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Instructor and Student Perceptions of Online Courses: Implications of Positioning Theory

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Instructor and Student Perceptions of Online Courses: Implications of Positioning Theory

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ABSTRACT

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The increase in online course delivery in higher education has implications for students and instructors. In fall 2002, 1.6 million students took at least one online course and this number increased by the fall of 2012 to 6.7 million. The increase in the rate of enrollment in online courses in higher education provides an opportunity to examine the strategies and technologies used in course design and delivery and student engagement in the online culture. Two of the key factors in creating student engagement are the instructor's interaction with students and the course design and delivery itself. An examination of students' and instructors' perceptions of what factors contribute to a positive online experience may assist those developing and delivering online courses.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate the relationship between the perceptions of online instructors and online students regarding student engagement and course design and delivery. Data collection techniques included the use of a survey with a 5-point Likert-type scale and collection of demographic information. Data were analyzed through a nonexperimental quantitative methodology and further explained through the use of *positioning theory*. Positioning theory combines cognitive and social psychology to describe how individuals interact through conversation or speech acts (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999). This theory provides a framework for discussion of the findings as to how the first interactions between students and instructors set a tone for student engagement for the duration of the course.

The study revealed that there is a strong statistical significance to the number of both student and instructors posting to perceived student engagement. The more students and instructors post in the first 2 weeks the higher the perception of student engagement. This finding allows for the application of the use of positioning theory in how students and instructors relate and experience engagement in the course. Findings also revealed that academic discipline was not statistically significant in regards to instructor and students perception of engagement. Significance was also established between student age and traditional or nontraditional status in their perceived engagement in online classes. Traditional students and also students in the age category of 24 and under reported higher rates of perceived student engagement than nontraditional students and students in the age category of 25 and older. Recommendations for practice are included in the discussion.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, siblings, and my wonderful husband, Taylor Shane Phillips. I have been blessed in life to have a strong support system and those who encourage me in all that I do. My parents enabled me to see that with hard work and dedication anything is possible. I can honestly say that you can accomplish your dreams if you are willing to do the work. My sister and two brothers have always been a source of motivation and pride for me. I want to show them that you are never to old or young to pursue your dreams. Then there is my husband Taylor who has endured a great deal these past 3 years. I could not have completed this degree and achieved one of my dreams to obtain my doctorate without your love, support, and faith in me. I thank all of you from the bottom of my heart.

This dissertation is also dedicated to the countless teachers, leaders, and individuals who have left a lasting impression on me. While my love of learning was born at home, I have been blessed to have countless teachers who renewed that desire. My third grade teacher Mr. Smith who made history fun and meaningful thank you for letting me see the joy of learning. To my sixth grade teachers Mrs. Rainer, Mrs.Wallace, and Mr. Hall each of you helped guide me in an area that I was either weak or would later discover a hidden passion for! I would also like to offer a special thanks to Dr. Patricia Cutspec who through my studies as a master's student showed me what it meant to truly care and lead as a professor.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is not a new term. We have been using distance education to refer to methods of reaching students who could not meet the requirements for traditional campus classes for years. These older versions of distance education relied heavily on the exchange and mailing of papers and assignments between student and instructor. Distance education has been revolutionized with the introduction of the Internet in education. Between 2002 and 2008 U.S. colleges and universities, both public and private, have reported a 260% increase in the number of students enrolling in online courses instead of enrolling in traditional face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010). There are three potential explanations for this increase in enrollment in online courses

1. Shift in strategy by higher education institutions to meet the increased student demand by increasing online course offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2010).
2. Demand by nontraditional students for access to higher education that has been driven by the labor market (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003; Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001).
3. Impact of Web 2.0 technologies on communication and learning preferences of traditional students (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins, Puushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robinson, 2011).

A study conducted by Impact Group Instruction gathered the following information on the level of interest private and public organizations have for internet technology based training: 57% show a steady increase in use, 20% are holding the same as they did last year, 18% report rapid

increases, 4% report being somewhat reluctant, and amazingly 0% report being very reluctant (Pace, 2013). The Impact Group has found that younger generations prefer to use the same technology for professional purposes as they do in their personal lives.

Today anyone who has access to the Internet can participate in a wide variety of e-tivities (Salmon, 2002a). The expanded access and choices gives learners the flexibility of when they choose to participate with larger amounts of research material and time to thoughtfully respond (Liang & Chen, 2012). Online learning has become a major consideration in higher education (Al-Adwan & Smedley, 2012; Kim & Bonk, 2006). Yet there seems to be a rather large issue in the retention and satisfaction of online students. From 2000 to 2010 dropout rates for online classes and online programs was reported to range between 20% and 70% in secondary, undergraduate, continuing professional, and graduate courses from a wide range of disciplines (Angelo, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Carr, 2000; Long, Dubois, & Faley, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

Several studies have been conducted to examine the potential draws of online education and potential drawbacks to current online students. Some of the following positive attributes have been reported from students as reasons they choose online courses: flexibility, increased access to materials, course efficiency, and the ability to openly share ideas and communicate without fear of embarrassment (Bathe, 2001; O'Lawerence, 2006). While students found many positives to online learning, there were also the following disadvantages listed: being self-disciplined, technological difficulties, lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty, lack of face-to-face interaction with classmates, increased work load from a face-to-face class, and time given to complete assignments (Bathe, 2001). Even though many students shared these disadvantages, many still expressed their desire or willingness to take an online class in the future. Knowing that

online education is a growing area of interest for students, institutions of higher education need to examine the perceived disadvantages from both faculty and student perspectives in order to create a more engaging and active learning environment.

Student satisfaction must be considered when creating and evaluating effective application of online courses (Zhu, 2012). Studies state that learning can be made more interesting and enriching when new technologies are incorporated into the classroom and into online course (Shrivastava, 1999). Yet the student only represents a third of the formula for an effective and engaging online experience. The other two thirds of this equation rest on the institutions shoulders with faculty's interpersonal interactions taking up one third and the remaining third resting with the institutions selected online platform and technical support. Many faculty members report a level of perceived dissatisfaction with teaching on online course before they actually experience teaching the course (McLawhon & Cutright, 2012).

Faculty perceptions, training, mentoring, and best practices occurring in the course must be examined in order to fully understand what is currently being presented to students and what might be a better way to present learning in an online environment. Many hold that faculty development and growth as online instructors be seen as a career journey that is best served through mentorships (Billings & Kowalski, 2008). The examination of current best practices and research on faculty expectations in the discussion forums, email, and other forms of contact play a vital role in addressing some of the disadvantages identified by students in the current research.

The examination of student expectations, student perceptions, student action or inaction, faculty expectations, faculty perceptions, and faculty action or inaction through positioning theory allows us to view the subjectivity of the human experience. Positioning theory attempts to understand human interaction through the evolution of storylines that are constantly changing

and being recreated. Positioning theory combines cognitive and social psychology in an attempt to understand and describe the variation in how individuals interact with one another (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Through using positioning theory we are able to explore what one student perceives as an actively engaged instructor while another may consider the same professor hands off. These are questions to which I have not been able to find answers in the literature. While there is a great deal of research on student engagement and faculty responses to online learning, there are very few that combine both the student's perceptions and the faculty's perceptions of the effective online course. There is also relatively little literature applying positioning theory as an attempt to understand the various roles both the instructor and the student take on through the duration of the course.

Statement of Problem

The current literature on online and distance education shows a strong link between the faculty's interaction in the course and the student's connection and future completion rates within the same courses (Lester & Perini, 2010). There is also sufficient literature that addresses how students often feel they have received inaccurate or incomplete feedback and interaction from online faculty members (Bambara, Harbour, Davies, & Athey, 2009; Rovai, 2001). While much research has addressed the notion of online student success, extant literature on online engagement has not addressed specific perceptions and storylines created by both the student and the instructor in the online course. Examining the interpersonal dynamic within the classroom and the expectations of both instructors and students will allow the application of positioning theory to overall student engagement. Because there is a dearth of research in the literature about student and instructors' perceptions of engagement, it is difficult to discern whether students and

instructors consider the same types of behaviors to be positive in regards to personal perceptions in the online classroom.

Although studies examining online engagement and perceptions with positioning theory are scant in the research literature studies have used positioning theory to examine various aspects of interpersonal interactions between teacher and student (Given, 2002; Linehan & McCarthy, 2000), peers (Given, 2002), researcher-participant (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001), and student teacher- student (Cook-Sather & Young, 2007). Ritchie (2002) and Ritchie and Rigano (2001) argue that positioning theory is a useful tool in understanding and illustrating how individuals in a classroom who occupy different social and political locations within the classroom experience actions and realities differently. The purpose of this quantitative study is to investigate and determine whether a relationship exists between online instructors' and students' perceptions of engaging online behavior and course structure. Specifically this researcher assessed students' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of a course, the instructors' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of the course, the role students' demographic and program of study factor into online engagement, and the instructors' prior exposure and experience with online courses factor into creating an effective online course design.

Research Questions

This study examines instructor and student perceptions of student engagement in online courses through the lens of positioning theory guided by the following research questions.

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference in perceived engagement among students who post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course?

Research Question 2: Is there a significant difference in instructors' perception of student engagement between when instructors post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course?

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in the degree of perceived student engagement as compared according to class standing?

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference in the degree of perceived student engagement based on their academic discipline?

Research Question 5: Is there a difference in the degree of perceived student engagement between males and females?

Research Question 6: Is there a significant relationship between GPA and perceived student engagement?

Research Question 7: Is there a significant relationship between age and degree of perceived student engagement?

Research Question 8: Is there a significant difference between the degree of perceived student engagement between traditional and nontraditional students?

Research Question 9: Is there a significant relationship between instructor's years of online experience and instructor's perception of student engagement?

Research Question 10: Is there a significant difference in instructor's perception of student engagement based on their academic discipline?

Limitations and Delimitations

Certain limitations exist regarding this study due to the nature of the population chosen. The population was delimited to all students who have taken at least one online class and

instructors who have taught at least one online class at one regional university in northeast Tennessee. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalized to any other institution. All students who met the one-course requirement and all instructors who met the one-course requirement were invited to participate in the study. The number of actual participants in the study is a limitation because the participants were fewer than those given the opportunity to participate.

The survey used in this study was designed and used for the first time during this research. At the time this study was executed I was a graduate assistant at the participating institution. However, my interaction was limited to instructors in one program and students who were members of one concentration within that program. To minimize any limitations such as bias or leading questions, the survey was piloted with graduate fellows and graduate instructors in order to increase validity.

Definition of Terms

During the course of any study that requires the use of terminology closely aligned with the field, it is important to examine and established well-defined operational definitions. The below terms are used throughout this study and are operationalized as follows:

Adult Learner – Working age adults, "who are assumed to work at least part time while going to school" (Wlodkowski, 2008, p.32).

Correspondence Courses – Distance and personalized instruction sent via regular mail. Applicants receive packets of information, syllabi, and in turn students are responsible for completing assignments and mailing back to institution (Larreamendy-Joems & Leinhardt, 2006).

Distance Education – ". . . the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organization" (Holmberg, 1986, p.26).

e-tivites – Any type of interactive task completed online through games, forms, or interactive discussion.

Learning Communities – Cohorts of students who take two or more courses together (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011).

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) – Courses of study offered over the Internet that are free and open to everyone. Usually these courses have a very large number of participants.

Nontraditional Student – Students who posess "one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, part-time attendance, financial independence, full-time job, dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, and having nonstandard high school diploma" and is usually described as someone over the age of 25 (Wlodkowski, 2008, p.32).

Online Education – Instruction through a connection to a computer system at a venue distant from the learner's personal computer (Larreamendy-Joems & Leinhardt, 2006).

Positioning Theory – Positions and storylines that together delimit possible actions and the meanings of what is said and done by those who are positioned in particular ways. Positioning theory grew from social psychology to offer insight into previous unobservable details of the human interactions that sustain life (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

Post –The original written expression of thoughts, questions, and insights found either in online discussion forums or areas for news announcements. Post in this study also refer to the written responses others may have to those original written expressions.

Student Engagement – The time and physical energy that students expend on activities in their academic experience (Jacobi, Astin, & Ayala, 1987; Kuh, 2003).

Significance of Study

In order to determine what creates an engaging and open online learning environment, more research is needed on the student and instructor perceptions of this type of interactive communication process. Findings from this study could provide data for institutions of higher education that are beginning or currently expanding their online course offerings. The data generated form this study could provide insight into whether student success in online courses stems from the instructors interpersonal interaction within the course or the students personal drive and motivation.

In addition findings from this study could also provide another focal point for researchers who are studying the success and best practices of online education as an alternative to other forms of distance education. While experimental studies applying positioning theory to online education are few (Ritchie, 2002; Ritchie & Rigano, 2001), a combination of instructor and student perceptions to the extant literature of online education could allow future researchers to triangulate these studies with existing data to determine if there are trends.

Overview of Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction, the statement of the problem, the significance of the study, the limitations and delimitations of the study, the definition of terms, significance of the study, and the research questions. Chapter 2 contains a review of related literature to the study. Chapter 3 explains the methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 reports the findings of the data analyses. Chapter 5 incorporates the summary, findings, conclusions, and recommendations for this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As technologies have secured there strong hold in higher education, it has become increasingly important for educators and administrators to ensure that the online courses offered at their institutions are meeting the needs of the students. According to Kuh and Vesper (2001) when technology is used appropriately and combined with strong pedagogical practices student learning is increased. When online courses are organized and structured, they can actively compete with any traditional classroom in regards to student learning potential. In order to achieve these goals close attention must be paid to curriculum design and delivery (Thompson, 2000). The importance of course design includes the instructor and curriculum quality, whether the course is a traditional course, two-way video conferencing, or via Web based platforms (Goodwin, 2000). Many factors must be considered when examining the effectiveness of any one online course ranging from design, content, student perceptions, instructor comfort, and communication styles that allow the student and the instructor to create perceptions of one another throughout the course. In order to have a firm grasp on where online education is currently and where it is headed, we must understand the evolution of distance education into online courses in higher education (Casey, 2008).

Technologies Evolution in Higher Education

Distance education is a systematic approach that has been employed over the past 2 centuries to reduce geographical and other barriers to certain groups accessing higher education (Casey, 2008). Online education is just the latest rendering of distance education. This is why

online education has part of its history rooted in technological advancements. The other half is connected to the older establishment of distance education within many institutions of higher education. The definition of distance education and its origin can be found in off-campus outreach of degree-granting institutions through the visions of the democratization power of higher educational institutions (Larreamendy-Joems & Leinhardt, 2006). Democratization here refers not to the political support or governmental structure but to allowing underserved populations access to higher education. One of the earliest and meaningful ventures into distance education was by Anna Eliot Ticknor and her Society to Encourage Studies at Home (Bergmann, 2001). Anna, the daughter of a Harvard professor, founded the society in Boston in 1873. The focus of the society was to provide women a liberal education via correspondence study program. After being accepted into the program women selected a department of study (English, history, French, science, German, and art). The learning in this program was self-paced as it allowed women to study in their limited available time because their domestic duties usually came first (Bergmann, 2001).

The first major development in distance education is credited to William Rainey Harper the president of the University of Chicago. Harper has been credited by many scholars as one of the founders of university correspondence instruction or teaching by mail (Holmberg, 1986; Storr, 1966; Watkins, 1991). While there was always a strong distinction made between university proper and university extension programs, the forward movement of Chicago began to close those gaps (Storr, 1996). At Chicago this movement is closely related and follows the larger historical development of the broader development of university extension programs in the United States and England. One of the pioneers of the university extension movement, Richard Moulton, summarizes the importance of the university extension program as follows:

"A university remains in an imperfect stage until it realizes how it must extend its influence to the whole bod of people; how it must extend its education to the whole period of the human life; and how it must bring its high ideas to bear upon all the vital interests of mankind" (Moulton, 1917, p.59).

Use of mail courses to expand the reach of the university began to gain even more momentum in the early 1900s when the University of Kansas launched a wide scale correspondence program that targeted the following groups: "1. Students preparing for college work; 2. Students needing high school completion; 3. College students whose resident study had been interrupted; 4. Teachers in public schools; 5. Professionals and businessmen; 6. Farmers, artisans, and shop workers; 7. Club women; 8. Anyone anxious to keep intellectually alert" (Larreamendy-Joems & Leinhardt, 2006, p.573). It was this newfound energy and approach to recruiting and serving students that lead many to see the primary goal of the university as the betterment of society and the individual. It was only natural for this new technology of mail order courses to begin to spread through other colleges and universities. However, with any new change correspondence courses did meet challengers who took the perspective that the university was an elite institution serving the elite student in pursuit of knowledge and scientific truth (Larreamendy-Joems & Leinhardt, 2006). Some of these same challenges can be heard during discussions of online education and online programs. The second challenge came with the realization that distance education could not democratize education and empower any specific community. The major obstacle to this was the lack of any infrastructure and organizational network to help run the administrative side of the correspondence courses. Also, a lack of strong and consistent financial support for early distance education efforts made it all but impossible to address the second major challenge to correspondence distance education programs.

Out of the correspondence course we see how distance education began to connect itself with the prevailing technologies of the times from radio instruction to the use of educational television, audiovisual to the use of the computer. The University of Iowa and the University of Wisconsin were the first to launch broadcast courses via the radio in the early part of the century (Willis, 1994). The University of Wisconsin saw great success with its radio broadcast, which led to the creation of WHA the first federally licensed educational broadcast channel. Well into the 21st century the University of Wisconsin's University of the Air has continued to be broadcast at the time of this writing. Other methods of delivering audio content from a distance included prerecorded phonograph records, audiotapes, cassettes, and compact discs. These methods were used very similar to the original text correspondence courses via the mail system.

A new wave of technology hit the distance education field the use of telephone technology to administer educational programming in the late 1970s. Telephone technologies that were and are still used to deliver distance education include the common telephone conference call and more sophisticated transmissions of audio and visual data (Willis, 1994). In the early days of audio conferencing the visual elements to a course were very different from actually seeing a professor speaking. They used freeze frame technology and other types of still images. The transition from telephone conferencing to the use of television technology was a natural progression.

The first use of television in distance education occurred in 1934 at the University of Iowa (Casey, 2008). The use of Interactive Video or ITV courses that allow students to attend a course at a remote site grew from the older correspondence and telephone conferencing models. The students have live feeds from the professor's active class with audio, visual, and the ability to interact in real time with the professor. These courses use a live phone line for the

conferencing of audio and independent television networks for the broadcast of visual data (Willis 1994). It was from this point in the distance education journey that the use of the computer and more importantly the advent of the Internet started to shift distance education as a whole.

Online Education

Most colleges found themselves entering the world of online learning without a strategic plan but through the curiosity and willingness of faculty to develop online courses (Lorenzo, 2010). Over the past 10 years online learning has shifted from being on the periphery of colleges and universities to the center of university life, which brings with it the shift from being only part of the university extension program (Larreamendy-Joems & Leinhardt, 2006) to being a cornerstone of may colleges and universities. As this shift occurred the various technologies employed in these courses has been expanded to include email, real-time chat rooms, asynchronous conferencing software, and video sharing technologies. The use and growth of the online course can no longer be seen as a fad but as a very real and grounded piece of the modern higher educational landscape.

The computer began to revolutionize the field of distance education in 1978 when the first email was sent using Intel inter-office system (Casey, 2008). Fifteen years later in 1993, just 2 short years after the World Wide Web was developed, Jones International University, the first fully accredited fully online university, opened headquartered in Colorado, (Casey, 2008). Four years later in 1997 the California Virtual Campus (http://www.cvc.edu/) opened holding a massive 1,500 courses. While these ventures were earth shattering in the realm of higher education, the real catalyst for online courses in higher education did not occur until course

management software systems were developed. The first two major software companies were Blackboard and WebCT that later merged in February 2005.

With the use of course management software, use of the Internet, and broadband access students now learn in a variety of ways online: navigating through virtual museums (Corredor, 2006; Crowley, Leinhardt, & Chang, 2001); access tutors who maybe in the same town or another country, (Lovett, 2001; Lovette & Greenhouse, 2000); carry out experiments in virtual labs (Larreamendy-Joerns, Leinhardt, & Corredor, 2005); participate in asynchronous discussions (Vrasidas & Stock-McIssacs, 1999); and enroll in online courses as regular resident students (Larreamendy-Joerns et al., 2005). As with any major educational innovation, once the initiative has been adopted and launched by first-rate institutions, others begin to see the innovation as credible (Larreamendy-Joems & Leinhardt, 2006). The first-rate colleges that began to launch new programs using the Internet were Columbia, Yale, Stanford, the University of Chicago, the London School of Economics (LSE), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). The initiatives of each of these schools are varied in scope and purpose. Several of the above institutions joined forces to create Cardean University that is devoted to online distance education in business and administration. Taking a completely different approach MIT created Open Courseware (OCW), CMU launched an Open Learning Initiative (OLI), and Yale has Open Educational Resources Video Lecture Project. These programs, while not a form of distance education in the traditional sense, offer a completely open access to the resources and knowledge housed within each institution. The move for this open format of education can also be seen at state institutions such as East Tennessee State University with their implementation of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These courses allow the larger community to enroll and access course material free

from charge. If the individual would later like to receive college credit for the course there would be a reduced fee from traditional enrollment.

Numbers from the Sloan Consortium studies examining online student enrollment for the years of 2008, 2009, and 2011 show more than a steady increase and demand for online education. In the fall of 2008, 4.6 million students were slotted to take at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2009). For the following fall of 2009, 5.6 million students were slotted to take at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2010), and for the fall of 2011, 6.7 million students would have taken at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Over the past years the overall higher education student body has grown at an annual rate of 2.6% from 16.6 million in the fall of 2002 to 21.0 million for the fall of 2011. Yet the annual growth rate of online students during that same period was 17.3% growing from 1.6 million in the fall of 2002 to 6.7 million in the fall of 2011.

Economic Impact Online Education

The economic downturn of 2007 impacted the lives of Americans in many ways. Those with secure careers and homes found themselves jobless and facing foreclosure. It is worth exploring if the economic downturn and the economy's continued less than optimal state have impacted the growth and demand for online education across our nation. Virtually all the institutions in the Sloan survey reported an increase demand for financial aid, while at least half of the institutions reported institutional budget cuts (Allen & Seaman 2010). The challenge for colleges and universities resides in meeting the increased demand in student enrollment, increased interest in online learning, and decreased budgets.

The question now becomes can institutions save funds by shifting to online courses in order to meet student demand and adjust for budget cuts that have been wide spread since 2008 while maintaining the expected level of academic rigor. Through research conducted by the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) Twigg (2003) provided evidence that online course redesign can be used to increase enrollment, lower cost, and improve overall learning. In the study 30 institutions received funding to redesign courses, lower cost, and improve student learning. By the end of the study the average savings from the 30 institutions was 37% with some programs saving 15% while others reported a 77% savings and the generation of $3.1 million in operating cost per year. Countless other studies demonstrate how if implemented and managed properly online education can help address the rising student enrollment while allowing for institutions to function with shrinking budgets and not compromise the education of the student (Bates, 2011; Meyer, 2006, 2008; Twigg, 2001).

Future Trends

It seems difficult for us to imagine what could take the place of the Internet much like it was challenging for others to see the replacement of the radio or the phone (Willis, 1994). Currently as we examine the numbers of students taking at least one online course we can see that the rate of growth is slowing, which may be a sign that online education is reaching a plateau with an even smaller expected growth rate this year (Allen & Seaman 2013). The plateau in online educational growth has and will continue to create a climate where new and different ways of approaching learning online may rejuvenate a different group of students.

When we examine the market place of online education and projected numbers for 2014 we find the following from the Ambient report.

In 2009 there were a total of 27.04 million students in higher education programs:

- 1.25 million student took all of their classes online (4.6%)
- 10.65 million students took some of their classes online (39%)
- 15.14 million students took all of their courses in traditional classrooms (54%)

In 2014 there will be 27.34 million students in higher education programs in total:

- 3.55 million students will take all of their classes online (12.8%)
- 18.65 million students will take some of their classes online (68.2%)
- 5.14 million students will take all of their courses in a physical classroom (19%)

(Ambient Insight Research, 2009, p.12).

With these growing numbers examining the future trends and possible direction of online learning allows for constant improvement and understanding (Casey, 2008). While the reality of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course) has been around for a while, the term was not coined until 2008 and the larger populations of colleges and universities have not fully accepted this type of online technology. In 2012 only 2.6% of higher education institutions offered MOOCs and only 9.4% said they are in the planning stages (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Put another way 55.4 % report they are still undecided on MOOCs while 32.7% say they have no plans to offer MOOCs. While only 43.5% of chief academic officers see MOOCs as a way to attract potential students, it is surprising that institutions of higher education are looking into MOOCs at all (Allen & Seaman, 2013). However, this could offer a glimpse into how institutions of higher education may start to market or develop a brand for themselves in an increasingly connected online world and market.

Along with MOOCs experts predict that general advances in technology will start to shape the method in which online courses are created, how users interact, and also how users

connect to the courses (Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010; Ferriman, 2013). In 2013 and moving forward we can expect the following trends to start to take over in online learning: gamification, mobile technology, MOOCs, HTML5, TinCan API, Social Networking Sites (SNS) and responsive web (Brady et al., 2010; Ferriman, 2013; Okoro, 2012;Veletsianos, Kimmons, & French, 2013). Gamification refers to the ability or use of learning games being incorporated into online platforms. In 2012 elearning gaming brought in $2 billion and is projected to bring in $7.4 billion in 2015 (Ferriman, 2013). Also there is a race to reach more mobile users because many technology users have made the shift from the traditional PC to some form of mobile connection device. This is such a major move that Apple has started to heavily invest in learning technologies and the software to make its products compatible with many of the existing eLearning platforms. Currently 71% of devices being used to access mobile technology are Apple products (Dunn 2013; Ferriman, 2013). Responsive web refers to the ability of all eLearning platforms to be accessed by a wide range of mobile devices. The move towards HTML5 and TinCan API refers to the course or platform designers as these types of software language and programming will allow for greater ease and flexibility in individual course design and use of additional features (Ferriman, 2013).

The growing interest in Social Networking Site (SNS) technologies in eLearning is due to the very impersonal design of Course Management Software (CMS) like Blackboard, Desire2Learn, and Moodle (Brady et al., 2010). Because research has illustrated that building a sense of community is part of the cornerstone to promote a sense of community in online learning, it is only natural that eLearning begins to incorporate SNS technology that is commonly used in the personal lives of most individuals (Rovai, 2002). Because SNS technology has been seen as an effective way to promote student engagement, increase

communication, and create a sense of community, we can fully expect to see this technology increasing in future online courses (Brady et al., 2010; Okoro, 2012; Veletsianos et al., 2013).

The advancements in online educational technology will be informed and focused on overcoming some of the shortfalls prior research has discovered. The questions that keep many from seeing online education as compatible or as effective as the traditional classroom may easily be addressed in the upcoming years with the incorporation and increased access provided to students and instructors (Casey, 2008).

Student Engagement

Student engagement theory originated with the work of Tyler (1932) and was expanded upon by Astin (1984, 1985), Pace (1984), and Kuh along with his colleagues (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Kuh, Whitt, & Strange 1989). Student engagement refers to the amount of time and energy students spend on activities in their academic experience (Jacobi et al., 1987; Kuh, 2003). These researchers used different language to describe the core of student engagement, but all their research basically states that students learn from what they do while in college or in the classroom. Years of research clearly demonstrate that student engagement is a core component that enables students to successfully complete postsecondary educational programs (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). The study of student engagement examines not the tools or skills students bring to their college experience, rather what students are exposed to in college that impacts their learning and completion such as environment, behaviors, and opportunities (Kuh et al., 2005).

While many of the above research studies examine the impact of extra curricula activities, many also show the powerful connection between the establishment of learning

communities and increased classroom engagement and academic success (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2002; Pike, 1999; Pike et al., 1997; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Therefore institutions of higher education need to be concerned with how one creates an engaging online environment in order to increase retention, completion, and learning outcomes of online students.

Kuh and others in their 2005 work provide an exceptional model for student engagement that includes three areas of focus: academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and active and collaborative learning all of which can be applied to an online learning environment. Academic challenge within the context of the model refers to "amount of time and effort students devote to (1) studying and other academic work, (2) preparing for class, (3) reading assigned and other books, and (4) writing" (p. 45). The second component of the model, student faculty interaction, examines interactions that occur both in and out side of the classroom environment discussing course material and research projects among other topics. The final component of the model refers to active and collaborative learning that combines the individual students use of learned materials as well as collaborating with colleagues to solve problems and accomplish designated tasks. This component combines classroom discussions as well as organized group assignments.

While the expansive model provided by Kuh et al. (2005) and the key work of others (Astin, 1993; Pascarell & Terenzini 1991, 2005) specifically focus on the traditional 4-year college learning experience, with slight modification these concepts can be transferred over to the distance learner.

Student Engagement from a Distance

Professors who have taught online classes understand that faculty plays a significant role in connecting the student with the college or university and also fellow classmates. Often the faculty person is the only interaction distance education students have with the college or university, and these interactions shape their connection or disconnection with the institution (Lester & Perini, 2010). This raises concern or alarm when studies have revealed that online students often receive inaccurate or incomplete feedback from online faculty (Bambara et al., 2009; Rovai, 2001). Because the faculty shapes and creates the online learning environment, it is also standard to expect that this impact the students willingness or ability to connect with one another and the instructor.

Robinson and Hullinger (2008) found that "online students reported higher levels of engagement than both freshman and senior on-campus students on each of the four benchmarks" (p.102). The four benchmarks that the study used are the same ones employed by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE): level of academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, active and collaborative learning, and enriching educational experience. There is a great deal of overlap in the four benchmarks used by Robinson and Hullinger to those established by Kuh's 2005 model for traditional classroom engagement. However it is important to note that this research is not items that students have identified as essential for engagement or productive learning environments. This is the response of students to their experiences in online classes in relations to these four identified benchmarked areas.

Academic challenge according to both Kuh (2003) and Robinson and Hullinger (2008) is determined by examining "whether students are putting forth enough academic effort, such as that spent studying, reading, writing, and preparing for class" (p.103). Measures of this

benchmark examined academic rigor through "type and quantity of homework, evaluations, and academic skills development" (p.103). The constant mission of higher education has been to develop the mental capacities of students and increase the student's ability to think critically (Barakzai & Fraser, 2005; Notar, Wilson, & Montgomery, 2005). In the Robinson and Hullinger research (2008) all five of the activities identified as those that increase academic challenge were found in online classes- memorization, analysis, synthesis, making judgments, and application (Barakzai & Fraser, 2005; Notar et al., 2005).

The second identified benchmark by the NSSE is that of creating an enriching educational environment for the students. This benchmark according to Kuh (2003) focuses on the development of the student to be able to work effectively with a diverse group of individuals. There is also a focus on the use of technology to help facilitate and enable rich collaboration among students. One of the many benefits students received from taking enriching online courses was their comfort with and ability to use technology that later could influence their ability to secure meaningful employment (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

The third identified benchmark used by NSSE to examine student engagement is that of student faculty interaction. This benchmark examines the nature and frequency of interactions students have with the faculty responsible for the identified course. Kuh (2003) identifies faculty interaction or contact as faculty feedback, discussion of grades, assignments, careers, ideas, and collaborative projects. Robinson and Hullinger (2008) found that faculty feedback was the more often reported type of interaction students reported. This is a vital type of feedback because online students can start to become isolated and detached without faculty guidance (Schwartz & White, 2000). However the study also found that there were a modest 56% of students reporting

interaction with faculty on readings and class notes, which is identified as an area of growth for online educators (Robinson & Hullinger 2008).

Expanding on the importance Kuh (2005) placed on student and faculty interaction we must also examine student-to-student interaction. Because distance education students do not enter physical classrooms and have less opportunities to engage in casual conversations, attention needs to be placed on how collaborative learning is accomplished, as this is the third identified NSSE benchmark. According to Kuh (2003) active and collaborative learning is the student's effort to contribute to class discussions, interact and work with other students, as well as engage in other class activities. Several studies have illustrated that collaboration is key to developing a learning focused online class (eg Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Weiss, Knowlton, & Speck, 2000). Because many students in distance education classes do not reach out or interact with each other on their own (Bambara et al., 2009), it is important that we examine how these types of interactions are structured and how students respond to the assignments. When students are not engaged in conversations with their peers, they are not exposed to other viewpoints or issues regarding a concept (Lester & Perini, 2010). Enabling students to discuss and engage with other students falls on the shoulders of the faculty and course design. When distance education students were able to reach out and encounter different viewpoints, they were at an increase to have positive multicultural experiences (Rovai et al., 2008). Because the online classroom as been described as a learning community by many researchers, it is important that we examine current literature and research associated with learning communities and expectations of the student and the faculty to create strong and vibrant learning communities in order to address and increase student engagement in online courses. (Barker, 2002; Benbunan-Fich, Hiltz, & Harasim, 2005; Dede, 2000).

Student Motivation for Online Courses

Literature in distance education (DE) holds that many undergraduate college students who access online or other distance learning models largely consisted of nontraditional students (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). The nontraditional students or adult learners are those students who are over the age of 25 who are returning to school, students working full-time jobs, and/or students with a family returning to college. Nontraditional student enrollment accounts for a large proportion of enrollment in online courses, which is currently growing at a rate faster than total college-course enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Howell et al., 2003). However there is an increase in traditional undergraduate students who are also taking online courses (Bejerano, 2008; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2011).

Because historically nontraditional students were thought to seek out online courses due to flexibility and inability to make face-to-face meeting times, it has been held that traditional undergraduate students are reaching to online learning for some very different reasons. Many researchers hold that traditional college students are seeking out online courses due to their familiarity and comfort with the technology used to deliver these types of courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Bejerano, 2008; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2011). Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011) state that students who prefer to communicate using technology in their daily lives will gravitate more towards online courses due to the perceived increase in anonymity. The types of web 2.0 technologies students interact with on a daily basis include: social networking sites, blogs, video streaming, and file sharing that are closely related to the types of platforms used to deliver online courses. Other researchers have identified that both traditional and adult learners select online courses due to their flexibility, increased access

to materials, course efficiency, and ability to interact with others openly without fear of embarrassment (Bathe, 2001; O'Lawrence, 2006).

Other factors that may impact a student's motivation and desire to enroll in an online course could be related to the shift in how online degrees are viewed. There is a rising level of acceptance and awareness for various online degree programs offered at traditional public and private universities (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Bejerano, 2008).

Mann and Henneberry (2012) identified some trends in types of students both traditional and nontraditional that are more inclined to register for online courses. One of their significant findings related to how the students major affected the student's willingness to take online courses. The students Mann and Henneberry classified as soft-applied nonlife majors [e.g. accounting, economics, finance, management, and marketing majors] were more likely to register for online courses that those classified as hard-applied nonlife [engineering majors] and soft-applied life [communications, English, history, philosophy, and art majors].

Once enrolled in an online course students not only have to learn the course material but they must also begin to learn how to navigate the online course platform, which usually requires some added technological skill. For students who are confident and comfortable using technology this may not be a huge hurdle, but for students who have not used technology as frequently, this is an added stress. Due to the differences between online learning and face-to-face learning many students who are successful in the traditional classroom are not equally as successful in an online class (Cheung & Kan, 2002; Tucker, 2001). Wojciechowski and Palmer (2005) identified three factors that could be connected to student success or lack thereof in one specific online course over a 3-year period: Grade point average [GPA], orientation, and previous number of withdrawals. Students with higher GPA were reported to maintain a higher

GPA through the online course as well as students who attended an orientation meeting for the online course reported higher completion and success rates than those students who did not attend the orientation. The third important factor was that students who had previous withdrawn from other classes were at an increased risk of withdrawing from the course or not completing the course successfully. Other researchers have also identified skills that students may need to have in order to be successful in an online course: ability to develop a new vocabulary, ability to develop new or revised learning practices, and ability to exercise patience with the instructor, coursework, delivery system, and one's own computer (Eastmond, 1995; Gibbson, 1998; Kearsley, 2000). While all students will bring their own cultural experiences and learning goals, research illustrates that online students in order to be successful also need to be self-directed, motivated, organized, and independent and take responsibility for their learning (Bates, 2000).

Learning Communities

In general a learning community as been defined as a "cohort of students who take two or more courses together" (Pike et al., 2011, p.301). Learning communities were introduced to academia in the late 1980s and early 1990s with little excitement but since have become correlated as having a positive impact on the educational experiences of students in regards to learning and completion of academic material (Kuh, 2008). Also a growing body of research suggests positive relationships between participation in learning communities, higher educational outcomes, and higher levels of student engagement (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pike 1999, 2002; Pike et al. 1997). Past research on learning communities has found that membership in a learning community has been linked to better grades in college (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Knight, 2003; Pike et al., 2011; Pike et al., 1997), satisfaction with college (Baker & Pomerantz, 2000; Zhao &

Kuh, 2004), persistence and graduation rates (Knight, 2003; Pike et al., 1997), and desired learning outcome (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pike, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Research also exist that shows positive relationship between student achievement and rating of the NSSE benchmarks when enrolled in a learning community. There are increased reports of faculty-student interaction (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pike et al., 2011;Pike, 1999; Pike et al., 1997; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), collaboration and interaction with peers (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pike, 1999; Pike et al., 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), and time spent on academic work and inquiry (Inkelas et al., 2007; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Research is emerging that suggests that the overall impact of learning community participation could differ according the individual student, learning community characteristics, and institution (Pike et al., 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). However there is overwhelming research that should focus institutional administrators to the formation of learning communities in their online degree programs as a whole or for faculty to start to creating a learning community environment in their individual classrooms.

Positioning Theory

Positioning theory highlights and attempts to understand human interaction through the evolution of storylines that we are constantly creating for ourselves. Positioning theory combines cognitive and social psychology in order to help us understand and describe how individuals interact through conversation or speech acts (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). These cognitive processes are instrumental in supporting the actions individuals participate in by fixating on the meaning assigned in the specific moment and situation (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). Cognitive psychology is used in the application of explanations drawing not only from formal rule of reasoning but also examining the meaning that individuals discern from

and assign to the actions of others (Harré et al., 2009). According to positioning theory conversations are considered tri-polar in that they are comprised of positions, storylines, and relatively determined speech-acts (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

At its core positioning theory is concerned with four interconnected aspects of interpersonal encounters and how they shape our daily lives

1. Rights and duties are distributed among people in changing patterns as they engage in performing particular kinds of actions.
2. These patterns are themselves the product of higher-order acts of positioning through which rights and duties to ascribe or resist positioning are distributed.
3. Such actions are the meaningful components of story-lines. Any encounter might develop along more than one story-line, and support more than one story-line evolving simultaneously.
4. The meanings of people's actions are social acts. The illocutionary force of any human action, if it has one as interpreted by the local community, determines its place in a story-line and is mutually thereby determined. Any action might carry one or more such meanings. (Harré et al., 2009,pp.7-8)

The key in positioning theory is that one may position himself or herself or be positioned by others involved in the social interaction. The creation of positions "help to address the more fluid subtleties of power and duty that occur through various communication acts "(Dennen, 2011, pp.528). An example of this could be how an instructor begins the course with a rigidly defined position but throughout the course that position may be renegotiated. For example starting off the course strict and highly structured and later allowing more flexibility within the context of the class. However it is somewhat impossible to escape some assigned roles within a

classroom setting due to the inherent power and years of cultural context of the classroom structure. Some examples of this are that the instructor is paid to assess learners and is seen as a subject matter expert. These roles-based expectations according to some researchers may serve as the starting point for the positioning exchange (Davies & Harré, 1999). Simply stated, once the individuals who are assigned a given role begin to interact, their positions may deviate from expected roles. While the instructor is seen as a subject matter expert, he or she may start to position himself or herself as a colearner, and some students due to professional and personal experience may start to position themselves in one topic area as more of an expert.

Positioning Theory and Education

While positioning theory has been largely used in social science and psychological studies, there does exist some current research applying positioning theory to classroom settings. These educational studies have used positioning theory to examine various aspects of interpersonal interactions between teacher and student (Given, 2002; Linehan & McCarthy, 2000), peers (Given, 2002), researcher-participant (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001), and student teacher- student (Cook-Sather & Young, 2007). Davies and Hunt (1994) examined how teachers limit the positions available to students based upon preconceptions of what successful students "look" like. Each of these studies was situated within the context of a traditional face-to-face classroom. Ritchie (2002) and Ritchie and Rigano (2001) argue that positioning theory is a useful tool in understanding and illustrating how individuals in a classroom who occupy different social and political locations within the classroom experience positioning practices differently.

Dennen (2007) first applied positioning theory to an online course environment importantly noting that while discussion boards are more reflective and lack the fluid exchange

that face-to-face discussions hold, positioning theory could still effectively describe how students and faculty interact in an online setting. Later Dennen (2011) examined student perceptions of instructors and student engagement by applying positioning theory. The end result of this study was that more research in the use of positioning theory to educate and empower instructors to properly position and reposition themselves and students throughout a course was needed.

Positioning Theory and Online Classrooms

The use of positioning theory can help us explain why some instructors' presence develops differently from others. For example, why when examining instructors' interaction in the same course, one instructor is seen as more involved but both instructors are actually present the same amount of time in the course (Dennen, 2011). According to Dennen presence then becomes not only a matter of how an instructor positions herself or himself but also how the learners position her or him. For example, one student may expect an instructor to offer immediate feedback on discussion post, while another student may expect the instructor to be less active in the forums. Given the same instructor but different assigned positions by the student one can see how the student expecting feedback will position the instructor as engaged while the student not expecting feedback will position the same instructor as overbearing or controlling. When the expectations of the leaner and the actions of the instructor do not match, some form of presence negotiation will be necessary to resolve the breech.

In order to examine this through an understanding of the student we must examine the context that students may bring to the online classroom (Dennen, 2011). We must also understand the context of the classroom itself as this is structured through the instructor's paradigm as it relates to education, learning, and the material. Research holds that student

context possess a great deal of influence over which skills students will or will not use when encountering unfamiliar classroom setting and situations (Eastmond, 1995; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robbins, & Shoemaker, 2000; Richardson & Turner, 2000). Because many students perceive they know how to interact in a traditional classroom, many will carry these perceptions, mindsets, and attitudes into the online classroom (Eastmond, 1995).

Students tend to engage in membership categorization or role assignment upon meeting an instructor. They begin to assign expectations of the instructor's interactions based not on their categorization as an instructor but on other categorizations such as gender, age, and cultural stereotypes (van Langenhove & Harré, 1994). Members of an online class begin to develop impressions of each other and of the instructor based on word choices (Dennen, 2007), colors, and fonts used in opening post. How students perceive their instructor influences their overall learning experience and can have an impact on motivation, communication, and effort.

Two key elements to asynchronous courses in the realm of positioning theory are instructional design and facilitation (Dennen, 2011). Instructional design helps the instructor create the parameters in which learners will function within- content, timing, assessments, assignments, and areas for interaction. Yet in many institutions one particular course template maybe used throughout many classes, of course with appropriate adjustments to content. Facilitation is quite the opposite in that it is highly individualized and relies on the skills of the instructor. The instruction design represents a proactive part of the learning activity; the facilitation represents a reactive part as this will be shaped through student and instructor interaction.

Facilitation for any online class contains three key elements in regards to positioning theory role, presence, and identity (Dennen, 2011) Role in this sense has been discussed in terms

of class function is the class technical, academic, social, or managerial (Aston et al., 2001; Berge, 1995). Role has also been used to reference one's pedagogical approaches such as guide verses sage or facilitator verses instructor (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003, 2007). The experience level of the instructor will also influence if the instructor is willing to actively engage or negotiate student expectations in the online environment (De Laat et al., 2007). Students are able to detect when an instructor is inexperienced with the medium (Choy et al., 2003), and this inexperience has a strong correlation to past influences and the development of the online instructor's sense of both role and identity (Salmon, 2002b).

Presence relates to one's perceived level of participation and impact in the online course. A simple way to look at presence is through asking the question: Do students feel the instructor is involved (Anderson, 2009)? Whether the instructor's presence is tacit or overt research shows that instructor presence is believed to impact not only the students' perceptions of online learning but also their participation (Ou et al., 2004), which prior engagement research links directly to student success (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pike, 1999; Pike et al., 1997, 2011; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In order to be present the instructor must be actively engaged in posting because according to Riva (2003) "If a user writes nothing he/she effectively ceases to exist" (p.583). Because we cannot tell when someone is reading or reflecting on our material in an online classroom without a post, the individual essentially falls off the map. Because this in not a traditional classroom where you can see heads nod and reflective gazes as students ponder information, posting serves this purpose. The same is true for the instructor- one must be posting and giving feedback in order for the students to see the reaction from their posted material.

Online courses tend to become social learning spaces where we rely heavily on the discussion based format of learning. This is important to note because individual identities play

an important role in how knowledge is shared, negotiated, and produced in online classrooms (Tsai et al., 2008). We have to understand that identity in this sense is not static but constantly negotiated as topics and interactions shift throughout the course (De Fina, 2006). Depending on the context of the material an individual may decide to present a different side of himself or herself that often shifts identity (Holmes, 2006). In an educational context the identity of instructor and student are related and are dominantly applied categories with social norms somewhat in place. Thus instructor identity is somewhat pre-established but is often changed through interactions and expectations with and from students.

Collectively these three interrelated components: role, presence and identity, influence how students perceive instructors and overall course effectiveness through the lens of positioning theory. The construction of these three components and development of each perception occur through dialog or discourse occurring via the instructor and the student where they are constantly positioning themselves and others within the class. Davies and Harré (1990) hold that identity, both the sense of self and of others, is developed through discourse. Discourse allows the researcher to examine and construct models for how language impacts meaning (Wooffitt, 2005). Thus positioning theory is a logical framework to examine the discursive nature of identity in online classroom settings. In the classroom context identity is tied closely to knowledge (who is right or wrong) and who holds power (who is in charge), which permeates most interactions in a classroom setting (Dennen, 2011).

Perspectives on Faculty

Prior to actually teaching an online course many faculty members predict dissatisfaction or the inability to convey the same material through and online course as they would in a face-to-

face course (McLawhon & Cutright, 2012). Bean (2005) identified the nine themes of a college, one of which he identified as academics. Bean's understanding of a faculty member was the individual who delivers the college's product. Bean wrote that, "a faculty member presents substantive material in a course in a way that promotes or does not promote students to be socialized to academic values and choose a particular major" (p.225). Bean held that the quality of the interaction between faculty and student would contribute directly to the student's affinity towards the institution and his or her overall learning, thus addressing the theme of academics that should be one of the nine goals of a college or university.

Student learning in an online environment is best served and enhanced by using a constructivist theory and problem-based pedagogy (Billings, 2007). Because novice educators are not familiar with how to translate this to an online course, they often attempt to translate their traditional campus lectures to online course offerings without faculty mentorships (Vitale, 2010).

Researchers advocate that faculty development in regards to online courses is part of a professional career journey that is best served through the involvement of faculty mentors (Billings & Kowalski, 2008). This enables seasoned online instructors to guide and offer feedback to the novice online instructor by sharing best practices and confidence boosting techniques. While lecturing is an important medium for the transfer of knowledge, this approach does not always lend itself to dynamic online learning. This strategy should not dominate the online course due to increased isolation and dropout rates (Fisher, 2009). The key for faculty in online courses is to build community, collaborative learning environments, and self-directed student learning spaces (Vitale, 2010). This requires the faculty to shift from the "sage on the stage" paradigm to the "guide on the side" (Ryan, Hodson-Carlton, & Ali, 2004).

Faculty and Discussion Forums

The instructor is responsible for creating a shared space that allows the individual student and the class as a whole to become engaged in the material. Thus communication and interaction between faculty and students is a cornerstone no matter the teaching venue. Creating opportunities for student-faculty interaction outside of the classroom increases student motivation and offers benefits to distance education programs (Levine, 2005). One strategy that all online instructors should employee within the first week of class is the use of an icebreaker (DeSilets & Dickerson, 2008). Below are some examples of icebreakers:

- Encourage all students to post a personal introduction during the first week of class. Include information about online course experiences, and encourage everyone to read through them. Create a threaded discussion for this activity it could be titled "Meet and Greet."
- Ask Students to think of one word that best describes them and their life (or relate this to the course), or ask them how they want this learning community to know them, and include a brief explanation. Instruct students to find and respond to another student whose words resonate with them. This is especially useful in the online course includes group work and students must find group partners.
- Instruct students to describe in detail the view from a favorite window. Ask them to weave some autobiographical information into their "view." Ask students to read all of the postings and respond to one-two peer postings with an explanation as to why they would like to trade places with the other student for a day.
- Create an icebreaker activity during the first week of class to help new distance learning students (or any distance learning student) to begin successful course

navigation. Encourage students to find and read important course documents, such as the syllabus. (Vitale, 2010, p552).

As the above examples illustrate, the discussion forums are very important to create that sense of community within the classroom. The discussion forums are also the place where the instructor becomes the "guide on the side" (Ryan et al., 2004) by ensuring the conversations are relevant and focused. The instructor must actively monitor the discussion threads to ensure that posts are reflecting the identified learning strategies of the course. The below are tips and best practices to assist novice faculty in directing the focus of discussion threads:

- Redirect divergent dialogue to productive discussion points by citing other students' comments.
- Connect the divergent thoughts by mentioning how these ideas can relate to the discussion thread through the use of alternative perspectives.
- Summarize conversations.
- Consider modeling responses and discussion techniques to clarify expectations for discussions. Example "Lets concentrate on the second part of this week's question and how these issues can be applied to public speaking."
- Make certain that threaded discussion assignments clearly relate to the topic, are essential to help students achieve identified learning goals (Vitale, 2010, p.553).

After establishing the expected behavior and types of posts within the discussion forum, instructors are also faced with the task of creating critical thinking and learning experiences within the discussion forum. This can be challenging as some students may withdraw from the class making their required post but not partaking in the benefit of exploring topics and themes

deeper. The following are some tips for instructors to increase the amount of thought and energy spent on the discussion topic in online courses:

- Gently question assumptions, while pushing thinking, especially if posts are anecdotal and demonstration of reference-based reading or reflective rationale is expected.
- Investigate and explore ambiguous or unclear responses by asking for more student elaboration on the topic or relevant examples.
- Respectfully challenge one-sided student opinions by welcoming the use of alternative viewpoints. Consider an impromptu debate.
- Always be ready to clarify a topic for student by offering examples.
- Use private responses and communication to encourage or motivate students.
- Let students lead the discussions by summarizing the previous week's responses or even generate a new discussion question (Vitale, 2010, p.553).

It is important that instructors realize the vital role they play in the creation of and sustainment of engaging online courses (Palloff & Pratt, 2005).

Conclusions

As higher education makes the shift from face-to-face teaching to more web based courses, it is important that we examine and establish best practices for successful online courses. Research has demonstrated the increased demand and enrollment in online courses across many private and public universities in the United States (Bathe, 2001). The reasons for this increase can be summed up as an interconnected relationship between the below three variables

1. Shift in strategy by higher education institutions to meet the increased student demand by increasing online course offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2010).
2. Demand by nontraditional students for access to higher education that has been driven by the labor market (Howell et al., 2003; Oblinger et al., 2001).
3. Impact of Web 2.0 technologies on communication and learning preferences of traditional students (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2011).

Research on both student and instructor perceptions through the application of positioning theory will add to the lacking literature in this area. As the educational world increasingly shifts to a more connected online community, it is imperative that we understand the story of how students and faculty become engaged within the context of an online course.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate online instructors' and students' perceptions of engaging online behavior and course structure. Specifically, this researcher assessed students' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of a course, the instructors' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of the course, the role students' demographic and program of study factor into online engagement, and the instructors' prior exposure and experience with online courses factor into creating an effective online course design. The results of this study were examined using positioning theory. The study used a combination of ANOVA, Independent samples *t* tests, and correlation to determine the relationships and significance of identified variables in student engagement. This chapter provides a description of the research design, population, data collection procedure, research questions and null hypotheses, data analysis procedures, and a summary of the chapter. Quantitative research designs are positivist in nature focusing on objective analyses of a phenomenon. Research design is one of the most important elements of a successful study; it promotes probable conclusions, describes the constructs for the study, and provides validity to the research questions (McMillian & Schumacher, 2006). Nonexperimental design allows for the description of phenomena that have occurred and examines relationships that exist without direct manipulation of the conditions or variables. For the purpose of this study the quantitative research design was placed into the subclassification of nonexperimental.

Researchers employee the quantitative method for testing objective theories through examining the relationships among desired variables (Creswell, 2009). This nonexperimental

design used a survey with a five-point Likert-type scale and various demographic questions to evaluate student and instructor perceptions regarding engagement in online courses. Independent sample *t* test, ANOVAs, and correlations were used to examine the relationships between the identified variables.

Research Questions and Null Hypotheses

This study examines instructor and student perceptions of online courses through the lens of positioning theory guided by the following questions.

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference in perceived engagement among students who post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course?

Ho1: There is no significant difference in perceived engagement among students who post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course.

Research Question 2: Is there a significant difference in instructors' perception of student engagement between when instructors post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course?

Ho2: There is no significant difference in perceived engagement by instructors when instructors post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course.

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in the degree of perceived student engagement as compared according to class standing?

Ho3: There is no significant difference in perceived student engagement as compared according to class standing.

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference in the degree of perceived student engagement based on their academic discipline?

Ho4: There is no significant difference in the degree of perceived student engagement based on academic discipline.

Research Question 5: Is there a difference in the degree of perceived student engagement between males and females?

Ho5: There is no significant difference in perceived student engagement between males and females.

Research Question 6: Is there a significant relationship between GPA and perceived student engagement?

Ho6: There is no significant relationship between perceived student engagement and student GPA?

Research Question 7: Is there a significant relationship between age and degree of perceived student engagement?

Ho7: There is no significant relationship between perceived student engagement and student age.

Research Question 8: Is there a significant difference between the degree of perceived student engagement between traditional and nontraditional students?

Ho8: There is no significant difference in perceived student engagement and student status as traditional or nontraditional student?

Research Question 9: Is there a significant relationship between instructor's years of online experience and instructor's perception of student engagement?

Ho9: There is no significant difference in perceived student engagement by instructor's years of online experience.

Research Question 10: Is there a significant difference in instructor's perception of student engagement based on instructors' academic discipline?

Ho10: There is no significant difference in instructor's perception of student engagement based on instructors' academic discipline.

Population

The population of this study consisted of all the undergraduate and graduate students and instructors from a single institution in Northeast Tennessee. The institution is a public 4-year institution with approximately 14,000 students. The institution offers professional programs, plus arts and sciences with some graduate programs (Carnegie Foundation, n.d). Instructors from the institution will be selected who had taught or taken at least one online course while at the college. These students and instructors came from a variety of academic backgrounds in the fine arts, humanities, social sciences, education, natural sciences, and technical fields. The population is also diverse in regards to sex, national origin, and age.

Instrumentation

This research study used two surveys, one targeted to the student population and the other to the instructor population. Both surveys were used to collect information relevant to the individuals' perceptions regarding their effectiveness in an online course and that of the other party either the student or the instructor through the use of 5-point Likert scale type questions with a 1 being strongly agree and a 5 being strongly disagree. Dissertation committee members, IRB members, and then the Vice Provost of Academic Affairs and Undergraduate Education first examined the surveys. During these evaluations wording and question formatting were discussed

to ensure that questions were designed to gather the information intended. After this initial review two students and two faculty were asked to review the survey before sending out the survey to the student and faculty populations. The student survey was used to collect additional qualitative data through nominal measurement that will enable statistical comparisons by sex, class standing, or academic major, and student engagement. The student survey was also used to collect interval-ratio data for the same purpose including GPA, numbers of postings, or age of the student. The student survey consisted of 15 questions: nine single choice and six 5-point Likert scale questions. The instructor survey was composed of the same types of questions with a slightly different focus. The instructor survey data were collected that focused on nominal measure of academic discipline and interval-ratio data to explore years of teaching experience, types of discussion forums, and number of postings. The instructor survey consisted of 16 questions; seven single choice questions and nine 5-point Likert scale questions. Each survey was calculated to take under 15 minutes to complete. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

Data Collection

Prior to the beginning of this research project, permission to conduct research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of East Tennessee State University. A survey instrument with demographic questions for students, demographic questions for instructors, questions for students regarding perceptions of engagement and posting frequency as well as questions for instructors related to online experience, perceptions of engagement, and posting frequency was developed and distributed via Survey Monkey, an online survey service. The surveys were sent to the office of the Vice Provost who later distributed the surveys through

its stored email list service. The survey was distributed in the early portion of the Fall 2013 semester. Participants were advised that all responses were confidential and the demographic information collected did not identify the participants in the study.

Data Analysis

Data from the survey instrument were analyzed through a nonexperimental quantitative methodology. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 18.0 data analysis software was used for all data analysis procedures in this study. The data sources that were analyzed included a survey with Likert-type scale and demographic information gathered.

Each research questions had a corresponding null hypothesis. Data were broken down into two large groupings with surveys gathered from instructors and surveys gathered from online students. The two were analyzed separately to find any significance or relationships between the identified variables. An ANOVA was conducted using *SPSS* for research questions 1-4 and research question 10. Research questions 1 and 2 examined how student and faculty posting quantity related to perceived student engagement. Research questions 3 and 4 examined if student class standing and academic discipline was connected to perceived student engagement respectively. Research question 10 examined if instructor's academic discipline was related to the instructor's perception of student engagement. An Independent Samples *t* test was conducted in *SPSS* for questions 5, 7, and 8. Research question 5 examined the degree of difference between perceived student engagement and sex (male and female). Research question 7 examined if a relationship exist between perceived student engagement and age. Research question 8 examined the degree of difference between perceived student engagement and student identification as traditional or nontraditional. Pearson *r* bivariate correlation test were used for

questions 6 and 9. Research question 6 asked if there was a relationship between perceived student engagement and GPA. Research question 9 examined if a relationship exist between perceived student engagement and an instructors years of online experience. After determining the statistical outcomes, positioning theory was used to explain the significance of each finding in regards to the created atmosphere and perceptions both student and instructors carry into the online classroom. All data were analyzed at the .05 level of significance.

Summary

This study examined relationships and perceptions of student engagement from students and instructors through the lens of positioning theory. All student and instructors who have taught or taken at least one online course were solicited to participate in the survey.

Chapter 3 reported the procedures and methods for conducting the study. After a brief introduction, a description of the research design, selection of the population, data collection procedures, research questions and null hypotheses, and the data analysis procedures were defined.

Findings of the data analyses are presented in Chapter 4. A summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research are presented in Chapter 5

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to investigate online instructors' and students' perceptions of engaging online behavior and course structure through the lens of positioning theory. Specifically, this researcher assessed students' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of a course, the instructors' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of the course, the role students' demographic and program of study factor into online engagement, and the instructors' prior exposure and experience with online courses factor into creating an effective online course design. Participants of this study consisted of all the undergraduate and graduate students from a single institution in Northeast Tennessee who have taken at least one online course while at the college.

In this chapter data are presented and analyzed to answer the 10 research questions and 10 null hypotheses. Data were analyzed from 14 survey questions collected from two separate surveys. One survey was sent specifically to instructors and the other survey was sent specifically to students. Two of the questions that measured engagement and perceptions of faculty posting were taken on a 5-point Likert type scale. The remaining questions consisted of demographic data, and interval and ratio data. Participants were given the option to add some additional information on questions regarding sex and discipline. Those data were not analyzed. Data were retrieved following the completion of a survey administered through an online survey service. Each survey was distributed once; 817 participants were recruited for the survey and 571 participants responded. Participants were advised that all responses were confidential and the demographic information collected did not identify the participants in the study.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference in perceived student engagement among students who post in the top third, middle third, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course?

Ho1: There is no significant difference in engagement among students who post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course.

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the relationship between perceived student engagement and students who post in the top third, middle third, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of a course. The independent variable, student postings, included three levels: top third, middle third, and bottom third. The dependent variable was the student's reported level of perceived engagement. The ANOVA was significant, $F(3, 391) = 12.39$, $p < .001$, $N = 392$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The strength of relationship between the number of student postings and the perceived level of student engagement as assessed by η^2 was strong, with the student number of postings accounting for 8.7% of the variance of the dependent variable. Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means. Because the variances among the three groups ranged from .19 to .25, variances were assumed to be homogenous. The Tukey HSD procedure was used to control for Type I error across the pairwise comparisons. All groups were found to be significantly different from all others ($p < .05$): Bottom third (M= 1.76, SD = .439) and Middle third (M= 1.53, SD = .50), and Bottom third (M=1.76, SD = .439), and Top third (M= 1.31, SD = .467), and Middle third (M=1.53, SD= .50) and Top third (M= 1.31, SD= .467). In other words, where students rank in the number of posting in the first 2 weeks of an online class top, middle, or third is statistically significant to how students perceived and reported their level of

engagement. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the three posting groups (top *n*= 117, middle *n*=187, and bottom *n*=88) and level of reported engagement. With one representing students who reported higher levels of perceived engagement and five representing students who reported lower levels of perceived engagement.

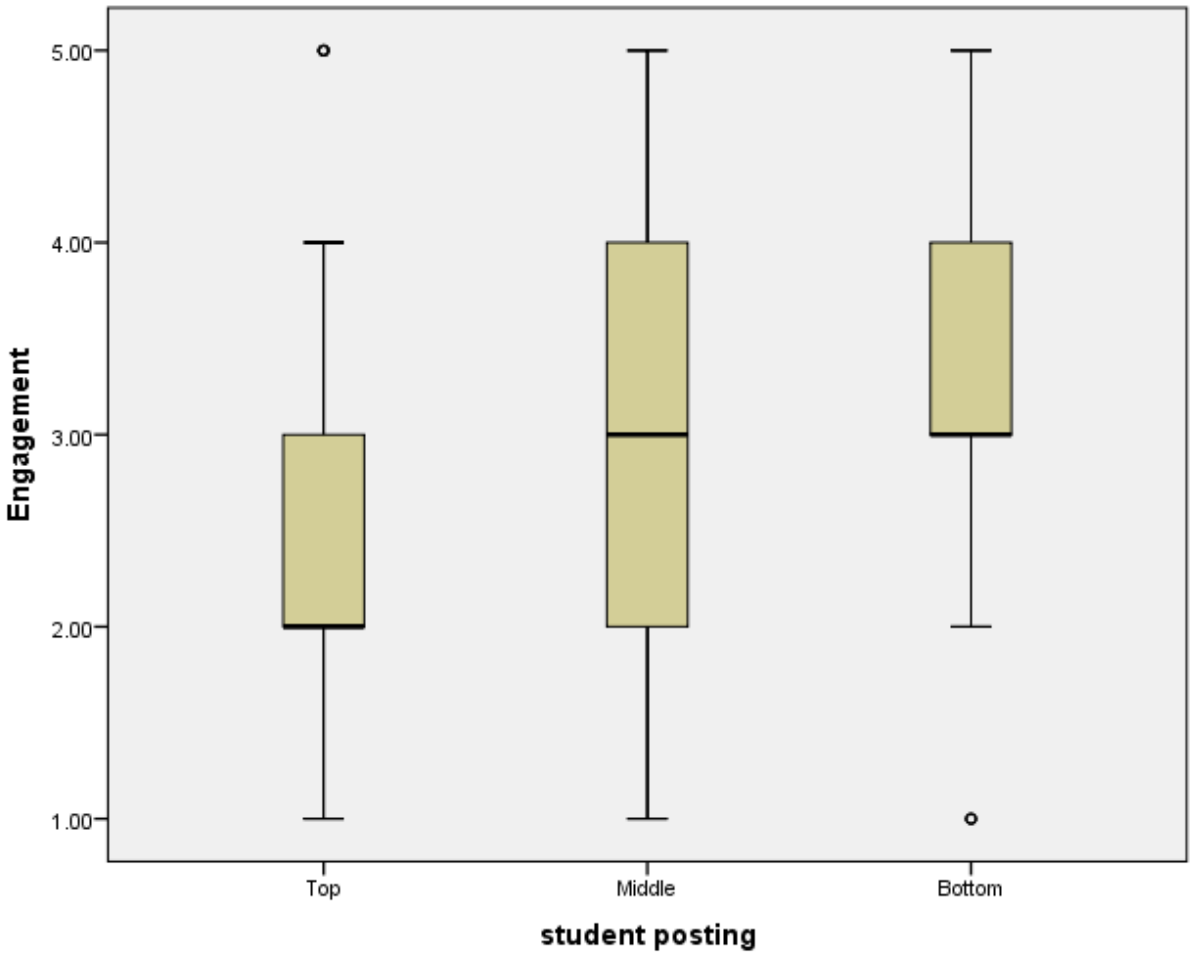

Figure 1. Student posting and perceived engagement. Engagement rankings with 1 = strongly agree with perception of student engagement and 5= strongly disagree with perception of student engagement. Distribution of participants by group top *n*= 117, middle *n*=187, and bottom *n*=88. Outliers have been identified using SPSS guideline greater or less than 1.5 X the 50th percentile. Median of sample is represented for each category.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2: Is there a significant difference in instructors' perception of student engagement between when instructors post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course?

Ho2: There is no significant difference in instructors' perception of student engagement between students when instructors post in the top third, middle, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of the course.

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the relationship between perceived student engagement and instructors who post in the top third, middle third, and lower third in frequency during the first 2 weeks of a course. The independent variable, instructor postings, included three levels: top third, middle third, and bottom third. The dependent variable was the instructors reported level of perceived student engagement. The ANOVA was significant, $F(2, 69) = 10.10$, $p < .001$, $N = 72$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The strength of relationship between the number of student postings and the perceived level of student engagement as assessed by η^2 was strong, with the faculty number of postings accounting for 2.3% of the variance of the dependent variable.

Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means. Because the variances among the three groups ranged from .55 to .83, variances were assumed to be homogenous. The Tukey HSD procedure was used to control for Type I error across the pairwise comparisons. All groups were found to be significantly different from all others ($p < .05$): Bottom third (M= 2.88, SD = .908) and Middle third (M= 2.04, SD = .734), and Bottom third (M=2.88, SD = .908), and Top third (M= 1.85, SD = .910), and Middle third (M=2.04, SD= .734), and Top third (M= 1.85, SD= .910). In other words where instructors rank in the number

of posting in the first 2 weeks of class top, middle, or third is statistically significant to how instructors perceive students' engagement within their courses. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the three groups. The frequency report within each group represents the number of participants who designated a 1 (top third *n*=21), 2 (middle third *n*=25), and 3 (bottom third *n*=26) on the online survey. For engagement one represents students who reported higher levels of perceived engagement and five represents students who reported lower levels of perceived engagement.

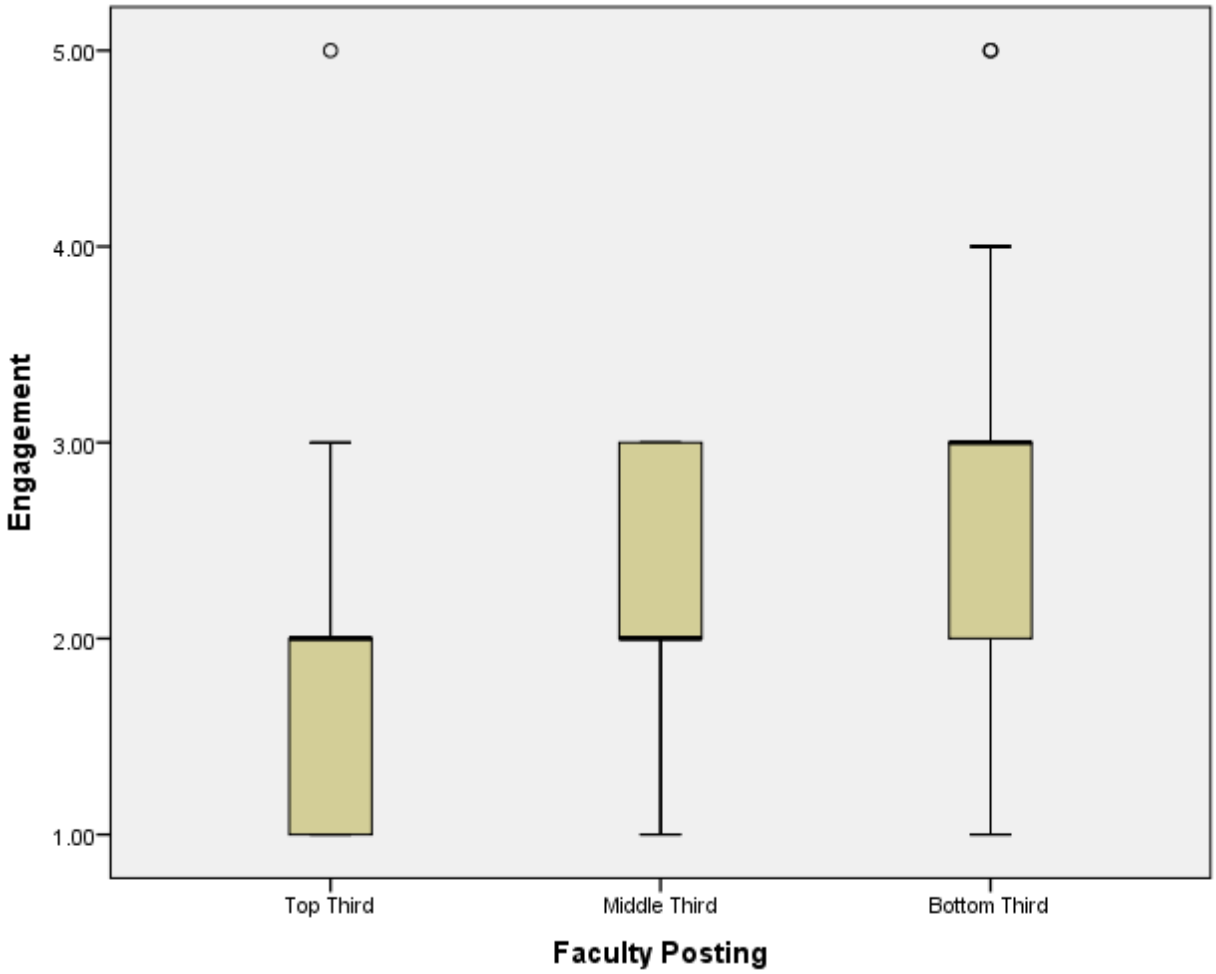

Figure 2. Faculty posting and perceptions of student engagement. Engagement rankings with 1 = strongly agree with perception of student engagement and 5= strongly disagree with perception of student engagement. Distribution of participants by group top *n*= 21, middle *n*=25, and bottom

n=26. Outliers have been identified using SPSS guideline greater or less than 1.5 X the 50th percentile. Median of sample is represented for each category.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference in the degree of perceived student engagement as compared according to class standing?

Ho3: There is no significant difference in perceived student engagement as compared according to class standing.

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the relationship between perceived student engagement and student class standing. The independent variable, student class standing, included five levels: Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, and Graduate. The dependent variable was the students reported level of perceived student engagement. The ANOVA was significant, $F(4, 484) = 3.18$, $p = .014$, $N = 392$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The strength of relationship between the student class standing and the perceived level of student engagement as assessed by η^2 was strong, with the student class standing accounting for 2.6% of the variance of the dependent variable.

Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means. Because the variances among the three groups ranged from 1.02 to .1.28, variances were assumed to be homogenous. The Tukey HSD procedure was used to control for Type I error across the pairwise comparisons. The following groups were found to be significantly different from each other ($p < .05$): Freshman (M= 3.08, SD = 1.1) and Sophomore (M= 2.5, SD = 1.01), Freshman (M= 3.08, SD = 1.1) and Juniors (M= 2.58, SD = 1.11), and Freshman (M= 3.08, SD= 1.1) and Graduate (M= 2.65, SD= 1.13). Table 1 is an illustration of the pairwise data results.

Table 1

Means, SD, & Confidence Intervals Between Class Standing & Student Engagement

Class Standing	*M*	*SD*	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate
Freshman *n*=71	3.08	1.09		.05 to 1.12*	.02 to .99*	-.17 to .99	.01 to .87*
Sophomore *n*=56	2.5	1.01			-.60 to .44	-.79 to .20*	-.61 to .32
Junior *n*=85	2.58	1.11				-.65 to .21	-.47 to .33
Senior *n*=113	2.8	1.1					-.22 to .52
Graduate *n*=164	2.65	1.13					

*indicates a significance difference

In other words student class standing is statistically significant to how students perceive engagement within their online courses. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the three groups. The frequency report within each group represents the number of participants who designated a 1 (Freshman *n*=71), 2 (Sophomore *n*=56), 3 (Junior *n*=85), 4 (Senior *n*=113), and 5 (Graduate *n*=164) on the online survey. For engagement one represents students who reported higher levels of perceived engagement and five represents students who reported lower levels of perceived engagement.

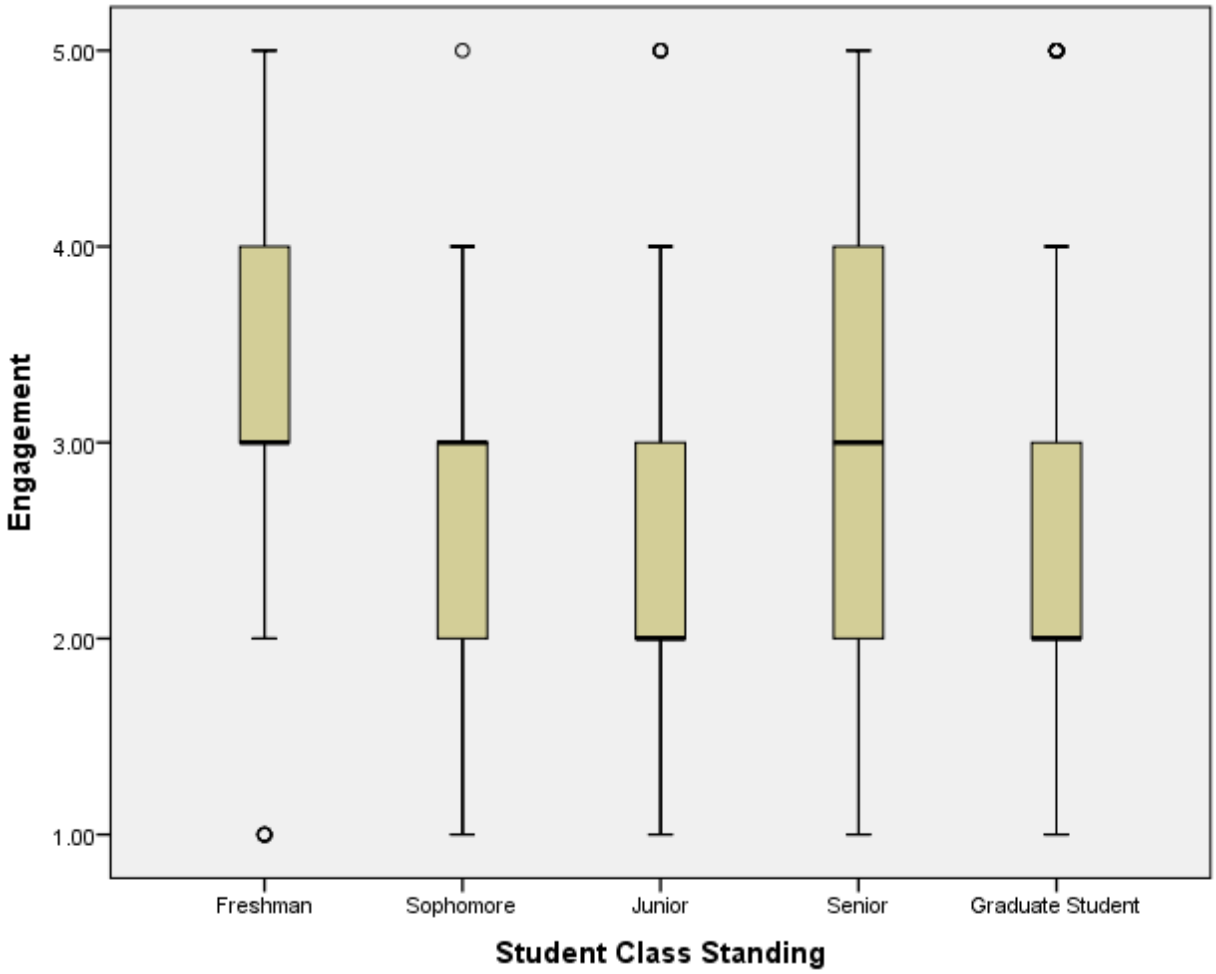

Figure 3. Student class standing and perceived student engagement. Engagement rankings with 1 = strongly agree with perception of student engagement and 5= strongly disagree with perception of student engagement. Distribution of participants by group Freshman *n*=71, Sophomore *n*=56, Junior *n*=85, Senior *n*=113, and Graduate *n*=164. Outliers have been identified using SPSS guideline greater or less than 1.5 X the 50th percentile. Median of sample is represented for each category.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference in the degree of perceived student engagement as compared according to academic discipline?

Ho4: There is no significant difference in the degree of perceived student engagement based on academic discipline

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the relationship between perceived student engagement and student academic discipline. The independent variable, student academic discipline, included five levels: STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), Humanities, Fine Arts, Social Science, and Health Related. The dependent variable was the students reported level of perceived student engagement. The ANOVA was not significant, $F(4, 484) = 1.36$, $p = .25$, $N = 392$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. The strength of relationship between the student academic discipline and the perceived level of student engagement as assessed by η^2 was weak, with the student academic discipline accounting for .11% of the variance of the dependent variable. Therefore, the perceived level of engagement is approximately equal across academic disciplines. The means and standard deviations for perceived student engagement and student academic discipline are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Means and SD for Perceived Student Engagement by Academic Discipline

Academic Discipline	*n*	*M*	*SD*
STEM	91	2.91	1.21
Humanities	49	2.71	1.14
Fine Arts	35	2.46	0.85
Social Sciences	124	2.74	1.13
Health Related	190	2.65	1.13

Figure 4 shows the distribution of the five groups. The frequency report within each group represents the number of participants who designated a 1 (STEM *n*=91) 2 (Humanities *n*=49), 3 (Fine Arts *n*=35), 4 (Social Science *n*=124), and 5 (Health Related *n*=190) on the online survey.

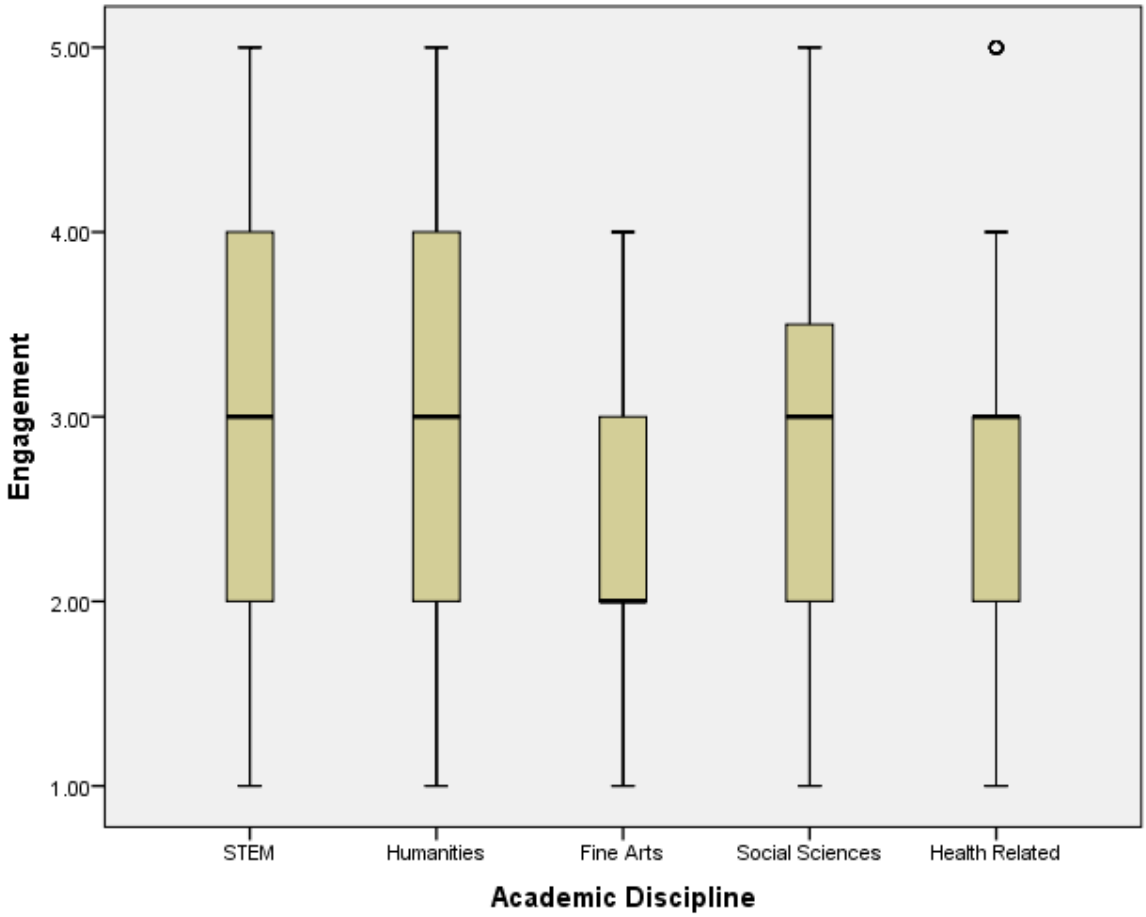

Figure 4. Students perceived engagement by academic discipline. Engagement rankings with 1 = strongly agree with perception of student engagement and 5= strongly disagree with perception of student engagement. Distribution of participants by group STEM *n*=91) 2 (Humanities *n*=49, Fine Arts *n*=35, Social Science *n*=124, and Health Related *n*=190. Outliers have been identified using SPSS guideline greater or less than 1.5 X the 50th percentile. Median of sample is represented for each category.

Research Question 5

Research Question 5: Is there a difference in the degree of perceived student engagement between males and females?

Ho5: There is no significant difference in perceived student engagement between males and females.

A one-sample *t* test was conducted to evaluate if sex plays a role on students perceived engagement in online courses. The test was not significant, $t(487) = 1.84$, $p = .06$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. Therefore, perceptions of student engagement do not differ significantly between males and females. The means and standard deviations for perceived student engagement and student sex are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Means and SD for Perceived Student Engagement by Sex

Sex	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Male	130	2.87	1.12
Female	359	2.66	1.1

Figure 5 illustrates the frequency report within each group represents the number of participants who designated a 1 (Male *n*=130) and 2 (Female *n*=359) in the online survey.

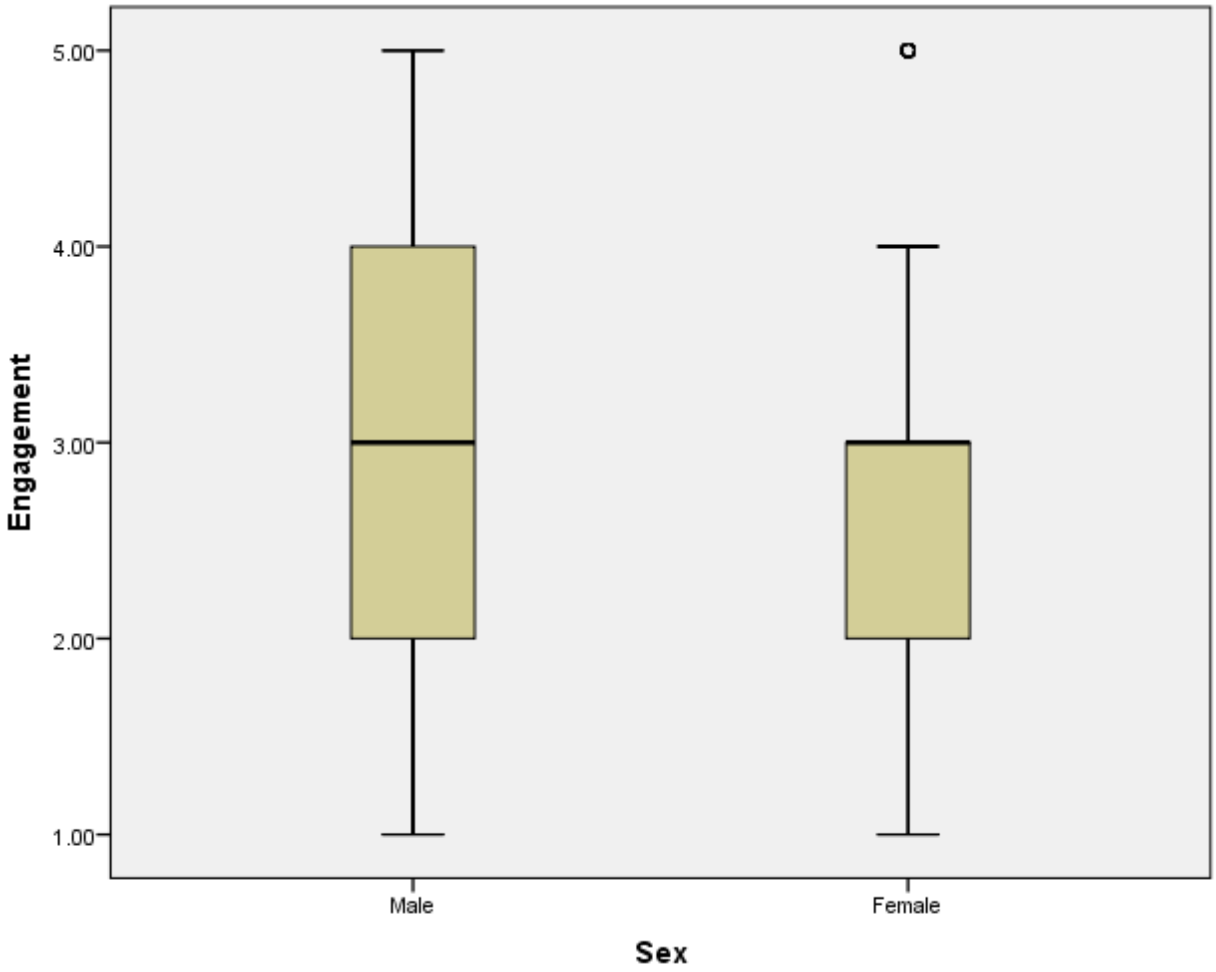

Figure 5. Student perceptions of engagement by sex. Distribution of participants by group male *n*= 130 and female *n*=359. Distribution of participants by group male *n*=130 and female *n*=359. Outliers have been identified using SPSS guideline greater or less than 1.5 X the 50th percentile. Median of sample is represented for each category.

Research Question 6

Research Question 6: Is there a significant relationship between GPA and engagement?

Ho6: There is no significant relationship between engagement and student GPA?

Correlation coefficients were computed between students' perception of engagement and student Grade Point Average (GPA). The results of the correlation analysis were not significant

with r(469) = .007, *p*= .883. In general GPA is not significantly correlated to perceived student engagement. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. Therefore, there is not a significant correlation between students' perception of engagement and GPA. Figure 6 illustrates the lack of relationship between GPA and student engagement.

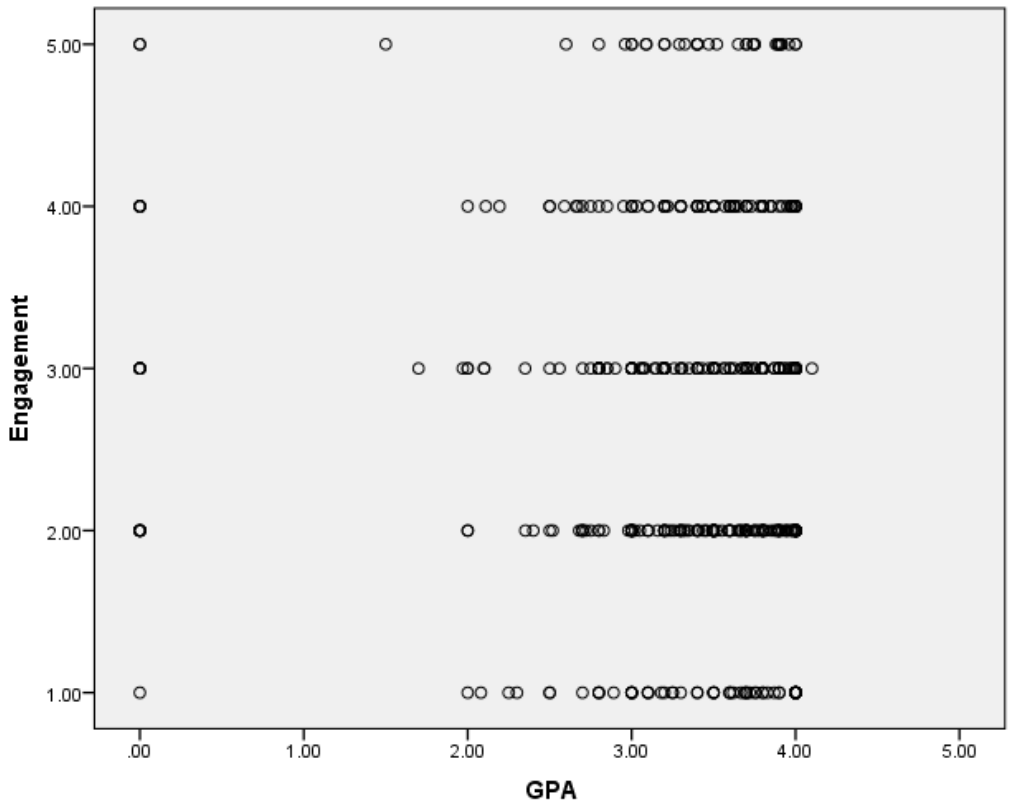

Figure 6. Student engagement by GPA

Research Question 7

Research Question 7: Is there a significant relationship between age and degree of student engagement?

Ho7: There is no significant relationship between engagement and student age.

An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate the degree of perceived student engagement between student's aged 16 to 24 and 25 and older. The test was significant, *t*(487) =

4.53, $p < .001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Students in the 16 to 24 age group report a significantly higher level of perceived student engagement than those students in the 25 and older age group. The means and standard deviations for perceived student engagement and student age group are presented in Table 5, while Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of frequencies between perceived student engagement and student age.

Table 5
Means and SD for Perceived Student Engagement by Age

Student Classification	*n*	*M*	*SD*
16-24	252	2.93	1.1
25 and older	237	2.49	1.08

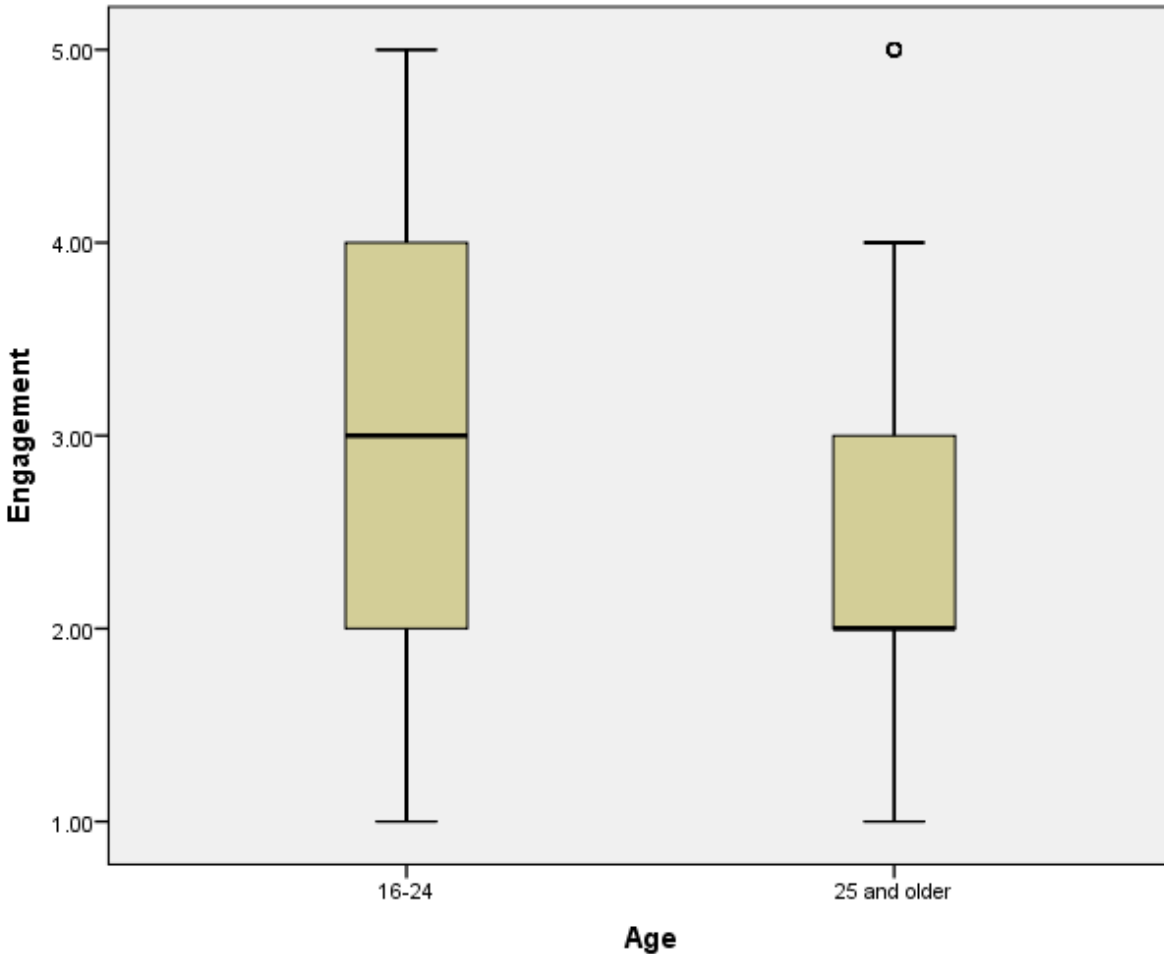

Figure 7. Student age and perceived engagement. Distribution of participants by group 16-24 *n*=252 and 25 and older *n*= 237. Outliers have been identified using SPSS guideline greater or less than 1.5 X the 50th percentile. Median of sample is represented for each category.

Research Question 8

Research Question 8: Is there a significant difference between the degree of perceived student engagement between traditional and nontraditional students?

Ho8: There is no significant difference in engagement and student status as traditional or nontraditional student?

An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate the degree of perceived student engagement between traditional and nontraditional students. The test was significant, $t(487) = 3.93$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Traditional students report a higher level of perceived student engagement than that of nontraditional students. The means and standard deviations for perceived student engagement and student GPA are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Means and SD for Perceived Student Engagement by Classification

Student Classification	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Traditional	234	2.92	1.08
Non-traditional	255	2.53	1.11

Figure 8 shows the distribution of the participant responses. The frequency report within each graph represents the number of participants who designated a 1 (Traditional *n*=234) and 2 (Nontraditional *n*=255) on the online survey.

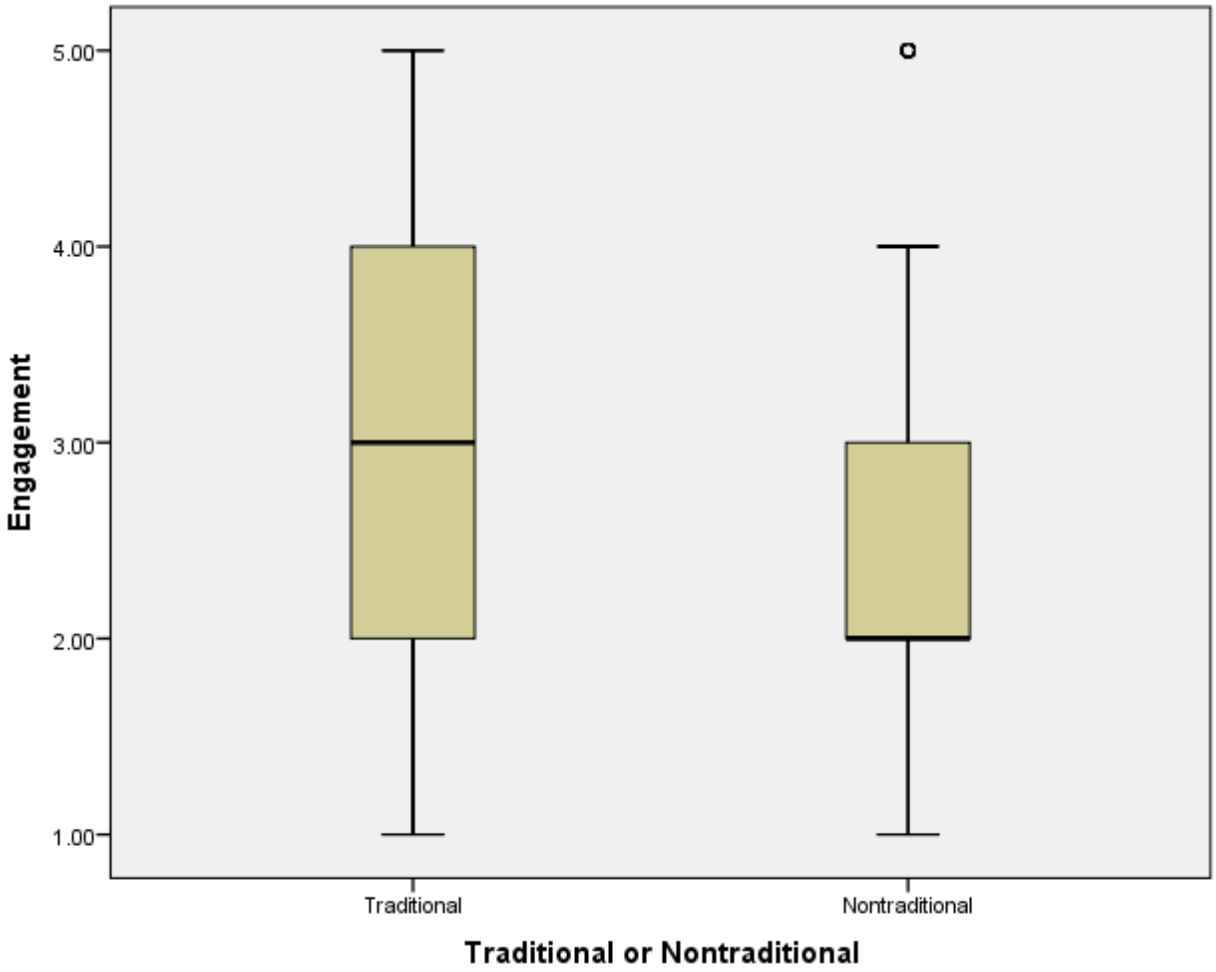

Figure 8. Traditional or nontraditional students by perceived engagement. Distribution of participants by group Traditional *n*=234 and Nontraditional *n*=255. Outliers have been identified using SPSS guideline greater or less than 1.5 X the 50th percentile. Median of sample is represented for each category.

Research Question 9

Research Question 9: Is there a significant relationship between instructor's years of online experience based on instructor's perception of student engagement?

Ho9: There is no significant difference in perceived student engagement based on instructor's years of online experience.

Correlation coefficients were computed between instructors perceived level of student engagement and instructor years of online teaching experience. The results of the correlation analysis were not significant with r(70) = .155, p= .19, N = 72. In general instructors years of online teaching experience was not significantly correlated to perceived student engagement. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. There was not a significant relationship between instructor's years of online experience and perceived student engagement. Figure 9 illustrates the lack of relationship between instructor years of experience and student engagement.

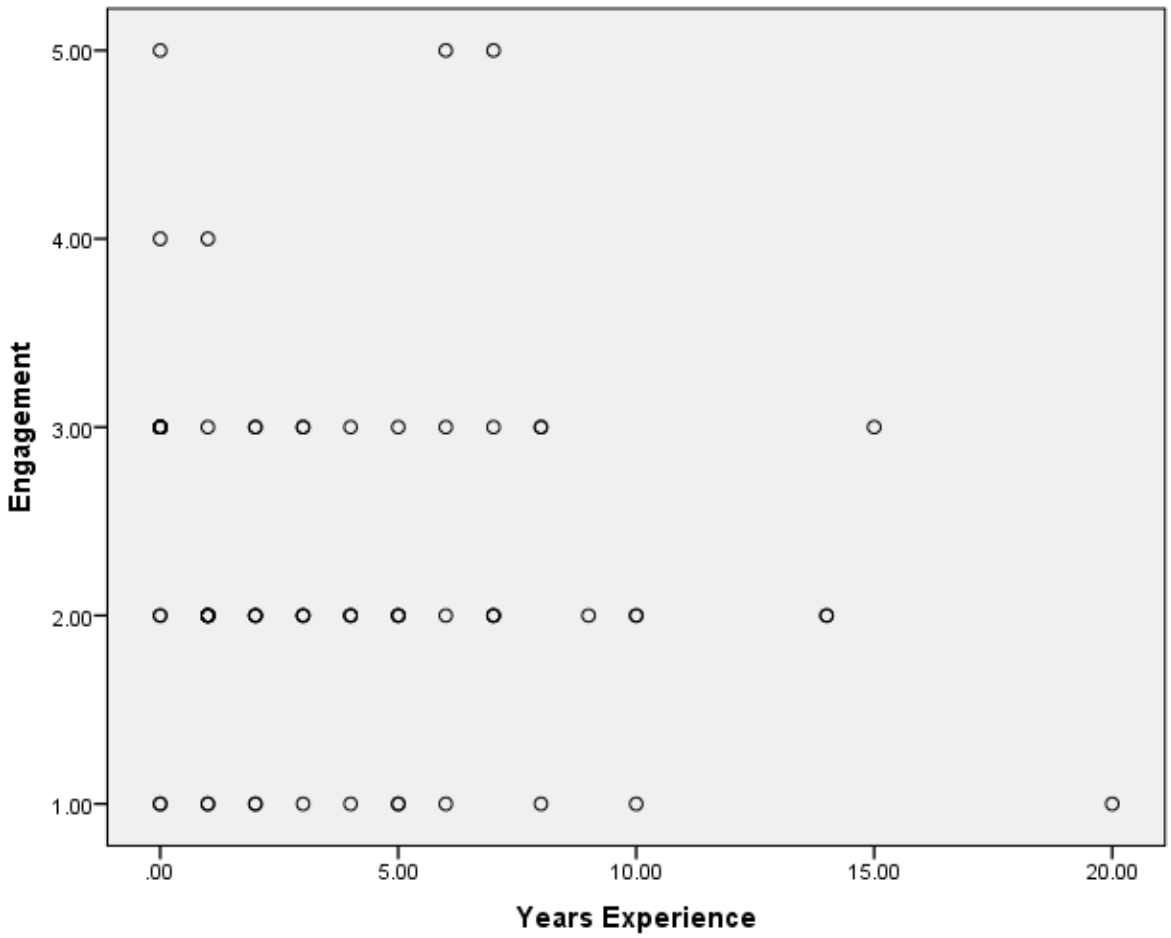

Figure 9. Instructors years online experience by perceived student engagement

Research Question 10

Research Question 10: Is there a significant difference in instructor's perception of student engagement based on instructors' academic discipline?

Ho10: There is no significant difference in instructor's perception of student engagement based on instructors' academic discipline.

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the relationship between instructors perception of student engagement and instructor academic discipline. The independent variable, instructor academic discipline, included five levels: STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), Humanities, Fine Arts, Social Science, and Health Related. The dependent variable was the instructors reported level of perceived student engagement. The ANOVA was not significant, $F(4, 67) = 1.24$, $p = .30$, $N = 72$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was retained. The strength of relationship between the instructor academic discipline and the perceived level of student engagement as assessed by η^2 was weak, with the instructor academic discipline accounting for .69% of the variance of the dependent variable. Figure 10 shows the distribution of the five groups. The frequency report within each group represents the number of participants who designated a 1 (STEM n=9) 2 (Humanities n=6), 3 (Fine Arts n=9), 4 (Social Science n=31), and 5 (Health Related n=17) on the online survey. Therefore, there is not a significant difference between the means of instructors' perception of student engagement between any academic discipline and any other.

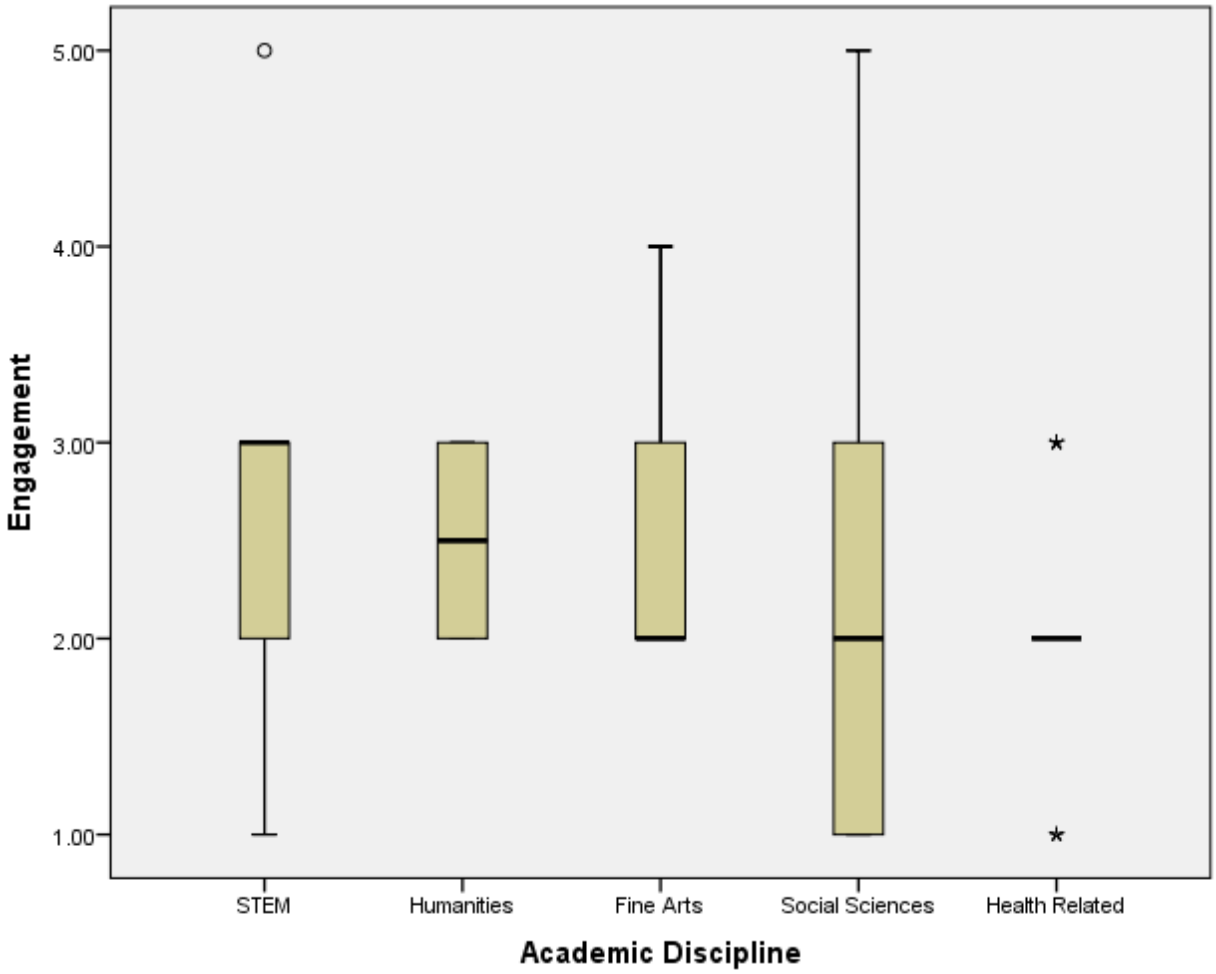

Figure 10. Instructor academic discipline by perceived student engagement. Engagement rankings with 1 = strongly agree with perception of student engagement and 5= strongly disagree with perception of student engagement. Distribution of participants by group STEM *n*=9, Humanities *n*=6, Fine Arts *n*=9, Social Science *n*=31, and Health Related *n*=17. Outliers have been identified using SPSS guideline greater or less than 1.5 X the 50th percentile. Median of sample is represented for each category.

Summary

In this chapter data obtained from instructors and students were presented and analyzed. There were 10 research questions each with one null hypothesis. All data were collected through

an online survey distributed to 210 instructors resulting in a 41% return rate with 87 participant responses and 607 students resulting in a 79% return rate with 484 participant responses.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINGDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter contains a summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The purpose of this study is to investigate online instructors' and students' perceptions of engaging online behavior and course structure through the lens of positioning theory. Specifically, this researcher assessed students' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of a course, the instructors' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of the course, the role students' demographic and program of study factor into online engagement, and the instructors' prior exposure and experience with online courses factor into creating an effective online course design. Understanding how these variables are related to perceived student engagement could be helpful for readers as a resource when designing, implementing, and participating in online courses. Participants of this study consisted of undergraduate and graduate students and instructors from a single institution in Northeast Tennessee. Data were analyzed from those who have participated in at least one online course while at the college.

Summary

The statistical analysis reported in the study was based on 10 research questions presented in chapters 1 and 3. Each research question had one null hypothesis. Research questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 10 were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA, research questions 5, 7 and 8 were analyzed using an independent-samples *t* test, and research questions 6 and 9 were analyzed using Pearsons *r* test of correlation. The number of total participants in the study was

571. The number of instructors was 87. The number of students was 484. The alpha level of .05 was used in all statistical tests.

Findings indicate that both instructors and students experience higher perceptions of student engagement when posting in the middle or top third of the class and that age and maturity in ones academic career also have a strong influence on perceived student engagement.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to investigate online instructors' and students' perceptions of engaging online behavior and course structure through the lens of positioning theory. Specifically, this researcher assessed students' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of a course, the instructors' perceptions of themselves in the first 2 weeks of the course, the role students' demographic and program of study factor into online engagement, and the instructors' prior exposure and experience with online courses factor into creating an effective online course design. The following conclusions were based on the findings from the data in the study.

1. A significant difference was found for all student posting groups and student's perception of engagement. The three classifications of student posting top, middle, and bottom showed significantly different ratings on perceived student engagement. The finding that students who post more report higher levels of perceived engagement supports the NSSE third benchmark that involves student-faculty interaction. When we combine this with the understanding positioning theory grants us of how students are positioning themselves in the beginning of the course to be seen as a successful dedicated student or a student who is not very concerned with his or her studies these postings in the first 2 weeks of class are attempts

according to positioning theory to establish themselves in the eyes of the instructor (Dennen, 2011, p.528).

2. A significant difference was found for all instructor posting groups and instructors perceived rating of student engagement in their online courses. The three classifications of instructor posting top third, middle third, and bottom third showed significantly different ratings on perceived student engagement. The finding that instructors who post more report higher levels of perceived student engagement supports the NSSE third benchmark that involves student-faculty interaction. Because research states that online students reported receiving inaccurate or incomplete feedback and interaction with faculty members (Bambara et al., 2009; Rovai, 2001), it is not surprising that the instructors who are posting in the middle and top thirds are reporting higher perceived student engagement than those who post in the bottom third. Likewise instructors who post in the top third have significantly higher reported ratings in perceived student engagement than those who post in the middle third.

3. A significant difference was also found in perceived student engagement between freshman and the following groups: sophomores, juniors, and graduate students. There was no significant difference between the level of perceived student engagement between freshman and seniors. Applying positioning theory to these findings allows us to examine the experience of the student group and their concern for being successful in their individual online courses.

4. No significant difference was found in the degree of perceived student engagement based on academic discipline

5. No significant difference was found in perceived student engagement between males and females.

6. No significant relationships were found between perceived student engagement and students reported GPA.

7. There was a significant relationship between student age as reported in the two groups 16-24 and 25 and older with perceived student engagement. The 16-24 age group reported higher levels of perceived student engagement.

8. A significant difference was found in students perceived engagement based on student status as a traditional or nontraditional student. Research in the field states that many undergraduate students who enroll in online courses are nontraditional students (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). Due to the motivations of these nontraditional students, it was surprising that nontraditional students reported lower levels of perceived engagement in online courses compared to traditional college students.

9. No significant relationship was found between instructor's years of online teaching and perceived student engagement.

10. No significant difference was found in instructor's perceptions of student engagement based on instructors' academic discipline (STEM, Humanities, Fine Arts, Social Science, and Health Related). This mirrors the finding of the same question when asked directly to students.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings and conclusions of this research project have enabled me to identify the following recommendations for practice with online courses:

1. Students and instructors should be encouraged to post in the first 2 weeks of a course more than three times as this was at the lower end of the posting scale for both groups in this study. When both groups posted at the lower end they each reported significantly lower levels of

perceived student engagement. Online interactions with students need to not only cover instruction and feedback on assignments but also discussions of careers and ideas that are essential interactions between instructors and students to create engagement (Kuh, 2003).

2. Online instructors need to use the discussion boards for more dynamic and interactive discussions. Many students and instructors responded that instructors do not post in the forums. Yet, in a traditional classroom when students participate in the discussion the instructor does not respond with silence but in a manner to help offer insight and understanding. Research illustrates that when students are not engaged in conversations and interactions with peers and the instructor, they are not engaged and are not exposed to different viewpoints that might be possible in a traditional classroom (Lester & Perini, 2010).

3. Instructors need to re-examine the course design and curriculum for freshman and senior level courses. The creation of an enriching learning environment is the second NSSE benchmark for establishing student engagement. Instructors need to be aware that class standing does play a role in perceived student engagement. Freshman and seniors report significantly lower levels of perceived engagement than other student groups.

4. Administrators and curriculum designers need to examine ways to reach nontraditional students in online environments. Examining terminology and course design may help bridge generational gaps. Because nontraditional students account for a larger portion of online enrollment numbers (Mann & Henneberry, 2012), it is imperative that we understand how to engagement and connect with this demographic.

Recommendations for Future Research

Results of this study indicate that interactions within the first 2 weeks of an online course play a large role in students' and instructors' perceived engagement.

1. Students who posted in the top two thirds in the first 2 weeks felt more engaged in the course and felt more satisfied with their course experience. Instructors' who posted in the top two thirds in the first 2 weeks of a course reported a higher perception of their students being engaged in their courses. Additional research needs to be conducted to determine the types of messages that create a sense of community and engagement in online courses. Examining how student and instructor postings begin to set the tone for success, establishing roles and expectations can be done through discussion post using positioning theory (Dennen, 2011).

2. By applying positioning theory to the qualitative evaluation of types and frequency of posts in discussion forums researchers can begin to understand how and why student and instructor persona may develop very differently in different classes. Positioning theory allows us to understand that the story we create for ourselves, for the class, and for others will impact how we connect or perceive our engagement in future classes. While this research identified the first 2 weeks as a pivotal time frame to establish engagement, there was no discussion or investigation on the types of messages or stories that help create a positive perception.

3. The data gathered also showed that traditional and younger students reported higher levels of perceived engagement. Nontraditional and older students reported lower levels of perceived engagement. Research needs to be conducted to find out what barriers nontraditional and older students face in establishing perceived student engagement in online courses. The collection of personal experiences, barriers, and obstacles these students face in online

environments would be beneficial because they make up the largest percentage of students enrolled in online and distance education courses (Mann & Henneberry, 2012).

4. Another area where research about perceived student engagement and types of interactions practiced and expected by instructors and students could examine how the amount and type of feedback a student and instructor need or provide may change in the middle and towards the end of a course. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods of exploration could allow us to understand the entire lifecycle of a course more completely.

5. Additionally research needs to be conducted to examine how students react after an unpleasant or hostile post appears from either another student or faculty member. Due to the lack of nonverbal communication in online environments the chance of misunderstandings is increased.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Instructor Survey

Online Instructor Perceptions of Student Engagement

This survey is being conducted for research purposes as part of a dissertation in the ELPA department at ETSU.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You must be 18 years of age or older in order to participate in this study.

If you have any questions please contact Miriam Phillips at 423-948-5967 or at zmsm26@goldmail.etsu.edu

Below are several questions regarding your feelings and perceptions about online courses that you have either taken or taught. Please answer all questions honestly and to the best of your abilities.

1. What is your academic discipline area?

- ○ STEM field
- ○ Humanities
- ○ Fine Art
- ○ Social Science
- ○ Health Related

Other (please specify)

***2. How many years have you taught online courses?**

***3. Did you have a faculty mentor when you started teaching online courses?**

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

***4. How many times do you normally post in the discussion forums the first two weeks of class?**

***5. What is an adequate amount of postings (including responses to other post) for a student in the first two weeks of a single online class?**

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Online Instructor Perceptions of Student Engagement

***6. Do your online classes have an introduction area for students to meet one another and you the first week of class?**

- Yes
- No

***7. Do you respond to each students post with an original message to offer feedback?**

- Yes
- No

In the follow situations please choose the best representation of your opinion regarding online class interactions. Strongly Disagree,Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree

***8. Students are often engaged in my online courses.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

***9. Student major plays little role in student engagement in my online courses.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

***10. Online students who post more in the first week of class are more engage throughout the course than those who do not.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Online Instructor Perceptions of Student Engagement

11. Online Graduate students are more engaged than online undergraduate students

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

In the follow situations please choose the best representation of your opinion regarding online class interactions. Strongly Disagree,Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree

***12. Students who are studying STEM fields are more engaged than other students.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

***13. Students who are studying Humanities are more engaged than other students.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

***14. Studentes who are studying Fine Arts are more engaged than other students.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Online Instructor Perceptions of Student Engagement

***15. Students who are studying Social Sciences are more engaged than other students.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

16. Students who are studying Health Related fields are more engaged than other students.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

APPENDIX B

Students Survey

This survey is being conducted for research purposes as part of a dissertation in the ELPA department at ETSU.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You must be 18 years of age or older in order to participate in this study.

If you have any questions please contact Miriam Phillips at 423-948-5967 or at zmsm26@goldmail.etsu.edu

Below are several questions regarding your feelings and perceptions about online courses that you have either taken or taught. Please answer all questions honestly and to the best of your abilities.

***1. What is your current class standing?**

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Graduate

Other (please specify)

***2. What is your current GPA**

***3. What is your current age category?**

- 16-25
- 25 and older

***4. What is your current area of study?**

- STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics)
- Humanities
- Fine Arts
- Social Science
- Health Related

Other (please specify)

***5. What is your sex?**

- Male
- Female

Other (please specify)

***6. How many online classes have you taken?**

- 0-1
- 2-3
- 4-5
- 6 or more

***7. Are you a traditional student (no dependents, not married, and entering college directly after highschool).**

- Yes
- No

***8. How many times do you normally post and respond in the course discussion forums during the first two weeks of a single online class?**

***9. In your experience have you felt fully engaged in your online courses?**

- Yes
- No

Other (please specify)

***14. Instructors should post personal greetings and messages in the course for example "Happy Thanksgiving".**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

***15. I have felt fully engaged in my online courses.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval Letter

East Tennessee State University
Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects • Box 70565 • Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-1707
Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

IRB APPROVAL – Initial Exempt

August 26, 2013

Miriam Phillips

RE: Instructor and student perceptions of online courses: Implications of positioning theory
IRB#: c0813.23e
ORSPA#: n/a

On **August 23, 2013**, an exempt approval was granted in accordance with 45 CFR 46. 101(b)(2). It is understood this project will be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Policies. No continuing review is required. The exempt approval will be reported to the convened board on the next agenda.

- xform New Protocol Submission; Survey Introduction Consent; Email Script; Student Survey; Instructor Survey; References; CV

Projects involving Mountain States Health Alliance must also be approved by MSHA following IRB approval prior to initiating the study.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB (and VA R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.

Proposed changes in approved research cannot be initiated without IRB review and approval. The only exception to this rule is that a change can be made prior to IRB approval when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the research subjects [21 CFR 56.108 (a)(4)]. In such a case, the IRB must be promptly informed of the change following its implementation (within 10 working days) on Form 109 (www.etsu.edu/irb). The IRB will review the change to determine that it is consistent with ensuring the subject's continued welfare.

Sincerely,
Chris Ayres, Chair
ETSU Campus IRB

Accredited Since December 2005

VITA

MIRIAM SEYELENE PHILLIPS

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Education:	Ed.D. Educational Leadership East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN 2013 Master of Arts in Professional Communications East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN 2008 B.S.S. in Political Science East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN 2006
Professional Experience:	Speech Instructor, Behavioral and Social Science Dept Northeast State Community College 2012- Current Doctoral Fellow, Educational Leadership Department, East Tennessee State University 2010-Current Account Marketing Manager STL Distribution North America 2008-2010
Presentations:	63rd Annual Appalachian Logistics Conference, 2013 Northeast State 9th annual honors conference, 2013 62nd Annual Appalachian Logistics Conference, 2012 STEP training session Northeast State , 2012 International Conference on Higher Education, 2012 Academic Business World International Conference, 2012

ETSU, ELPA Leadership Symposium, 2012OneVoice I

International Conference, 2011

WE Launch East Tennessee, 2011

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Honors and Awards: Outstanding Graduate Student 2011-2012

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