way they grew spiritually and they judged the success of religious education according to how well it helped them make that connection. Second, participants seemed highly self-directed. They were personally motivated to learn from the Holy Ghost, felt doing what was required by the course was an issue of integrity, and viewed spiritual growth as a journey for which they were personally responsible.

The research questions were considered through the lens of three aspects of the online course: the curriculum, the instructors, and other students. Participants focused on six themes across these areas.

First, regardless of the type of course, scripture study was seen as a key mechanism for connecting with the Holy Ghost. Responses relating to the effectiveness of religious educations courses (both online and face-to-face) generally either directly or indirectly tied back in some way to how well the course got students meaningfully engaged with scripture through personal study.

Second, participants viewed their face-to-face classes as discrete events in the week, whereas they viewed the online class as an integrated part of their daily routine. This appeared to be related to the frequent assignments and accountability designed into the online course as well as curriculum that required reflection through writing.

Third, participants reported feeling more room to explore topics of their own choosing in the online course than they did in face-to-face courses. They pointed out that face-to-face instructors tended to teach pre-planned lessons designed for a wide range of students during a time-limited class period, whereas in the online class the curriculum was designed around students finding and reflecting on principles relevant to their situation. This design seemed to work in harmony with participants' inclination toward self-directed, autonomous learning.

Fourth, participants described different roles for face-to-face instructors compared with online instructors. They viewed face-to-face instructors as being in a leadership role as they direct a class through the topic and discussion for that day. In contrast, participants experienced the role of online instructors as guiding them and supporting them in their individual paths.

Fifth, participants generally felt that while strong connections can and did develop online, face-to-face instructors have an easier time connecting personally with students. Related to this, and despite their own success in the online course, most participants would recommend a face-

to-face class over an online class to a friend who was struggling with their faith because they felt a face-to-face, personal connection would make it easier to help the student feel the Holy Ghost.

Sixth, other students did not appear to play a significant role in participants' spiritual growth. The root of this appeared to be challenges creating meaningful dialogue between students, with the majority of participants preferring face-to-face rather than online communication. However, some participants reported successes in this area that suggest there is potential for fellow-classmates to positively impact a student's path of spiritual growth if given the opportunity to draw on their varied experiences and perspectives to address each other's concerns and challenges.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The focus of this study is to describe how university students grow spiritually when religious education is conducted online. This chapter addresses this purpose by pointing out connections between the research findings and related scholarly literature, discussing the findings holistically, and then providing observations related to the research questions. Limitations and recommendations for future research are also provided.

Connections to the Literature

This section explores the research findings in light of the review of literature and newly presented research as applicable. My intent is to relate what I found in this study to existing literature in order to discover both alignment and deviations.

The religious education outcomes instrument. The instrument developed by Plummer and Hilton (2014) to identify students who grew spiritually as a result of the online Book of Mormon class was a critical element in this research . Based on the interviews, I believe that all but one of the 10 participants legitimately did feel they grew spiritually as a result of the course. Craig, who did not appear to have a good experience, explained he answered positively on the survey simply because the class encouraged him to study his scriptures more, but that engagement in other class activities were not a good use of his time. Although I recognize that ten subjects is not enough to establish reliability, the results from this research provide an added degree of confidence that the instrument is a useful tool in determining the impact of religious education courses. Future research might further explore the validity of the instrument by interviewing those who responded negatively to see if interview findings align with the survey results.

Trends and implications. Astin et al. (2011) and Walvoord (2008) concluded students have a high degree of interest in spirituality. As expected, participants in this research did show a high degree of interest in spirituality throughout the interview process. Astin et al. also pointed out that college students do not generally look to institutions to find spirituality, rather they find spirituality in their own way. One could argue this finding was not true of participants in this study because they were attending a church-sponsored institution whose core, overt mission is to help students develop spiritually. In this sense, these students turned to an institution to help foster and develop that part of themselves and are therefore an exception to this Astin et al. finding. On the other hand, Astin et als' finding that students valued independence as they sought to develop spirituality was true of many participants because they viewed developing spirituality as an intensely personal endeavor. Participants were willing to be guided by a caring instructor, but they did not appear to be willing to abdicate what they viewed as their responsibility for growth to an instructor. On the contrary, they implicitly understood growth to be learning directly from the Holy Ghost on their own terms.

Theoretical perspectives. Theoretical perspectives about how students go about growing spiritually were reviewed previously and were helpful as groundwork for considering the research questions. This section explores the findings in the context of Fowler's (1995) Faith Development Theory and Court's (2013) ideas on religious education designed for spirituality.

Faith development theory. The theoretical perspectives reviewed in the literature were apparent in a variety of ways throughout this research. Fowler (1995) placed college students in his fourth stage of faith in which people often move to a more autonomous belief system. This aligns well with the finding that participants were very self-directed; they wanted to grow spiritually by connecting personally with the Holy Ghost.

Fowler (1995) made the recommendation that faith communities can support students through periods of questioning core beliefs by encouraging, not stifling exploration. Students who grew spiritually seemed to appreciate the flexibility afforded by the curriculum to explore principles and doctrines of their own choosing, and so in this sense, the curriculum seemed to be in alignment with Fowler's suggestion for successfully supporting this age group. It should be noted, however, that this exploration and questioning occurred at the level of individual principles found in scripture and not at the core, foundational level that Fowler was likely referring to. There was no indication during the interviews that any of the participants were questioning their beliefs at that level, although it seems unlikely that this would have been the case considering interviews were conducted with those who reported high levels of spiritual growth. Additionally, it seems unlikely that participants would have shared challenges to their core beliefs during the interviews given the personal nature of questioning one's faith.

Religious education designed for spirituality. Court (2013) provided more specific ideas and views than Fowler did about supporting students in their spiritual growth. There was a great deal of alignment between Court's ideas and what students reported as being particularly helpful in this study. Woven through all the interviews was an implicit understanding that the Book of Mormon class was not intended to be a regular academic class. Participants understood that the goals of the course were spiritually based. This aligns very well with Court's suggestion that religious experience be very clearly articulated to students as the goal of the course and that the value of these goals be explicitly discussed.

Related to this, there was alignment with Sfard's (1998) participation metaphor for learning in which engagement is a form of knowing. The alignment with this idea is clear in that students saw connecting with the Holy Ghost and feeling his influence, an example of legitimate

participation, as the hallmark of spiritual growth and success in the class. By implicit and sometimes explicit definition, this was about much more than knowing something intellectually for students; this was about being full participants in an ongoing conversion process.

Court's (2013) ideas about how accepted doctrines and practices serve to contextualize and set boundaries for spiritual experiences also aligned well with this study. The course itself focused on the Book of Mormon, and instructors guided students within that framework. Participants understood religious experiences within the context the LDS faith tradition. With this in mind, the success of students in the online class offers added confidence in Court's idea that it is important to explore religious experience within the boundaries set by a tradition's accepted cannon and norms.

Court (2013) saw religious experience as "essentially unprogrammable" (p. 257). In other words, neither an instructor nor a curriculum can force a religious experience. This is supported by the finding that, for the most part, participants were not looking to programmed instruction to connect them to God, but they did find that connection through the environment the course helped create through studying scripture, reflecting in writing, and performing charitable acts.

The findings in this research also align well with Court's (2013) ideas about the ideal instructor for a religious experience. In religious education designed for spiritual growth, she advocated for instructors who were personally devout and who adhered to a particular faith tradition. Court argued this combination positioned instructors to help students because they would have religious experience themselves and because they would understand the religious doctrines and norms that were important in making sense of those religious experiences. The online instructors in this study aligned with this recommendation; all instructors were members

of the LDS church, and participants' comments indicate they viewed the instructors as devout. The value of Court's idea regarding instructors in the context of this course can be seen in the participants who reported having a high degree of respect for their instructors.

A respect for the instructor seems to have translated into a willingness on the part of students to do better work, be more thoughtful in their responses, and generally take the experience seriously. All of this in turn seemed to help students connect with the Holy Ghost and have a successful experience. In addition to Court's (2013) work, this finding is also consistent with literature regarding affective outcomes. In summarizing literature in this area, Smith and Ragan (1999) described the need for a respected role model. In this case, we see examples of instructors acting as role models. Students reported the positive impact of instructors who shared their own personal convictions.

Self-directed learning. An additional area of study not discussed in the literature review is helpful to interpret the findings of this research. Participants who grew spiritually through the online course appeared to have been highly self-directed. A principle from the BYU-Idaho learning model aligned closely with this finding: "Learners and teachers at BYU-Idaho act for themselves and accept responsibility for learning and teaching" (BYU-Idaho, n.d.-b).

Sub-themes help define the use of the term "self-directed" as used in this research: intrinsic motivation, integrity, and ownership for one's spiritual path. Self-directed Learning (SDL) is a broad research area in its own right and has been the subject of much interest in distance learning over the past several decades (Moore & Anderson, 2003). It should be noted that the use of the term self-directed learning throughout the findings chapter is not used to directly reference the broader research area of SDL, although key overlaps are important. These key overlaps align with principles of SDL when considering the literature as a whole more so

than with precise operational definitions. For clarity, "self-directed" is used when referring to the findings of this research, and SDL is used when referring to the body of literature related to self-directed learning.

 Choice, responsibility, motivation, and boundaries. A core principle of SDL is trusting students that they can and will learn even though the environment may be self-determined (Moore & Anderson, 2003). Peters (1998) described self-directed learners as active participants both mentally and behaviorally. Two core ideas behind SDL that support this type of participation are control and responsibility. Control refers to the ability to make decisions about what and how one learns, which in turn can lead students to take responsibility for their learning. Together, choice and responsibility ultimately support and help to create an environment in which students can develop motivation.

 There appears to be evidence of alignment between the findings in this research regarding self-directed learners and the principles of choice, responsibility, and motivation articulated by Peters (1998). Consider selected statements from David, Hannah and Issac in the SDL vernacular and contexts of choice and responsibility.

 Choice

- "[The trait I chose to work on] turned into prayer halfway through because I . . . needed to learn to use prayer more often in my life."
- "You're not limited by what the teacher is teaching."

The second quote, from Hannah, shows she felt the online format excelled in providing more choice than the face-to-face setting since she felt freed from an instructor's lesson plan.

Responsibility

- "I learned because it was all on me."

- "With online, it's more like it was my obligation to make sure it went the right way."

- "It's something I know I can do on my own."

We see in these statements a potential advantage in the online course since it seemed to require these students to take greater responsibility for their own learning than in face-to-face classes these students had taken.

A statement from Erik highlighted one example of how motivation was supported when choice and responsibility were present. Students were directed to read a section of scripture and then find principles of their own choosing that applied to them.

The requirement [to find principles from the reading] was only like five, but . . . I did like 20 because as I went through each chapter, I tried to find out, and piece out, and listen, really listen to the Book of Mormon instead of reading it.

Proponents of SDL acknowledge learners need guidance and some boundaries in how they approach their learning in order to "ensure worthwhile outcomes and continued effort to learn" (Moore & Anderson, 2003, p. 165). The presence of boundaries can be seen in Erik's comment in that the assignment focused him specifically on the Book of Mormon rather than any religious text of his choosing. His statement also aligned with Court's (2013) position that a religion's canon can serve to set boundaries for students' exploratory and organic process of spiritual growth.

Dialogue and collaboration. In addition to control and responsibility, scholars in the area of SDL acknowledge the importance of testing personal meaning and constructing

knowledge through interactions with others (Moore & Anderson, 2003). Dewey (1959) also supported this idea. He believed the cognitive aspect of education should not overshadow the sociological, or collaborative aspect of education wherein ideas are tested and refined. These positions are further supported by the work of Delamarter et al. (2011), who advocated for student-centered, constructivist learning environments designed to support testing and discussion of a wide variety of perspectives between peers.

These ideas appear to be in play in this research, at least in some respects, in the positive interactions between participants and instructors. Recall, for example, Fae's comment that illustrated how her instructor helped her think more deeply about the application of scripture to her life, "I think [it] really helps me when they give suggestions of scriptures or talks or whatever. . . . It helps you gain that relationship with God even more."

There was some evidence that interactions between students facilitated deepening understanding and testing ideas, but more often participants in this research reported minimal benefit from student-to-student interactions. Certainly these interactions were not present to the depth nor the degree Delamarter et al. (2011) envisioned; revisiting Hannah's comment makes this clear. When asked about the impact of fellow students, she replied,

> Honestly, nothing. I feel like an online class is a personal class. Like I get so much from myself and maybe there's a few concepts or ideas that I get from other students, but there's not one thing about online classes that I'm just like, "Oh, I remember someone in the class said that." It's always been from the material and the Spirit or from a teacher. . . . I don't really get anything from the other students. That's why I feel like discussion boards really are busy work because I'm just commenting, and I could care less what they have to say, honestly.

Hannah viewed this as a class of essentially two people: herself and the instructor, with other students playing a very minimal role. Although other students may not have been quite as direct as Hannah, the general tone from other students aligned with her experience. It is noteworthy, however, that six students did see some value in student-to-student interaction. These instances were cited in the findings chapter and identified as an area that holds potential for helping students grow spiritually even though this course did not see this realized to a significant degree. Based on this noted potential, and based also on literature cited previously, it appears this is an area within this particular course that could be improved rather than a finding that student-to-student interaction is not important in online religious education courses.

A Holistic Discussion of the Research Questions

The findings chapter addressed the research questions as they related to the online curriculum, instructors, and other students. This section takes a more holistic approach in an effort to synthesize what was learned. In considering the first research question, "How do students describe the difference between the online and the face-to-face classes?" it was important to first address what was fundamentally *not* different from students' perspectives. Participants saw connecting with and feeling the influence of the Holy Ghost as the definition of spiritual growth regardless of the type of course. With this in mind, it is logical that the discussion of the differences between the online and the face-to-face class focused on the different mechanisms utilized to support this connection and their utility and effectiveness. This was my approach in the findings chapter as I discussed the general themes and considered different aspects of the course. We will miss an important perspective, however, unless we take a broader look at the interplay between the themes.

Structure and flexibility in curriculum. Two themes related to curriculum could be in conflict: the value of a structured design and the value of flexibility. The overarching theme of self-direction as a hallmark of those who grew spiritually in the online class also seems to conflict with the value of a structured design.

These themes may be more interdependent than they appear at first glance. Students valued the flexibility in that they enjoyed not being limited in what they were learning. The assignments focused students on finding, articulating, and applying principles of their own choosing. Students valued structure in the sense that they were required to engage in the course frequently throughout the week through the discussion board posts and other assignments. It appears flexibility to discover and being asked to do it frequently was an important combination.

Themes related to instructors. In addition to curriculum that is both flexible and structured, instructors appeared to play an important role in helping participants experience a connection with the Holy Ghost. This section explores the interplay between themes related to the instructor, the curriculum, and self-directed learning in an effort to describe what promoted spiritual growth. Some students reported that the online environment presented barriers to communication with their instructors that they did not experience in a face-to-face course. An important question forms the basis for the discussion in this section: What impact did those barriers to communication have?

Four participants mentioned the benefits of face-to-face interactions. They felt strong relationships were easier to foster in a traditional classroom environment and that those caring relationships were important in the process of spiritual development. Based on this perspective, one could conclude the online course was inferior.

However, this position should be balanced with comments made by four other participants who did not miss face-to-face interactions with an instructor. Also, it should be remembered that the students who noted the benefits of face-to-face interactions still reported high gains in spirituality as a result of the online course, and several of these participants reported developing strong relationships with their online instructors.

It is interesting to note that David and Brad acknowledged the value of face-to-face interactions, but they also indicated that they benefited in some ways by not having the instructor present. The context for their varied responses is enlightening and helps resolve this apparent contradiction. In almost all cases, comments about the benefits of face-to-face interactions were made when participants were asked what type of course they would recommend to friends who were struggling with their faith. Comments highlighting the benefits of not having an instructor physically present related to the participant's personal experience in the course. This context is important because it focuses attention on the state and disposition of the student in determining what leads to spiritual growth.

At this point, it would be easy to take a reconciliatory stance between these varied viewpoints regarding the role of instructors by simply adopting the position that students who struggle with their faith or who are not self-directed are better served through the more personal, warm, and supportive environment of a face-to-face class whereas students who are more mature in their faith and are self-directed are more likely to do well online. Although this position may be valid and helpful, we miss an important opportunity if we do not explore further the interplay between the influence of instructors, self-determined learning, and curriculum.

In pursuing this path, it should be remembered that the purpose of this study is not to catalog what works in online religious education for the majority of students. Rather, the

approach has been to discover the individual paths of spiritual growth reported by participants and then to synthesize the successful elements into a description of fruitful online religious education. What follows, therefore, is an amalgamation of themes derived from individual successful paths; no claim is made that any one element of success was representative of all or even the majority of students interviewed. I hope that by pulling together the successful parts of each individual story, a helpful narrative will emerge regarding successful online religious education, and ideally religious education generally.

A good starting point is to revisit the overarching theme that students viewed success in the course according to how effectively it helped them experience a connection with the Holy Ghost. With this in mind, the original question posed at the beginning of this section could be reframed slightly: What impact did barriers in communication with instructors have *on the course's effectiveness in connecting students with the Holy Ghost*? Recall also the overarching theme that successful students in this research showed a high degree of self-direction in the sense that they took ownership of their own spiritual journey. We can therefore ask a related question: What impact did barriers in communication with instructors have *on promoting self-directed learning*?

A confluence of the different themes reported thus far helps us address these questions. Removing the teacher as the prominent figure in the teaching and learning process appears to have left students to pursue insights and spiritual experiences of their own choosing. The course design gave these students a framework that supported them in this process but did not prescribe a specific path. Choice and action on the part of students put them in a position to connect with the Holy Ghost. This was promoted by a structured curriculum that required frequent engagement with scripture and reflection. Although personal ties to instructors may not have

developed as readily online as in a face-to-face classroom, online channels of communication were reported as an effective avenue for instructors to "preach" and students to "receive" by the Holy Ghost (D&C 50:22). This preaching and receiving was personalized to students since the context for this communication was feedback provided by instructors directly to students on assignment topics chosen by students.

In some ways, it appears the limitations of the online environment meant a recasting of the role of instructors into one that was less prominent but more personal: less prominent because instructors did not have the physical classroom or a lesson plan as a venue for influence and more personal because the influence they did have was focused on supporting individual students in their self-directed path. The role of the instructor moved from leading out from the front of a classroom to acting in harmony with a structured curriculum designed with flexibility and personal accountability in mind. This type of curriculum, combined with a trusted instructor personally guiding students along their chosen spiritual path appears to have been a successful combination for students in this study.

Observations

Based on this description of successful religious education, I offer several observations that invite reflection by those who design online religious education. They are organized into four categories: general, curriculum, instructors, and other students. I also provide a model for online religious education for consideration in order to present the observations in a way that demonstrates how they work together.

General observations.

1. Participants clearly understood the goals of the online course. This was likely due in large part to the culture of the university and the sponsoring institution, the

LDS church. Both expend a great deal of effort continually communicating to students that the goal of their education is to develop a strong relationship with God. This goal was also communicated well at the course level.

2. Participants understood that they were the only ones that could put themselves in a position to feel the Holy Ghost. This role of independence was strengthened by a curriculum designed for student-choice and instructors who functioned as guides rather than leaders along the participants' spiritual paths.

Curricular observations.

1. Students appreciated assignments that focused them in the scriptures. There was an almost implicit assumption by students that studying scripture directly is how one connects with the Holy Ghost.

2. Participants reported that the course encouraged reflection through writing. Students explained that writing helped them capture thoughts throughout the day that were applicable to things they had studied.

3. Successful students responded positively to curriculum designed to encourage frequent engagement with scripture-based assignments. . One of the benefits of the online course over face-to-face courses reported by some students was that small, frequent assignments due throughout the week encouraged them to make scriptural study and reflection a part of their regular routine.

4. Those involved in this study valued curriculum that allowed them to explore issues that were personally relevant. Having room to explore principles that related to issues they were facing seemed to help students take responsibility for their own spiritual growth.

Observations about instructors.

1. Participants appreciated the individual help and guidance provided by instructors. Students downplayed the importance of having an instructor who led the entire class together and instead emphasized personal interactions.

2. Participants generally reported that efforts made by instructors to connect personally with them were fruitful. Students who connected personally with their instructor felt inclined to take the course activities seriously.

3. In many cases, instructors were successful "preaching" via computer-mediated channels by providing insight, sharing personal feelings, describing their own journey of faith development and so forth. Students reported this can be an effective medium for instructors to convey the Holy Ghost.

Observations about other students.

1. There may be an opportunity to create space in the online class for authentic discussion about students' questions and or challenges. Many students reported the discussions were superficial. The few examples of success that were seen all centered on authentic experiences.

2. A course may be able to capitalize on the wide range of perspectives that are present when people from different areas of the world are gathered in an online class. There seems to be potential benefits for students helping each other grow spiritually by interacting more meaningfully with each other than was evident in this course.

A model for online religious education. The observations about online religious education can be conceptualized by expanding on a metaphor presented in the Book of Mormon.

Alma, a Book of Mormon prophet, compared the development of faith to planting and growing a seed.

> Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me. . . . And behold, as the tree beginneth to grow, ye will say: Let us nourish it with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us. (Alma 32:28, 37)

Continuing with the metaphor of faith growing like a seed, the findings of this study regarding religious education conducted online can be visualized through the image of a garden box and the processes of growth. The following are descriptions of the different elements in this comparison:

- Soil and seeds are held in a wide container. It is wide to convey the idea that there is no one, single starting point for faith.

- The soil, which provides nourishment for the growing seed, represents a religion's canon of scripture. It is significant that the soil is contained, since this conveys Court's (2013) idea that religious experience makes sense within the context of a faith tradition's doctrines and norms.

- A trellis is anchored to the container and extends upward, providing a structure to which the growing plants can attach themselves. Like the container, the trellis is

also wide, allowing plants to grow laterally at will.

The trellis represents the course design and the

structure it provides. The broad width of the trellis

indicates the course should support multiple paths of

exploration in much the same way that plants will

climb without always following a strictly vertical

path. Often, one plant will attach itself to another

plant instead of to the trellis; this conveys the idea

that fellow-students can play an important role as an

aid and as a point of anchoring (see Figure 1).
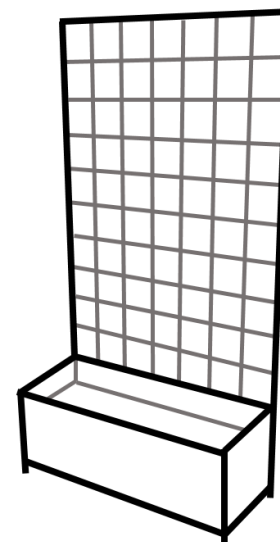
Figure 1. Garden box and trellis. The image of a wide garden box and trellis conveys a possible approach to successful online religious education.

- The sun is required for growth, which symbolizes the interactions that must occur between students and the Holy Ghost for spiritual growth to occur.

- A gardener watches over the plants. He or she ensures the roots are firmly planted in rich soil. As the plants grow, the gardener gingerly and carefully attaches the plant to the trellis when needed, but does not require any particular path upward. Importantly, the gardener is careful not to cast a shadow by standing between the plant and the sun. The gardener symbolizes the instructor who honors the different paths of students, and who assists where needed.

- Finally, the natural inclination of a plant to grow heavenward represents the natural inclination of students to experience spirituality. With plants and with students, it is a process that can be encouraged, but not forced.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe spiritual growth as experienced by university students taking an online religious education course. In considering the description presented, it is important to note several key limitations of this research.

- The focus of this research meant selecting for interviews only those students who reported spiritual growth.

- The findings from the research seem to indicate the online course experience encouraged self-direction. Given the sampling method, it may be that these students were highly self-directed to begin with.

- Perspectives from those who reported little gains in spiritual growth were not considered.

- Only students who chose to take an online religious education class in the first place were eligible for the study. Perspectives from students who avoid online classes are therefore missing.

- A small sample size (ten students) was used.

- This study focused on a single online course at an LDS, church-owned school.

Although these types of limitations are common in phenomenological research, it is important that the reader understand them. No claim is made through this research that the views expressed by the participants are representative of the majority of online religious education students. Those wishing to transfer the findings from this study to other contexts are invited to consider these limitations, as well as the previously stated assumptions.

Directions for Future Research

This study considered the perspective of students who grew spiritually as a result of the course. An additional study considering the perspective of those who reported low gains in spirituality might provide a valuable contrast to the findings reported here.

Several questions arose during this study that could be considered in the future: What, if anything, did instructors do differently in the higher scoring sections? What can be done to enhance the student-to-student impact? Are the themes from this research true across religious boundaries? Could measures to improve self-direction in students show increased gains in spirituality? What activities do instructors see as valuable in promoting spiritual growth? Research that addresses these types of questions may help to further explore how universities can assist students in their spiritual development.

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Appendix A: Religious Education Survey

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your **SCRIPTURE STUDY**? **"BECAUSE OF THIS CLASS:**

	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree
1. The number of **days** I read per week has increased."	O	O	O	O	O	O
2. The number of **minutes** I read per day has increased."	O	O	O	O	O	O
3. I am more consistent in reading at a set time each day."	O	O	O	O	O	O

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your **SCRIPTURE STUDY**? **"BECAUSE OF THIS CLASS:**

	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree
4. I better understand what I read."	O	O	O	O	O	O
5. I read more carefully and thoughtfully."	O	O	O	O	O	O
6. I am doing better at relating the scriptures to my life."	O	O	O	O	O	O
7. Scripture study has become more meaningful for me."	O	O	O	O	O	O
8. I feel a greater excitement to read the scriptures."	O	O	O	O	O	O
9. I am using new techniques that help me study the scriptures."	O	O	O	O	O	O
10. I have increased in my ability to find my own insights from the scriptures."	O	O	O	O	O	O

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
"BECAUSE OF THIS CLASS I FIND IT EASIER TO:

	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree
11. Keep the commandments."	O	O	O	O	O	O
12. Be more Christlike."	O	O	O	O	O	O
13. Resist temptation."	O	O	O	O	O	O
14. Put God first in my life."	O	O	O	O	O	O

"BECAUSE OF THIS CLASS I FEEL:

	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree
15. Closer to Heavenly Father."	O	O	O	O	O	O
16. Greater spiritual fulfillment."	O	O	O	O	O	O
17. Greater peace with my life."	O	O	O	O	O	O
18. An increased sense that God is keenly aware of me."	O	O	O	O	O	O
19. That I have more of an eternal perspective on life."	O	O	O	O	O	O
20. An increased sense of spiritual direction in my life."	O	O	O	O	O	O

	Not carefully at all	Somewhat Carefully	Very Carefully
21. How carefully did you respond to these statements	O	O	O

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Beginning Statement: The survey you completed indicated you felt like your online class helped you develop spiritually. To refresh your memory, here are some of the prompts from the survey:

1. Because of this class, scripture study has become more meaningful for me.

2. Because of this class, I have increased in my ability to find my own insights from the scriptures.

3. Because of this class, I find it easier to be more Christlike.

4. Because of this class, I feel greater spiritual fulfillment.

5. Because of this class, I feel an increased sense that God is keenly aware of me.

We can only understand so much from the survey responses, so the purpose of this interview is to dive deeper into these questions to understand your experience. I'd like to hear your perspective about being in this online class and the impact it had on your spiritual growth. As we talk, I'd like to learn everything I can about your experience, so imagine I knew nothing about the class, or what it's like to develop spirituality.

Questions and Topics:

1. Can you walk me through what it's like to be a student in an online religion class?

    a. What did you do as a student?

    b. How does that compare to what you have done as a student in a face-to-face class?

2. [Briefly explain the Hilton et al. (in press) study, but not the findings] What results would you predict?

3. In the survey, students said it was *because* of the class that they grew spiritually. Can you give me an example of how the class led to spiritual growth?

4. Can you describe a face-to-face religion course that helped you to grow spiritually? Can you describe a similar experience in the online class?

5. How do you feel about having assignments that require you to ponder deep and perhaps personal things and then share them with people you may have never met? Is that easier or harder than the face-to-face environment and why?

6. Were there any specific activities or assignments in the online class that helped strengthen your faith?

   a. Why do you think those activities mattered?

   b. How are those activities the same or different than a face-to-face environment?

7. How did the role your online instructor played compare with past face-to-face instructors you have had as it relates to helping you grow spiritually?

   a. Tell me more about your interactions with your online instructor. Do you feel he or she had a meaningful impact on you or led you to a deeper understanding?

8. What, if any, barriers to spiritual growth are unique to the online class?

9. What, if any, advantages are there to online religion classes compared to face-to-face classes?

10. How did your interactions with other students in the online class compare to interactions you had with students in past face-to-face classes?

    a. What, if any, impact did those differences have on spiritual growth?

11. Religion courses should help students with challenges to their faith. How well can that happen in an online course compared to a face-to-face course? Do you have any examples you would feel comfortable sharing?

12. [Briefly explain the findings of no significant difference in the Hilton et al. (in press) study] Why do you think there was no significant difference?

Appendix C: Interview Scheduling Script

I'm calling about a survey you completed at the end of last semester in your online Book of Mormon class. Do you remember answering questions about the impact of that class?

          No: Read some of the questions to them as a reminder.

          Because of this class I feel greater spiritual fulfillment.

          Because of this class I feel an increased sense of spiritual direction in my life.

          Because of this class I have a more of an eternal perspective on life.

Yes: You indicated on the survey that you would be willing to discuss your responses further with someone here at BYU-Idaho to help improve the class and I was hoping to set up a time when that could happen. The interview should take between 30 and 60 minutes. Are you still interested in doing that?

          No: [thank them for their time and end call]

Yes: The interview is part of a research project I'm conducting comparing students' experiences in online and face-to-face religion classes. I know you've had the online Book of Mormon class, have you ever taken a face-to-face religion class like seminary, institute, or a f2f college religion class? (Sunday school works, but note this on the spreadsheet).

          No: [explain we need to interview someone who has had both, and end the call]

Yes: A couple things to be aware of:

- This interview is part of a research project I'm conducting so before the interview I'll have you read through a consent form and sign it if you're comfortable with it.
- The interview will be recorded and transcribed, but your identity will removed from the final results.
- After the interview I'll get in touch with you through email and have you read through my notes about the interview to make sure I captured everything right.

Are you okay with that?

          No: [thank them for their time and end call]

Yes: [Schedule a time in Outlook and let them know you'll send an email with the details as a reminder]

Appendix D: Consent to be a Research Subject

Introduction

This research study is being conducted by Ben Fryar and Peter Rich at Brigham Young University to determine what students experience in online courses designed to strengthen students' spirituality. You were invited to participate because you have taken the Book of Mormon course at BYU-Idaho and because you reported gains in spirituality as a result of the course.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- you will be interviewed for approximately thirty (30) to sixty (60) minutes about your experience as an online student

- the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements

- the interview will take place in the researcher's office at a time convenient for you or it will take place at a time and location convenient for you. Your interview may also take place over the phone or using a web conferencing tool such as Skype.

- the researcher will contact you again through email after the interview asking for your comments on the researcher's analysis of the interview. It is estimated that providing this feedback will take you up to thirty (30) minutes

- total time commitment will be less than (90) minutes

Risks/Discomforts

The risks or discomforts for participating in this research are minimal. You may experience discomfort when recalling personal experiences. There is no obligation to share personal information if you feel uncomfortable doing so. You may choose to not answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any time without any negative consequence.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to you. It is hoped, however, that through your participation researchers may learn about spiritual development in online education. This could potentially benefit universities that offer courses designed to help students develop spirituality.

Confidentiality

The research data will be kept on a password protected computer and only the researcher will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed and the data will be kept in the researcher's locked office.

Compensation

There will be no compensation for this research project.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your class status, grade, or standing with the university.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Ben Fryar at fryarb@byui.edu or (801) 616-2279 for further information.

Questions about Your Rights as Research Participants

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant contact IRB Administrator at (801) 422-1461; A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; irb@byu.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name (Printed): _____   Signature_____   Date:_____

Appendix E: Audit Trail Sampling

2/18/15 First Interview "Alice"
Reflections: First interview was by phone and kind of awkward, meaning I was kind of awkward. This is probably to be expected from a first interview. Alice was patient with some of my less-than-well stated questions.

In talking with her, I had the feeling that she was very interested in being and doing good. Because of this, I wondered a little about an ability to discover with her things that really weren't working well. I'm not sure that's fair though, because in reading her transcript, she was actually vocal about some negative things.

Overall, I'm hearing from her that a lot of what matters is simply what is stated in John 7:17. For example, at one point I asked her why the course had a spiritual impact on her, and she simply stated: um, The Book (meaning the book of Mormon). In her voice was a little, "you idiot!". I also heard some positive things about interactions with other students.

The above is pretty consistent with expectations regarding what is at the heart of spirituality. I was a little surprised at how little negativity I heard about the overall online/logistical experience.

Process notes: Workflow related to recruiting, scheduling and interviewing is established. Was able to set 6 appointments in about 1 hr, 30 min. Transcriptionist lined out.

2/19/15 "Brad" and "Craig"
Reflections–Brad: Brad really great and insightful. I think this is going to be a personal learning experience for me. Brad epitomizes what the Mormon Church does for people. By self-admission, he was not very mature before his mission. Going on his mission taught him personal accountability, to be a man of his word, and to think pretty deeply about spiritual things. He was very vocal about all of this. Brad confirmed in a very big way my belief that people choose they type of religious education experience they will have. His choice was really evident in his exact obedience, even down to finding a quiet place without music to study simply because it said to in the syllabus somewhere. Doing this resulted in a "magical" experience where he felt like he got a lot out of his personal study. Brad really hit home the necessity for students to take personal responsibility for their spiritual education.

Brad also highlighted the importance of knowing the instructor and having a connection. He knew of his instructor through education week, but that's about all. From that, he projected that personality onto him throughout the entire class. It made a difference in the kind of posts he made and he indicated he would have reached out to his instructor in a crisis of faith because of that prior contact. It was really surprising to me how big of an impact the instructor had on him.

Reflections–Craig: Craig was pretty negative about the modality of online learning. He gravitated towards the need to have real-time interaction via Skype or something like that to replicate the f2f experience. Why is that? What is it about the real-time that we want to replicate it? Is that cultural? Is that required? Is that just nice? It introduces so many logistical challenges that I hope that aren't required. Text-based discussions, he argues, aren't sufficient to have a spiritual impact. What about the scriptures? Are we confusing emotional social interaction with a connection to God? He does suggest inviting students to pray before an assignment.

Process Notes: "Anything else?" is a legitimate questions that got me some good mileage.

2/21/15 General Reflections.

I've conducted 5 interviews so far. Several things appear clear. First, people have a spiritual experience because they choose to. Those who speak highly of the online experience are those who also speak about personal accountability, abiding by the honor code, etc. Second, conversion comes through actively engaging in Godly things – scripture study, service, lifting others, obedience. This means modality isn't real important. Third, instructors matter. Both Alice and Craig indicate this as a challenge of online. The exception to this is Brad, who had an earlier connection. My first and third seem to conflict a little. If choice matters so much, then why would a strong connection to the instructor matter so much?

Consider updating the interview protocol to include a question about what they mean when they say this course led to increased spirituality. Then, based on their answer, ask them how the class did that. I find a lot of people answer questions about the instructor or the assignments when I ask them about spirituality. I suppose this means they are connecting interactions with the instructor or the materials as how they grew spiritually though, so maybe this isn't a problem.

A distinction is beginning to form in my mind in some of the answers I'm hearing. It seems two things matter and each has supporting items:

1. The Course Experience
    - Activities that engage them in Godly things
    - Interactions/Relationship to the instructor
    - Interactions/Relationship to other students
2. Self-directed Students
    - Logistical maturity: able to manage assignment logistics-due dates.
    - Enough honor and integrity to engage meaningfully in the course experience. You can just do enough to satisfy your conscience to say you've done a "service" assignment.

#1 and #2 both seem to have to be in place for an online class to work and they seem to build off and support each other.

Process notes: I currently have 1 person getting me appointments and 3 people working on transcripts. The transcripts are going to be the thing that slows this down. I may have to get more students working on this.

Dedoose seems to be working really well at this point – it's very easy to find the supporting quotes for each category.

Have realized the ineffectiveness of the interview protocol as a question-by-question tool and instead find myself just guiding the conversation to the topics. The questions serve as a way to get us back on track when we stray too far.

2/23/15 Additional reflections on "Craig"

I'm coding Craig's responses. He didn't have a great experience and I attribute it, in some measure, to what I said above under 2. I think an added sub-point seems to be at play: The idea that insights are received from others is not conducive to growth in the online environment. Those who see insights as coming from engagement in Godly activities seemed to have a better experience online. I'm seeing this

in respondents who note the role of an instructor is as "providing insight", or "engaging us" or even more explicitly, "entertaining us because it's an early morning class" as perceived positives that are missing from the online mode. Insight is correlated with spiritual growth and is passed from an individual to another rather than an experience that results from Godly action.

2/24/15 Reflections on "Erik"
Phone interview.

Really interesting interview. Erik has a great perspective because he taught in the Provo MTC online using chat – full discussions, "prayer and all". I think the highlight quote from him was that the spirit is not limited to verbal communication. When I asked if he felt the influence of the Holy Ghost, his response was, "a resounding yes." Great insights. He's currently taking an OT class. He also genuinely felt that like conversion happens as a person interacts with the Holy Ghost. Unprompted, he responded with that when asked about the role of the instructor. I must admit I hoped to hear students elevate the role of the Spirit as opposed to the instructor. I think when pressed, anyone I interview will give the "right" answer on this, but Erik, Brad and David all brought this up pretty spontaneously and it seemed core.

Erik also reemphasized a clear theme that keeps coming through, namely that the course design needs to get students doing Godly things (I need a new name for this) and that students must act autonomously despite logistical frustrations. He also brought up the permanence of the online communications might lead to students being hesitant to share, which is a new take on this I hadn't thought of.

2/26/15 Reflections on "Fae"
(phone interview)

Fae said she really liked learning from other students. She finds the text-based communication really effective because she can think through a response. Also, she is not as outgoing as some others. She likes to reflect on what she has seen and learned. She values the time she can take to not rush and get an answer out. She talks about an experience where she was able to help someone out with a question and the appreciation that person expressed being really meaningful.

Fae seemed really genuine. She seemed to represent the voice of students who are a little shy in the classroom, but have a lot to say given the right venue in which they feel comfortable.

2/26/15 Reflections on "Greg"
I wonder if Greg represents a demographic of online students who do not relate to the energetic seminary teacher. Once again, the "autonomous student" seems to be a major theme. He was very forthright that he did not want or need to praise of the teacher. Once again, engaging in spiritual activities was a major theme.

Greg validates some of the things I've thought might happen, but to a greater degree that I had anticipate. Some students really are very serious about not being bothered by all the "hoopla" that sometimes goes into a seminary class, in fact it's sort of a distraction.

2/26/15 Reflections on "Hannah"
Really delightful. Has already done online classes in high school, so she thinks that helped. Hannah was the most vocal about a finding among some that I found surprising: that they really didn't miss the

teacher. They really felt like they learned a lot on their own. At the core of this, I'm finding, is that students don't miss the teacher because they view this as their journey – they are not looking to other people to tell them how to connect with God.

I think I've mentioned this elsewhere, but I wonder if there is a large group of really independent learners out there who really, genuinely excel with little oversight from an instructor "teaching" them. And then I wonder what would happen in this group got into a class where the teacher was really good, excelled, at his/her role of guide and facilitator. (see next paragraph, this happened for Hannah). Also note that this is very consistent with the HERI study – students aren't looking to others to define their spirituality.

Hannah really felt a deep connection to her instructor. I had expected to hear that instructors were really absent from the scene. What I'm hearing from Hannah, however is that an instructor can make a very big difference and have a profound spiritual impact. The ticket seems to be a great combination of a teacher with the spirt, a student ready to learn and a curriculum that gets people doing the right things.

2/27/15 Reflections on "Isaac"
Its' interesting to see how students define spiritual growth. Many of them talk about growth and insight as synonymous. Insight into the divine? Insight into a doctrine? In this case it appears to be an insight into a doctrine. But are they different? A doctrine is simply a truth about God and understanding God seems to be a critical component of nearness to God.

Isaac was having a hard time and somehow the instructor picked up on it (line 286). Combine this with what Hannah said about how the spirit really can teach via text (both to the instructor so he could know there was a problem and from instructors to students). Also Craig, I believe it was - the guy who taught at the MTC. We see here the ability for teachers to convey the spirit in a very powerful way to students.

Notice also the tie in with independent learners. We see mutually beneficial strands here.

Isaac mentioned his instructor by name…and it just happened to be the new dept. chair.

2/28/15 Some Concerns
Am I just looking for what I expect to find? Example: downplaying the role of the instructor? No, I'm pretty cynical. Did they just give me what I want to hear? No, they seem genuine. They are the ones who scored high on the survey. And, I'm gaining a lot more confidence in the survey.

3/6/15 cultural-centric concern
I and the students are coming at this from a very cultural-centric perspective. We share the same vocabulary (spirit, insight, Holy Ghost). Coming at this from that world-view is good and bad. Good because it allows for communication. Bad because I'm worried this isn't very transferrable. I wonder if it would have been better to have a researcher who is not a member of the church conduct this study. Having said all that, I think it's important to focus on the purpose of this study. This is not a study to describe how Mormons get converted, this is a study to see how Mormons get converted within the online religious education course; emphasis on online, not general conversion process.

3/14/15 Some surprising things about instructors
I've been reviewing all the codes and become surprised by how openly students talk about wanting to be independent learners. Several of the students talked about how they prefer to be able to just study

without the interference of an instructor. I'm happy to see students interact directly with the Holy Ghost, at least this is the way they talk about it, rather than relying on an instructor to be their source of testimony. There is connection with the HERI study on this I think.

Notes for the Discussion Chapter
The Developing Model
Responses generally fall into these categories:

1. The Course Experience
   a. Activities that engage them in Godly things
   b. Interactions/Relationship to the instructor
   c. Interactions/Relationship to other students
2. Self-directed Students
   a. Logistical maturity: able to manage assignment logistics-due dates.
   b. Enough honor and integrity to engage meaningfully in the course experience. You can't just do enough to satisfy your conscience to say you've done a "service" assignment.
   c. View insights as stemming from a higher power vs. being provided by others. Those who look to the instructor or other students for insight didn't speak as positively about the class.

   General Insights
- Even though they all scored above a 5, some were more and less inclined to speak positively about the online class.
  o 3/6/15 – actually only 1 seemed overall negative.
- Students are finding their own methodological paths (some turn gravitate to a very present instructor, but some prefer an open-ended environment where they are free to explore) but for these students, it's within a doctrinal framework.
- Student do care very deeply about spirituality as seen in self-direction. This consistent with the Lit review (HIRI study).
- There are some unstated assumptions made by students that may need to be mad explicit:
  o Conversion happens through the Holy Ghost.
  o Activity (scripture study, prayer, working on a trait, missionary work) connect one with the Holy Ghost.
  o The point of the Book of Mormon class is spiritual rather than academic.
- F2F is really good at creating a nurturing, loving environment. This is especially important for those who may not have a strong testimony to begin with.
- Feeling more and more confident about the survey – these are people who genuinely seemed to have a good, faith-promoting experience.
- It's interesting how often when asked about how they learn spiritual things that students turn to their experience with others. I.e., Q. what would make it better? A. Real-time communication. This implies that people place a high level of importance on human interaction.
- There is a clear thread that runs through this entire things – that the Holy Ghost is the teacher. People are converted because they read and the Holy Ghost testifies, or because an instructor testifies and the Holy Ghost confirms it. This is consistent with the article that talks about explicitly stating the outcomes and it takes the literature on influence of faculty a step further –

they aren't just examples/heroes, they are guides (for our students). As I write this up, I'll want to make this explicit from the very beginning.

- There should probably be a general discussion at the beginning somewhere about general principles of conversion and how conversion is taught in the LDS church. I think Isaac at lines 337 really capture this process well. See also, of course, the How Spirit Communicates/Teaches and Spirit Converts (not different) codes.
    - We testify to one another as a way to build spirituality.

Recommendations

- Embrace online religious education as a legitimate way to build students spiritually.
- Curriculum must engage students in activities that directly connects them with Deity.
- Train students to be autonomous and honest and see the class as much more than a grade. Note: this is totally consistent with lit review
- F2F, create a daily, structure experience rather than just show up 1 or 2 times per week but don't over orchestrate. Think framework rather than specific topics you expect them to find.

Appendix F: Code Sampling for Theme of Self-directed

Title: Brad_2-19-2015.docx

Codes Applied: Q2: Facilitates Growth   Engage in Spiritual Activities   Self-directed

Brad: So that call to action, which I really liked. Y'know, "I'm going to try and do this, and hold myself up to those goals." I remember one week it was, the scripture was from King Benjamin, I think. And it was just all beggars and stuff like that. So I challenged myself to do random acts of service for three other people that week that were not in my room, not my roommates. It was good, I got at least two I was proud of, I just did them toward the end of the week. Yeah, the plan, I think, was really awesome. It's something I haven't seen in a religion class yet. And you can hear, and sometimes hear their testimony, but when I write it down, I feel like I'm more accountable for it. So if I hear the testimony I'll go to church, and say "I challenge you all to do this." But if I don't have it in writing or don't hold myself to it, I just think it's a good idea. But when I write it down, it's like a goal.

10:00

Brad: So that's what I particularly enjoyed.

Title: Brad_2-19-2015.docx

Codes Applied: Q2: Facilitates Growth   Self-directed   Great Quotes

I was interested to hear that there was this activity where you were supposed to journal and then make a plan of action. I can see some students reading that and going like, "There's no real accountability here, right? I can sort of doing a mediocre job of it, just enough to satisfy my conscience, and click that I did that. I mean, nobody knows I really did that." If you did it or not.

Brad: Yeah.

Interviewer: But it doesn't sound like that was the approach that you took. Can you just talk about why you chose to make that a meaningful thing?

Brad: Yeah. To me, this is my one time I get to charge my battery, spiritually and academically. I think it's kind of useless to weasel your way through a religion class.

12:00

Brad: [laugh] Like I get it, when you're struggling in science, when you're struggling in math, it's like you'll do whatever it takes to get a good grade. But it's kind of like, well, what's my grade mean to me in a religion class? I guess if you're not doing the spirituality, you'll feel rather crummy about the A. It's just on paper, it doesn't matter. Like, I'll best honest, I've done whatever it takes to—study groups in science classes, history classes, y'know, to help me get through. Y'know, work with other people, I don't see any problem in that, but it's just like Book of Mormon is so personal. I guess it's accountability and mostly integrity, I guess? Y'know, doing what's right when no one is looking?

Title: Brad_2-19-2015.docx

Codes Applied: Self-directed   Q2: Facilitates Growth   Q2: Barriers to Growth
        Great Quotes

And especially in the mission, yeah. It was truly humbling in the mission, and so it's really frustrating to see the other people not do challenges and commitments.

19:00

Brad: So to me after seeing two years of disappointments, I come home and I'm like, "Y'know,"—and I don't want to speak bad about them, that's not what this is, but it's tough. You ask people do something and it's so easy to do it, it's so easy not to. I mean, you challenge someone to read the Book of Mormon, a couple of verses, so you talk about it the next time you come over. They don't make their appointment, they didn't read, even if they are there, and it's stressful, and you think about it, "Well, they said that they'd do it, are they not a man of their word or woman of their word?" I think that's what stressed me out the most. I had a truly humbling experience. Before the mission I was cocky son of a gun, and now I just come home really humbled and I'm willing to keep to a commitment that I'm set to. So I come to this meeting on time, and stuff like that.

Interviewer: That's great.

Brad: I don't understand why we don't do that more often. I don't know what's the stigma with Mormon time, but here it's like everything is 15 minutes late.

20:02

Brad: And that just irks me so bad.

Title: Brad_2-19-2015.docx

Codes Applied: Q2: Facilitates Growth   Course Design Instructors   Self-directed
          Great Quotes

Interviewer: Do you feel like you felt the spirit because of this online class?

Brad: There were several moments that I did because I'm not really good at using manuals and stuff like that, I'm just more like a simplistic read. What I'm reading then has a new interpretation because of a life experience, and that's changed what it is.

26:03

Brad: And this really opened by eyes because Brother - , he would show the Book of Mormon manual, and I haven't felt like this since, y'know, back in seminary. He started showing images and graphs from what I'm reading, and it just kinda like, put the scriptures out on a holographic 3D level. So I never used so many talks when reading the Book of Mormon, but I remember so many helpful guides and stuff. It was like every chapter that we did, that we had to read, there was a reading guide from the Book of Mormon reading manual. So again, just a more intellectual way of looking at the Book of Mormon. So to me that increased my knowledge, which was great, because my scripture study is pretty simple on my own, but with the class it kind of helped me see more.

Title: Brad_2-19-2015.docx

Codes Applied: Q1: Description of the Difference   Self-directed

Brad: So my own personal statistic is knowing that I have the diligence and my own integrity to do online classes. Because I don't think I would have checked to see, "Oh, what's due in my online class," I would have done the bare minimum, had I ever done one, because I think I had the brains to fathom a course that didn't exist tangibly.

52:00

Brad: Because I went to a classroom and I knew what the teacher was saying and say what was due next class and I'd have that ready for the next class. But on an online course, you have to see what is expected of you, and you read the materials so that you understand it, then read

what is expected of you and then be able to post it or present it to a teacher that you've never met before.

Title: Craig_2-19-2015.docx
Codes Applied: Q2: Barriers to Growth   Instructors   Self-directed   Negative Case
 I hopped into the second semester of an online course, and it was simple, but it was—I wouldn't say meaningless—but it depended a lot on what the person wanted to get out of it, which is kind of why I don't like it because I want to go into a religion course to get somebody else's view on the scriptures, to see something else that I hadn't. 'Cause I don't wanna just reread them and do my own personal study 'cause I do that on my own time. So going to the class, I was expecting new insights, new stuff about the Book of Mormon that I hadn't thought of or heard of before.

Title: Craig_2-19-2015.docx
Codes Applied: Self-directed
Craig: In a face-to-face class, it also really just depends on what you want to get out of it. Like most, if not all, things in the Church. It's like the only thing that I really could impede me from growing is myself. If I wanted to get something out of the class, I would go in prepared, I'd go in listening. Waiting, listening to the spirit, "Alright, this is what I feel, I'm going to share this."

Title: David_2-21-15.docx
Codes Applied: Self-directed   Course Design Q2: Facilitates Growth
First of all, how would you describe the difference between a face to face religion class and an online religion class?
1:00
David: With the face to face class, for me, when I was going, I could go and sit down and didn't have to participate fully, but I was still able to learn a lot. There was a little bit more….because you would have the element of prayer in it. There's a prayer at the beginning of class. With the online class it put more of the responsibility on myself, and so, especially with the honor code and not lying when you're doing homework online. Like it was either to do it or not to do it. And for me I wanted to get a good grade, 'cause the last thing I wanted to remember was that I failed a Book of Mormon class. So I got to a point where I wanted to succeed in that class and so it was kind of a motivation for me to first get a good grade and then it transformed into learning more.