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Portraits of Online Teaching and Learning: The Experiences of an Instructor and Six
Graduate Students in a Course Entitled Educating Students with Autism

by

Sarah R. Semon

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the very special people in my life who have inspired and supported me throughout this journey. First, my husband, who actually brought the stars down to earth for me the day he proposed. Thank you for your generous spirit, logic, and good humor! This dissertation is as much a reflection of your hard work as it is of mine. Secondly – though no less important – I dedicate this work to my family. My parents, step-parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, helped make me who I am in this world. They taught me about love, appreciation, curiosity, imagination, faith, and patience. They have also provided much needed guidance and encouragement every time I have needed it (and all of the times in between). I dedicate this work to my friends as well. My family and friends have sacrificed much and have supported me tremendously. I am forever grateful for each and every one of you. Additionally, I dedicate this to my doctoral cohort and the doctoral students who mentored us and those who I have been able to mentor after me. It is my honor to be counted among you. Finally, I dedicate this work to my former students and fellow teachers, who opened my eyes to so many important issues and helped me to recognize the role that I can play in creating change.

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Systemic change is being shepherded through the efforts of dedicated teachers, administrators, parents and students. Technology ignites opportunities for learning, engages today's students as active learners and participants in decision-making for their own educational futures and prepares our nation for the demands of a global-society in the 21st century (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 46).

The definition of a high-quality teaching force must shift with the times – and along with it, colleges of education and professional development providers need to seek out new, innovative ways to train and support educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 55).

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Portraits of Online Teaching and Learning: The Experiences of an Instructor and Six Graduate Students in a Course Entitled Educating Students with Autism

Sarah R. Semon

ABSTRACT

Throughout the last decade (1999-2009) Florida's Bureau of Exceptional Education Student Services, in partnership with Institutions of Higher Education created the Florida Virtual ESE program to develop and deliver online professional development courses. The state also provided tuition support for teachers to participate in online professional development coursework to earn credentials necessary to be considered Highly Qualified. Online course delivery is thought to be a cost-effective approach to the provision of professional development for in-service teachers. However, there is a need to examine what it takes to create meaningful online learning experiences that facilitate the goals and objectives particular to the field of special education. Thus, this study explored the nature and qualities of the instructor's and six graduate-level exceptional student educators' experience in one Virtual ESE course entitled: *Educating Students with Autism*. This study utilized Portraiture Methodology because it provided a systematic framework to develop understandings of lives, pedagogy, or cultural institutions. The products from this genre of research approach are compelling, empirically grounded, and meaningful portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Data collection for this study included: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document reviews, and analysis of artistic and photographic data. These data documented different aspects of

each individual's experience in the online course and the relation of the course to her teaching practice. Portraits developed as a result of this inquiry were grounded in the following: (a) participants' general understanding of the nature and purpose of the course, (b) their understanding the online pedagogical tools used for instruction, (c) their perceptions of the online discussion boards (synchronous and asynchronous), and (d) their concerns. These experiences were woven into portraits that highlight the importance of themes including, but not limited to, relationships, course design and content. The final portraits illuminated idiosyncratic issues that emerged within the context of student's professional and personal lives and impacted their engagement in the online course.

Chapter One: Introduction

Personal Narrative

Have you ever sat in awe of a teacher? Can you remember feeling excited as that teacher “worked the room” engaging and provoking those sitting around you so expertly that you forgot you were “learning?” Can you recall a class activity so stimulating that the conversations among the group made you pause and think about your own life? Have you left class so deep in thought that you did not recall the turns or stops on the way home? Or can you recall some seemingly little thing said by a classmate that suddenly made sense in the shower months later? Finally... Did any of this happen to you in an online class?

The online seminar course near the end of my master’s degree program stands out in my memory more favorably than most of my campus-based graduate courses. Signing up for one’s first online class might make anyone anxious. However, I was excited for this new experience and found that I enjoyed it for many reasons. The content of the course was up-to-date and relevant to my professional work as a high school special education teacher and as a leader in my school. The activities allowed me to explore information and collaborate with others from home. The online format also saved me from tedious hours of commuting to and from the city for class. And luckily, I grew up using computers.

I enrolled in the online Advanced Seminar in Exceptional Student Education in the fall of 2002. As soon as I read the syllabus I knew it was an ideal course for someone

like me. I envisioned the course as an opportunity to focus on my assignments on my own time without having to spend hours driving to campus, fighting traffic and other students for the limited campus parking spaces. Since I did not have children to care for, I was able to come home after work, grade papers, have dinner, and immerse myself in my academic work.

The courses I took to earn my Master's in Varying Exceptionalities focused on advanced theory and methods. However, this online course was the capstone seminar course in the degree program. The intent of the course was to encourage in-service special education teachers, like myself, to explore critically a variety of important issues in the field while synthesizing knowledge from our previous courses and professional experience. The syllabus included topics such as the over-representation of culturally, economically, and linguistically diverse students in special education classrooms, the consequences of bias in assessment, and the implications that various school and governmental policies have for practice.

The course provided opportunities to think about and analyze problems that were actually occurring in my professional practice. From the beginning, I embraced the scope of the course because, in addition to being a teacher, I was the team leader of the Special Education Department at my school. I also served on the county-level Secondary and Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Issues Committees. Like many other rural districts in the state of Florida, our school system faced challenges due to its rural location, limited resources, exploding population, and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity. During this time, our district was also under review from the Florida Department of Education for having a graduation rate for students with disabilities that was lower than

the state and national averages. The Issues Committees met regularly to discuss solutions to such problems and to make recommendations to the district's administration. I enjoyed participating in these committees and having the opportunity to influence policies that might impact my own students. I recall my excitement beginning the online seminar course. I was eager to engage with other practitioners and leaders who might be able to offer fresh perspectives on the problems we were facing in my school and district.

Early on, I began to realize what the instructor expected of me as a learner in the online class. I was able to meet those expectations by spending considerable time posting and responding to my online classmates in great detail on the discussion board of Blackboard, the course management system we utilized. I looked forward to turning on my computer and “logging on” to Blackboard to discuss the issues our instructor had planned for us. The course was primarily designed around these web-based discussions and activities although a traditional research paper synthesizing perspectives on a critical issue was also required. Every week we were required to post at least one comment about the readings or activities we had completed and respond to comments from at least two classmates. In my opinion, this was a more healthy way to interact than in traditional classes where one or two students usually dominated the discussion. Over time I became very involved in the course, posting more than what was required and trying to engage others about the topics we were discussing. As the semester progressed, I realized I was not getting a lot of feedback from my peers; they seemed to meet the minimum requirements and nothing more. After the first few weeks, I recognized that minimal participation and benign feedback were becoming the status quo. Despite this, I recall

frequent and timely feedback from the instructor. However, I remained puzzled as to why so few other students seemed to enjoy the course as much as I did.

At first, I felt disappointed that my peers did not share my enthusiasm for virtual discussion. The reality I did not see was that not everyone may have been comfortable with the technology or the online format. It is possible that they may have felt that the discussion board had become redundant over time. Additionally, I see now that the issues being discussed may not have been as relevant to others as they were to me. Other students in the class may have been classified as out-of-field or not certified in ESE and as such would have had very different professional development needs than myself. I wonder if I would have viewed the course as useful if being a classroom teacher had been my only professional role?

While I believe that my entire degree program was very helpful to me professionally, it was the online course that had the greatest impact on my professional practice. The course was a turning point where I solidified my commitment to critical self-reflection. I learned to reflect and examine the ethical implications of my actions and understand my role within the context of education as a whole. This commitment later prompted me to pursue a doctoral degree and become a teacher educator in special education.

I realize that I may have been unique in my enjoyment of the online course. In the opportunities I have had as a doctoral student, I have learned that teaching online is a complex assignment for any educator. It involves knowing your students' needs and being able to balance and address them within the framework of the course. While there are informative studies that indicate how to design online courses in general, there is very

little in the research literature regarding how students experience online teacher education courses. Additionally, research has not established how pedagogy utilized by teacher educators informs the practice of teachers enrolled in the course. Unfortunately, there are few qualitative studies which look at the students' perspective about learning in online professional development courses in Exceptional Student Education. This study was motivated by the knowledge that as a future teacher educator in a field where courses and degree programs are increasingly offered online, I will need to understand the experience of students who may be on the other side of the wires that connect us and contribute to the knowledge base in this developing area.

The Study

This study sought to address the gap in the research literature regarding online instruction related to the instructors' need to know about the nature and qualities of experience of online learners. The specific focus of this study was on experiences of the teacher and six students in one online course entitled: *Educating Children with Autism*. This study sought to construct richly-developed portraits that would contribute to the field and be accessible to non-scholarly readers. This study was conducted utilizing the portraiture methodology developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997). Portraiture (described in more detail in chapter three) is typically used to develop deeper understandings of lives, pedagogy, and institutions. The following definitions are utilized throughout the study.

Definitions

Online Instruction

In this study, online instruction is considered to be synonymous with virtual instruction. The key elements of virtual instruction, according to Feyton & Nutta (1999) are: “(1) computer-mediated communication, (2) active-learning type interactions, (3) instruction that takes place at a distance, and synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (time-delayed) communication” (p. xv). Virtual instruction is distinguishable from distance learning because distance learning is typically delivered using videotapes, television and radio broadcasts, or pre-programmed computer modules.

Computer Mediated Communication

In a recent review of research on the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in education, Luppicini (2007) defined CMC as “...communications, mediated by interconnected computers, between individuals or groups separated in space and/or time. Common characteristics of CMC include: asynchronous and synchronous communication capacity, high interactivity, and multi-way communication” (p. 142). Computer-mediated communication tools used by instructors in online courses consist of email, discussion boards, and chat-rooms. Instructors may use these tools for a portion of the course or embed their use throughout the entire semester.

Course Management System

Instructors who often deliver online instruction typically use course management systems (CMS). CMS are also referred to as online learning systems or e-learning systems. Institutions adopt CMS because they package easy-to-use tools, templates, and resources that instructors can use to present content, communicate with and engage

students, design individual or collaborative group activities, and conduct assessments (Bender, 2003). The most commonly utilized CMS are Blackboard®, WebCT®, and Moodle®.

Discussion-based Online Education

According to Bender (2003), discussion-based online education consists of asynchronous, text-based interactions between the teacher, the student and the content. Discussion-based learning primarily occurs within the context of the discussion forum component of the course management system. Discussion forums are described here as threaded ongoing text-based conversations. In the discussion forums instructors and students can post and respond to each other. When a course is primarily discussion-based it may also be asynchronous allowing instructors provide timeframes during which the discussion should occur. Within these timeframes, students are allowed to choose when they will respond to the questions or responses of the teacher or their classmates. Due to the nature of asynchronous and text-based online discussions, Bender (2003) asserts that they are most appropriate for conceptualization of and reflection on content.

Research Questions

The first task of this study was to learn about the participants' general understanding of the nature and purpose of the course. The second was to understand the online pedagogical tools used for instruction. The third task of this study was to understand participants' perceptions of the online discussion boards (synchronous and asynchronous). And finally, the study sought to identify concerns that emerge from the participants' perspective.

The research questions were addressed through a series of three interviews, as well as, observations, participant concept mapping, and document reviews (see Chapter 3 for detailed description of methodology). The research questions were grouped according to whether they focus on the instructor or the participants. The research questions with a focus on the instructor are presented below.

1. Instructor Questions

1.1. What are the instructor's perceptions of the overall nature and purposes of the course entitled *Educating Students with Autism*?

1.2. What are the instructor's perceptions of the nature and purposes of the pedagogical tools utilized in online courses?

1.3. How does the instructor describe the teaching strategies she employs in discussion boards?

1.4. What salient concerns emerge about discussion boards for facilitating learning from the instructor's perspective?

The instructor-focused research questions first inquire into the overarching goals and objectives for students enrolled in the course. Thus, in response to 1.1, the instructor might describe the purpose of the course as being either content or learner centered. Additionally, the instructor might explain the rationale for experiences planned in the course, or discuss the impact she hopes the course had on students' classroom practice.

Question 1.2 provided the instructor with an opportunity to describe how she used pedagogical tools such as chat rooms, wikis, or discussion boards that were available through the course management system. Responses to this question may contribute to an understanding of the instructor's philosophies of teaching and learning theories that shape

their use of instructional approaches in online courses. Question 1.3 pursued a deeper understanding of the ways in which the instructor utilized the discussion board in particular. Discussion boards are a frequently used tool in online courses. The instructor was encouraged to describe the rationale for her uses of the discussion board tool. Responses to 1.3 may indicate strategies for using the discussion board such as collaborative learning projects, debates or discussions, or evidence that the student completed assigned readings. Finally, question 1.4 will identify salient concerns that the instructor had about teaching and learning online. The instructor interview protocols that include additional probing questions related to the above research questions can be found Appendix B.

2. Student Questions

- 2.1. What do students report about the nature of their experience in the course entitled *Educating Students with Autism*?
- 2.2. How do students perceive their experiences in the course as having an impact on their philosophies of teaching and learning?
- 2.3. How do students perceive their experiences in discussion boards relate to the use of discussion boards in their class?
- 2.4. What salient concerns emerge for students about discussion boards for facilitating learning?

These research questions focus on the perspectives of six students who took the course. The participant selection criteria are outlined further in chapter three. The student-focused research questions explored how the content and structure of the online course informed the students' philosophies of teaching and learning. Responses to question 2.1

focus on identifying what students expected from the class. Question 2.1 explored their history, knowledge of, and comfort level with online courses. Responses to question 2.2 contributed to an understanding of the students' perceptions about the use and educative value of the various online activities, assignments, and assessments. In responding to 2.2, students may or may not indicate that they learned new ways to structure activities in their own classes or they may share new insights about how teaching and learning occurs after taking the course. Question 2.3 asks for student perceptions of the discussion boards (asynchronous or synchronous) that were used in this course. Responding to 2.3, students will be asked to describe the impact of discussion board use in their own teaching practice. For instance, do the special educators find that they are able to improve their collaborations with general educators or service providers, or find new ways to facilitate or enhance their students' communication skills through the use of technology? Finally, question 2.4 asks students to identify any concerns that they have about online learning for professional development. The student interview protocols that include additional probing questions related to the above research questions can be found Appendix B.

Contribution to Existing Knowledge

Universities and colleges are increasingly converting courses to completely online or partially web-enhanced, also referred to as "blended" formats (Luppicini, 2007). This growth is the result of increased consumer demand for the convenience of courses delivered on the World Wide Web to serve students who live and work out of driving distance to a university campus, the improvements in information and communication technologies, and potential cost-savings to the institution (Theall, 2003; Wake, Dysthe, & Mjelstad, 2007). There are large and competing bodies of evidence from experimental

and quasi-experimental research regarding the effectiveness of online and face-to-face courses. Some studies show that there is no difference, others that face-to-face is better, and still others claim that online is more effective (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005). In their meta-analysis of these competing bodies of literature, Zhao et al. (2005) assert that, "...the quality of distance education programs is influenced by the same set of factors that affect the quality of face-to-face education" (p. 1843). They found that factors which make a difference include, but are not limited to, technology infrastructure, teacher characteristics, learner characteristics, content material, interactivity, types and use of media, and the design of assessments. These studies and others have led to recognition that there is a need for further research focused on understanding the complexities involved in designing online instruction for adult student learners within each discipline (Smith & Meyen, 2003; Spooner, Agran, Spooner, & Kiefer-O'Donnell, 2000). It is my hope that this study will contribute to the broader body of research about online professional development coursework and the field of special education teacher education.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Panel on Teacher Education Research commissioned by the American Educational Research Association has indicated a need for research studies designed to create connections between and among theoretical frameworks, programmatic goals, contexts, pedagogy, and particular learning outcomes for teachers, and by extension k-12 students (Zeichner, 2005). This report also recommends that researchers strive for consistent usage and explication of terms or concepts such as “constructivism” and “reflective practice.” Thus, this literature review will begin with an overview of interpretive phenomenology as the overarching theory that guides this inquiry. Then I will discuss the learning theories and needs of experience of adult learners in online environments. Finally, I will discuss current possibilities that exist in special education teacher education as a result of evolving online educational technologies.

Continuous Professional Development

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 set forth requirements that all teachers must be Highly Qualified. The law also mandated that states provide teachers with “high quality” professional development throughout their career. This mandate challenged researchers to systematically explore continuous professional development as it related to teacher learning and student outcomes (Borko, 2004). While educational researchers have conducted empirical studies of teacher satisfaction and changes in behavior or attitudes resulting from participation in professional development activities, Desimone (2009) called for a more comprehensive research agenda. This agenda would include identification of more research methodologies and exploration of the proposed core

features of professional development. Desimone (2009) surveyed existing studies and identified core features that define effective continuous professional development included: strong content focus, opportunities for active learning, coherence with reform or policy initiatives, substantial duration (typically a semester or 20 hours), and collective participation in sustainable learning communities.

Constructivist Learning Theories

An awareness of learning theories is important to understanding, describing, and interpreting the experience of teaching and learning. Learning theories are used explicitly or implicitly when teachers set goals, design materials, and select approaches (Bruner, 2004). Often teachers and teacher educators discuss their teaching in terms of constructivist learning theory (Lane, 2007; Maypole & Davies, 2001 ; Richardson, 2003). In doing so, they may not be aware that there are hundreds of theories of how constructivist learning actually happens. Understanding the context, critiques, and the philosophical basis for different learning theories is important for this research because it will help with understanding the instructor's motivations for designing the course. As such, the first section of this literature review will focus on the philosophical basis for constructivist learning theories.

The debate over what knowledge is and whether humans construct it or whether it already has its roots in antiquity (for a more detailed review see Oxford, 1997 and Phillips, 1995). Because learning theories are grounded in premises about the nature of knowledge and knowing, the resulting discourse on learning theories in education has mirrored the larger philosophical debate (Bereiter, 1994). However, there is some level of consensus among scholars that knowledge is constructed (Oxford, 1997; Phillips, 1995;

Prawat, 1999; Richardson, 2003). However, the way in which this construction process actually occurs remains highly debatable. Many scholars have made an effort to clarify, contextualize, critique, and map relationships between the many different conceptions of constructivism and their philosophical roots (Bereiter, 1994; Condon, Clyde, Kyle, & Hovda, 1993; Oxford, 1997; Phillips, 1995; Prawat, 1996).

According to Bereiter (2002), research and theories about the intricacies of human learning and knowledge construction have been conducted in teacher education, science and mathematics education, philosophy, social sciences, psychology, medicine, and numerous other fields. Since the creation of the first School of Education, teacher educators have struggled to enact constructivist ideals (Dewey, 1904). The following discussion highlights only two relevant schools of thought on constructivist learning theory in education. These are the branches of constructivist learning theory that correspond to the major philosophical perspectives of post-positivism, and postmodernism.

From a post-positivist philosophical frame, constructivist learning theories emphasize the role of cognition and decision making. Teachers should be competent in observing and processing information about student needs and making decisions that will result in effective instruction (Yick, Patrick, & Costin, 2005). Student and contextual information would be important to the teacher in this model. In this model, teachers might focus on improving the skills, strategies, and problem-solving abilities that a student might need for a particular content area.

The social constructivist understanding of learning fits well with the postmodern perspective. This model focuses on expanding, contextualizing, and intentionally

problematizing the ways that one comes to terms with reality. The postmodern, social constructivism emphasizes the construction of knowledge as a result of the influences of social interaction, language, and culture. Social constructivist models would view the teacher's role as a facilitator providing opportunities for active learning rather than acting as a broker of knowledge. In this model a teacher would recognize that each student has his or her own legitimate ways of approaching a given objective. These ways of knowing might be rooted in cultural traditions or other social experiences (Bailey & Pransky, 2005; Blair & Hoy, 2006).

In general it can be said that constructivist or "learner-centered approaches" require attention to students' "construction of knowledge" in ways that do not exclusively involve direct instruction from the professor. By contrast, instructor-centered instruction notions of teaching, which focus on "knowledge transmission" continue to be most prevalent methods of teaching in college classrooms (Lee, 2003; Luppicini, 2007). In the knowledge transmission mode of teaching, course content is most often provided by the instructor verbally through lectures, presentations, and seminars.

Challenges for Constructivism in Higher Education

In a college classroom use of constructivist learning theories might involve students and professors tinkering with ideas, exploring data through hands-on activities, learning through solving real world problems, or working collaboratively to improve theories (Puntambekar, 2006). As one might imagine, the amount of preparation and pedagogical skill needed for learner-centered teaching requires more effort and planning than the traditional model (MacDonald & Thompson, 2005; Stansberry, 2006; Stern, 2004). While constructivist learning theories have much to offer for the design and

implementation of college courses (face-to-face or online) further development, support within universities, and research is needed (Luppicini, 2007).

Factors that work to prevent widespread adoption of constructivist learning theories include: lack of infrastructure, faculty reward systems, and a better understanding of students' needs. University committees that approve or deny tenure and promotion often place more emphasis on research and publishing efforts. One result of this emphasis is that constructivist or student-centered teaching is not feasible or a top priority for professors. Instructional approaches may be chosen with efficiency and expediency in mind so that more time is available to conduct research. As a result college teaching often remains primarily instructor-focused (i.e. lecture, note-taking, etc) rather than student-centered (hands-on, active learning, etc.) (Zhao, et al., 2005). Complicating this, constructivist models that emphasize student-centered learning approaches may be uncomfortable and disadvantageous for individuals who may have predominately or exclusively experienced teacher-centered or directed instruction throughout their educational careers (Bailey & Pransky, 2005). There is also increasing recognition of the need to understand how socio-cultural and gender differences influence online learning (An & Kim, 2006; Andrew, 2007; Bowman, Holmes, & Swan, 1999). Further research needs to be done to help faculty understand students' needs and learning style in order to make appropriate instructional decisions in an online course.

The Needs of Online Learners

Online delivery is considered to be particularly viable for introductory courses and courses in niche subject areas, such as courses designed for teachers of students with low incidence disabilities (Spooner, et al., 2000). Teacher education researchers are

working to determine which types of courses are suitable for online delivery and how best to design instruction given the unique characteristics of teacher education curriculum and capabilities of course management systems (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). When teaching online, instructors need to recognize the needs of the students in their classrooms. When moving to a partial or full online teaching format, faculty may have the opportunity to work with instructional designers and software developers to customize course content and student interface. Some professors are able to employ tech-savvy graduate students who assist with online teaching assignments. However, many college professors are on their own in learning how to teach online with Course Management Systems (CMS).

Research has indicated that a balance of interactivity, responsiveness, structure, and learner autonomy are important for creating positive virtual learning environments. Further research about students in online courses demonstrates that they must be organized, effective time managers, self-motivated, and aware of their particular learning styles (Zhao, et al., 2005). Students who succeed in online courses also need strong reading and writing abilities (Bender, 2003).

Learning to teach online also requires thinking differently about student and instructor roles. Anagnostopoulos, Abasnadjian, and McCrory (2005) investigated how power relations between teachers and students are altered in online courses. They found that in more learner-centered online environments, students had increased opportunities to take control of their own learning. Their findings also indicated that in the online environment there were increased opportunities for students to challenge and subvert the instructor's authority or the content being presented. In face-to-face classrooms students

may be encouraged to share their opinions and the instructor can intervene to clarify misunderstandings in real time. In the online environment interventions of this nature are challenging because it is difficult to convey tone of voice and or expression in text-based formats. Akdemir (2008) points out that course quality, expectations of students, and the future success of online course offerings should be issues of faculty and administrators discussion at the post-secondary level.

Continuous Professional Development for Teachers

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 set forth requirements for all teachers to be Highly Qualified. It also mandated that states provide teachers with “high quality” professional development throughout their career. This mandate challenged researchers to systematically explore continuous professional development as relates to teacher learning and student outcomes (Borko, 2004). While educational researchers have conducted empirical studies of teacher satisfaction and changes in behavior or attitudes resulting from participation in online professional development activities, Desimone (2009) called for a more comprehensive research agenda. This agenda includes the identification of new research methodologies and exploration core features that help define effective continuous professional development. The core features include: strong content focus, opportunities for active learning, coherence with reform or policy initiatives, substantial duration (typically a semester or 20 hours), and collective participation in sustainable learning communities.

Online Learning in Special Education Teacher Education

Online technologies opened up many possibilities for pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development in the field of Special Education.

Online technologies have created new possibilities for supplemental training for community-based early childhood service providers and personnel preparation coursework in the area of Early Intervention on an international level (Ludlow, 2003). A number of special education courses examining student satisfaction and outcomes in online and face-to-face formats have indicated that the two modes of delivery are comparable (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; O'Neal, Jones, Miller, Campbell, & Peirce, 2007; Spooner, et al., 2000). However, Dyches, Smith, and Syal (2005) argue that interactions between instructors' and students' learning about the needs of students with exceptionalities may not be adequate in online courses. Pedagogy in face-to-face courses include: role playing, simulations, debate, case study and other opportunities designed to promote dispositions and affective skills needed when working with students with disabilities and their families. Instructors of face-to-face courses can also provide pre-service teachers and practitioners with modeling and immediate feedback during the practice of teaching methods and approaches.

There is a need for studies that examine what it takes to create meaningful online learning experiences that facilitate the meeting of goals and objectives that are particular to professional development in special education. This study focuses on instructor and learner experiences in an online special education course entitled: *Educating Students with Autism*. It is my hope that this study will make a contribution to research in the field of special education teacher education.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Portraiture, a methodology grounded in interpretive phenomenology and developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), grew from the rejection of the positivist philosophical tradition in educational research. While logical positivism has long been defeated as a philosophy of science, the positivist epistemology still dominates educational research (Paul, 2005). Research conducted in the positivist tradition seeks to maintain objectivity and distance between the researcher and the participants. Scholars in other philosophical traditions view the positivist goal of objectivity as problematic and, perhaps, undesirable because it results in an incomplete view of the world. An example used by Paul (2005) brings into sharp relief the need for researchers to move beyond the positivist paradigm. Paul discusses how achievement and intelligence tests considered to be objective and un-biased actually have privileged children from the dominant culture and have promoted a negative image of minority students. As Paul points out, “needed was not only a different norming of tests but a perspective to enable educators and policymakers to understand more about the complex and culturally variable lives of all students” (Paul, 2005, p.5).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman-Davis (1997) view Portraiture as a methodology which endeavors to move away from positivism while balancing the need for empirical research infused post-modern aesthetic elements that can contextualize and give meaning to analyses. Portraiture has been described as, “... a blending of qualitative methodologies—life history, naturalist inquiry, and most prominently, that of

ethnographic methods”(Dixon, Chapman, & Hill, 2005, p. 17). The products of portraitist research are compelling, empirically grounded, and meaningful narratives.

Portraiture Methodology

This section will provide an overview of the principles and understandings that guided the design and data gathering for this study. Descriptions of the study design and data gathering are detailed in the following sections. The portraiture methodology resulted from the desire of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) to improve research and cross boundaries by “providing opportunities to recognize the scientific rigor of artistic processes and the potential artistry of science” (p 22). Portraitists aim at developing deeper understandings of lives, pedagogy, or cultural institutions. This is accomplished as,

Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions – their authority, knowledge and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image. The relationship between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and becomes an arena for navigating the empirical, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of authentic and compelling narrative (p. xv).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that, when done well, portraiture research can create a space where readers are invited to make their own interpretations and meanings. Attending to the elements of voice, context, relationships, and emergent themes are vital for the researcher to be able to synthesize data and create authentic and

aesthetically whole interpretations of people, lives, or institutions. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) the *aesthetic* refers to efforts of the artist or researcher to make their meaning clear. When crafting portraits, both artists and researchers find ways to represent the subject matter and inevitably convey their representation in a unique way. Despite different outcomes, both artists and researchers use similar tools to craft their representations, as with painting:

In the methodology of portraiture, the aesthetic aspects of production include the keen use of descriptors that delineate, like line; dissonant refrains that provide nuance, like shadow; and complex details that evoke the impact of color and the intricacy of texture. The forms that are delineated convene into emergent themes and the interrelationship of these themes is woven through the connections of their content against the backdrop of their shared context (p. 29).

Thus mirroring the processes of art, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) outline five aspects for researchers using portraiture to consider as they create the expressive content of the portrait. Those aspects are: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole. In the paragraphs that follow, I will summarize these aspects and discuss strategies that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) recommend to be implemented in a study. The authors did not intend for these aspects to be performed in a linear fashion. They are elements that should frame all stages of the inquiry process. In the following description of the elements of portraiture, the terms researcher and portraitist are used interchangeably.

Context

Conveying the context of a study is important to empower others to be able to appreciate it. There may be unique historical, environmental, personal, or internal contextual factors that have influence on the subject matter. Attending to these factors can help the researcher determine what is important to highlight or deemphasize when developing the final narrative. Strategies for writing about context during a study include beginning with a broad description of the context and gradually narrowing the focus to the particulars. This might include collecting and reviewing relevant documents, observing and interviewing on site. It might also include disclosing the internal perspectives, biases, and motives of the researcher.

Voice

Voice refers to the researcher's voice as data is being collected and interpreted as well as the participants' voice as they provide information or help with analysis. Strategies to capture voice might include elaborating on the researcher's and participants' voices as witnesses on the scene, as interpreters of events, or even as they are preoccupied with their own histories in any given moment. One or all of these uses of voice can be included in the design of the study. In portraiture, the researcher's voice is always present yet controlled so as not to overshadow the participants' perspectives. The researcher is compelled to consistently disclose pre-conceived notions and motivations about the study. The goal after all is to paint the story from the participant's point-of-view.

Relationships

The relationship aspect refers to interaction and conversation between the researcher and the participant. The researcher should remain attentive as the relationship grows and changes over time. Relationships built between the researcher and the participants may vary depending on the goals, length, and depth of the study. What matters is that the portraitist remains cognizant of how the time invested is impacting the quality and dynamics of the relationship. Some recommended strategies are suggested for researchers at all stages of the project. Before visiting a research site, such as a school or a community center, researchers may wish to engage in role playing to help anticipate potential pitfalls or detractors to the building of rapport with study participants. They might also list possible questions they expected, and should spend time with written documents learning as much as possible about the organization beforehand. During the visit, researchers must be flexible and remember that when interacting with participants, through interviews or conversations, the goal is to be open to learning and provide opportunities for the participants to comfortably and authentically share their thoughts. When using a recording device during field work, the researcher should request permission and thoroughly to explain the rationale for its use. After the visit, the relationship remains important. Researchers are ethically bound to protect identities of participants in the relationship that was forged during the visits. The disclosure of details of the relationship between the researcher and the participant are only included in the portrait to the extent that they bear on the emerging themes relevant to the portrait. Member checking defined as providing the participant with an opportunity to review and comment on available findings. Member checking with the participants is another way to

honor the relationships built during the project. Member checking can be done throughout the study as well, but is most important for providing closure for the participants.

Emergent Themes

Attending to emergent themes is a vital aspect of portraiture. From the moment the study begins to take shape (in the researcher's mind), the portraitist engages in an iterative process of researching in the field and analyzing the data. As she analyzes the data, she is interpreting and identifying or disregarding themes and preparing for the next visit. Themes emerge as the researcher engages in analytical questioning about the phenomena under consideration. When thinking about emergent themes, the portraitist must seek to identify common themes but resist the temptation to distill the flavor of the participant's individual and unique perspectives. When looking for themes, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that the portraitist must carefully balance between "...the hard edges of classification and the complex blur of human experience..." (p. 215). The caution against reducing lived experiences to meaningless generalizations is echoed throughout the work of Max van Manen (1990),

Too often theme analysis is understood as an unambiguous and fairly mechanical application of some frequency count or coding of selected terms in transcripts or texts, or some breakdown of the content of protocol or documentary material....making meaning of a text or of a lived experience is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure – grasping and formulating thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of “seeing” meaning. Ultimately, the concept of theme is rather irrelevant and may

be consider simply as a means to get at the notion we are addressing. Theme gives order and control to our research and writing (p.79).

As with the aspect of relationships discussed earlier, watching for emergent themes occurs at every phase of the project. Before and after an interaction with a participant, the portraitist may gather preliminary ideas from documents or artifacts about the subject matter. During the visits the portraitist listens for, what Lawrence-Lightfoot calls “repetitive refrains” or formulations that recur either implicitly or explicitly in the environment, language used in conversation, and interactions among and with participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggest that the researcher maintain and periodically refer back to a notebook or “Impressionistic Record” (p. 188). The researcher should carefully document sources that are lending credence to particular emergent themes. Member checking or sharing and confirming the themes that emerged throughout the study with the participants is also a way to authenticate the interpretations that have developed.

The Aesthetic Whole

Finally, the researcher shifts attention to the development of the aesthetic whole. As mentioned earlier, aesthetics refers to work done to bring together the parts of the whole in order to construct the portrait. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) eloquently state dual purposes of portraiture: “...to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and to the heart...” (p. 243). However, to accomplish this, the portraitist searches for patterns that help paint a picture of the life, events, or interactions that occurred. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggest that the portraitist first attend to locating the overarching story, narrative, or gestalt that gives order and meaning

to the data collected. Then the portraitist should consider how the data will provide structure to the constructed text. For example, there may be common threads that run through the stories of all the participants. The next consideration is to the form of the text, as this is the element that brings the stories to life; it is the texture of the details that are incorporated into the document. Finally, the portraitist strives for coherence in all aspects of the portrait. Is there an overarching theme located logically from the themes that emerged in various data sources? Are there sufficient details to provide texture and to paint the picture so that it is coherent and genuine? This is the aesthetic whole.

Research Perspective

Interpretive phenomenology is the theoretical basis for the portraiture methodology that was used in this study. Benner (1994) identifies interpretive phenomenology as being well-suited for research aimed at understanding people, events, or practices in their own terms. Interpretive phenomenology is one of many phenomenological programs that are rooted in the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl. Holstein and Gubruim (2005) describe Husserl's work as being concerned with ontological questions that explore the experiential underpinnings of personal knowledge. Interpretive research grounded in phenomenology can be defined as practice that,

engages both the *hows* and the *whats* of social reality; it is centered in both how people methodologically construct their experiences and their worlds; and in the configurations of meaning and institutional life that inform and shape their reality-constituting activity (p. 484).

Interpretive phenomenology is utilized in nursing and health care research and other human sciences where understanding the embodied and lived experience of patients

and practitioners is vital (Benner, 1994). Researchers working from an interpretive phenomenological perspective do not strive for a single objective interpretation of events or experiences. They accept that the researcher is an inextricable part of any interpretation provided and that multiple interpretations can offer valuable insight into the commonalities and differences found in any situation (Benner, 1994; Duffy & Jonassen, 1992). Thus, phenomenology blurs the lines between the researcher and the participant as the researcher tries to understand the lived experience of the participant (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005).

Portraits developed as a result of this inquiry are grounded in the following: (a) participants' general understanding of the nature and purpose of the course, (b) their understanding the online pedagogical tools used for instruction, (c) their perceptions of the online discussion boards (synchronous and asynchronous), and (d) their concerns. The following section describes the procedures utilized to collect data for this study.

Research Procedures

Grounded in the framework of Portraiture Methodology, this section includes discussion of course and participant selection processes, description of the research phases, and the boundaries of the study.

Course Selection

The course entitled: *Educating Students with Autism* was selected for this study as a result of literature review and application of criteria. As discussed in chapter two, Spooner, et al (2000) identified an increased use of technology and online course delivery for teacher preparation and professional development in the field of special education. As a future teacher educator in the field of Special Education, my decision to focus on such a

course for this study evolved from the growing awareness of challenges inherent in virtual classrooms (Anagnostopoulos, Abasnadjian, & McCrory, 2005) and the affordances and limitations of online delivery in teacher education (An & Kim, 2006).

To identify the course for this study, I contacted the state coordinator of the Florida Virtual Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Distance Learning Program. I subsequently examined the historical information and program evaluation data report available on the Virtual ESE website. The Virtual ESE Cumulative Data Report (Florida Department of Education, 2006) includes attendance, instructor, and institutional data from 1999-2006. Review of these data led to development of selection criteria for identifying courses that would inform the research questions.

A brief background of Florida's Virtual ESE program as described on the website and in the report (Florida Department of Education, 2006) provided the rationale for the course selection criteria. According to the report, the Virtual ESE program began in 1999 with a public university providing a single course to fifteen students. The state-funded program reached its apex with nine universities offering twelve courses (four per semester) serving 264 students in 2003. From 2004-2006, enrollment and course offerings decreased. In 2007, the course offerings were streamlined to focus on courses needed by teachers for endorsement to become highly qualified for teaching students with autism, severe and profound disabilities or Pre-Kindergarten ESE populations. With the new programmatic focus, four courses are offered each spring and fall to assist teachers who need to earn their endorsement. Since 1999 Florida's Virtual ESE program has enrolled over 1,400 students, the majority of whom are in-service teachers.

The report also included data from a five question satisfaction survey that was administered to students in five courses offered during 2006 (See Appendix D). Three of the survey questions provided some interesting information. Most of the students who took the survey indicated that they had a positive experience and would enroll in another Virtual ESE course in the future. The majority of respondents indicated that they did not experience significant technological challenges while taking the course. Students also indicated that they felt supported during their initial access to the course and that the distance learning procedures were adequate. These data are interesting because they established, at least tentatively, that the decreasing enrollment was probably not due to systemic problems within the Virtual ESE program. These responses generated questions which led to the development of the course selection criteria for the study. What explained the decreased enrollment over the years in Florida's Virtual ESE program? Did the teachers need the courses offered? Did districts' in-house certification programs reduce costs or increase ease of access thus replacing the need for the university-based online courses? Are online courses not as popular as they once were? Are the courses meeting the needs of the population they are designed for?

Course Selection Criteria

The questions above were instrumental for developing the course selection criteria. Specifically, I sought to identify a course that was, (a) a graduate-level ESE teacher education course offered completely online supported by the Virtual ESE Program in Florida, (b) taught by the same instructor at least two times between 2005 and 2007, (c) part of a degree or endorsement course of study, (d) utilized discussion boards extensively, and (e) emphasized the learning of instructional practice more than theory.

Three courses met the course selection criteria: *Foundations of Special Education*, *Advanced Theory & Practice in Mental Retardation*, and *Educating Students with Autism*. All of these courses provided unique opportunities for this study, however review of the syllabi indicated that the *Educating Students with Autism* placed heavier emphasis on discussion board interaction and students were required to submit a portfolio of evidence demonstrating particular teaching strategies and skills (see decision matrix in Appendix C). Therefore, the course selected for this study was the course entitled: *Educating Students with Autism*.

Educating Students with Autism was offered in the summers of 2006 and 2007. The course was offered to Exceptional Student Educators throughout the region in the summer of 2006 and enrolled thirty-three students (thirty-two females and one male). During this course a majority of the students declared speech language pathology (SLP) as their area of study. However, during the summer of 2007, enrolled twenty-one students (nineteen females and two males) and the majority of students in this course declared Exceptional Student Education (ESE) as their area of study. This study focused on the *Educating Students with Autism* course offered during the summer of 2007 due to the increased number of students with a declared special education major and the recency of the course offering. The instructor for this course was contacted and invited to participate via email. She was extremely agreeable to participating because she viewed it as an opportunity to reflect on her own teaching practice and to gain insight into her student's needs from the portraits that would result from the study.

Participant Selection Criteria

Participants for this study consisted of in-service, ESE teachers in General or Exceptional Education settings, who successfully completed the graduate-level course entitled: *Educating Students with Autism*. I assumed that these individuals would be experienced teachers (at least two years), who were working toward an advanced degree or seeking to become highly qualified. As such, I hoped that they might be more capable than less experienced teachers or students from another degree program to reflect on how the course influenced their teaching practice.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment of participants began mid-April 2008. I met with the instructor of the course to explain the study and identify potential participants. She printed out the 2007 summer course roster and indicated which students would be the best candidates for participating in the study based on the criteria described above. The course enrolled 32 students during this term. There were twenty-eight graduate-level students; twenty-one were majoring in ESE and seven in SLP. Four undergraduate ESE and one undergraduate with a Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) major. According to the instructor, the undergraduates were allowed to take the course to earn endorsement in Autism prior to teaching. Fourteen students comprised of the four undergraduates, the seven graduate SLP majors, and one student who took an incomplete due to an injury were excluded from the list of potential participants for this study. Additionally, two graduate ESE majors were identified by the instructor because they minimally completed the course. The application of the selection criteria resulted in eighteen potential participants for this study. The instructor indicated that four of the remaining eighteen had distinguished

themselves as highly successful, but she considered all eighteen successful as online learners in terms of higher than average grades, work quality and/or levels of participation. As I originally proposed, I randomly selected 10 of the 18 potential participants and emailed them an invitation to participate. Only four responded to this email and agreed to participate. A second invitation was emailed to the eight remaining potential participants who met the study criteria, but no one responded to this second email. Considering this limited response, I consulted the instructor of the online course. She suggested that I ask the four who agreed to participate to contact other students from the class. As a result, I recruited two additional participants, successfully securing the six student participants necessary for conducting the study.

The rationale for identifying seven participants (the instructor and the six students) resulted from my deliberate efforts to be consistent with the methodology and respectful of participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that while teams of Portraiture researchers are able to explore the experiences of larger numbers of participants the single researcher is advised to select fewer participants to ensure opportunity to build rapport and maintain trusting relationships. After considering the advice of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis and evaluating the amount of data I proposed to collect I determined that five to seven participants would be the most feasible given the nature of the study and amount of data I proposed to collect from each participant. I also believed that selecting a handful of participants, and not over-extending myself as a researcher, would be a way of respecting the time and generosity of participants who agreed to participate in my study.

Table 3.1 Participant Selection and Recruitment

Negotiation of Access

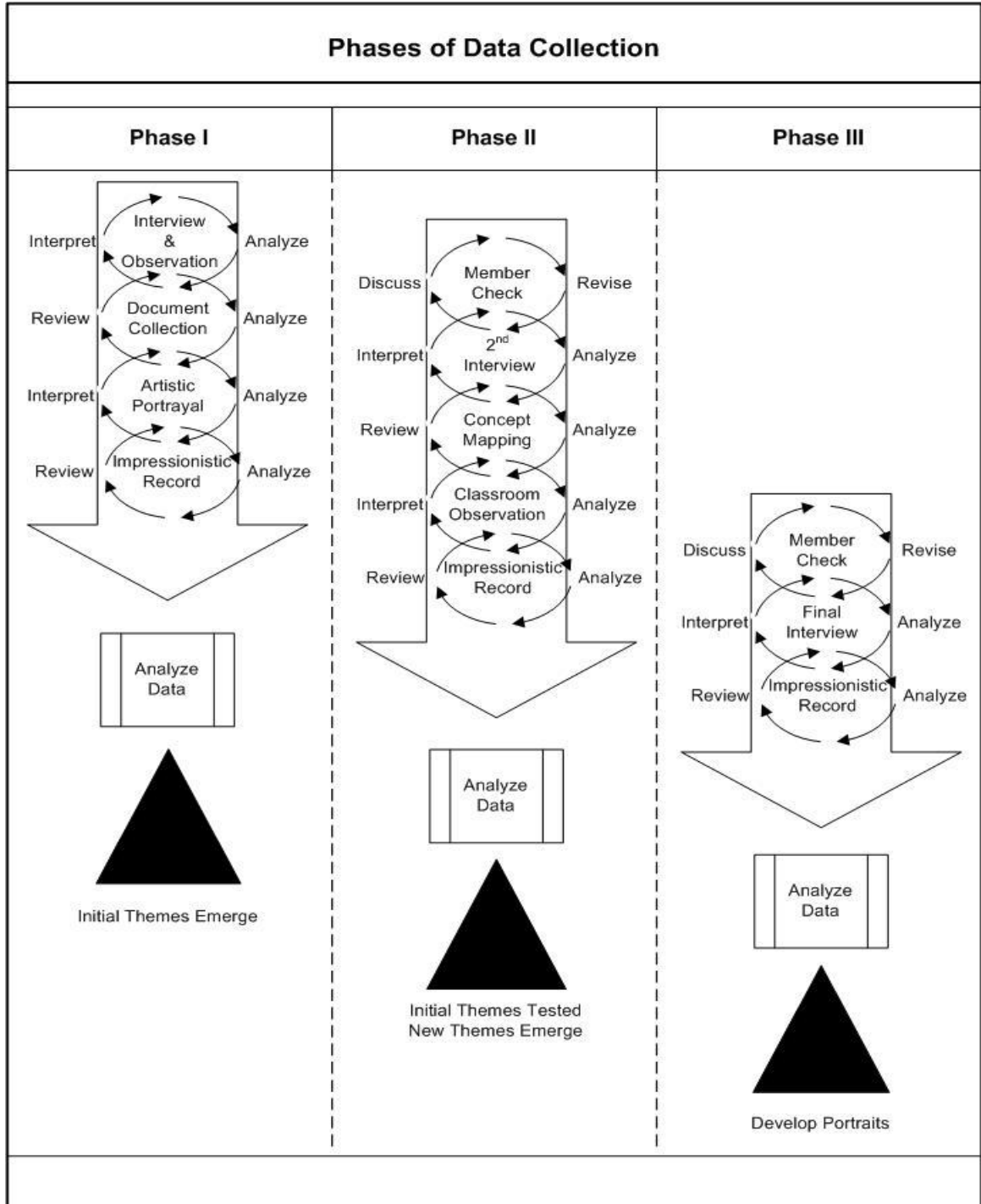
From the start, I worked to develop rapport and a sense of trust with the participants who volunteered to be a part of the study. Initially, I sent an invitation letter to each potential participant (Appendix E). This letter was adapted from the sample provided by Janesick (2004) designed to provide adequate information about the intent of the study and a warm greeting. At the first face-to-face meeting with the instructor and the students, I explained my rationale for conducting the study and my expectations for participants. I clarified that the study was not an evaluation of the course or the instructor. I also informed the participants who took the course that their participation in the study would have no impact on their grades or status within the degree or endorsement program. I explained that they would receive a digital kids camera to keep for use in their classroom and that I would hold a drawing for an iPod at the end of the data collection as their incentive for participating in the study. In addition to the incentive, I explained that the only known benefit to those who participated would be the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching and learning. The portraits developed for each study participant provided in Chapter 4 will further detail how the participant/researcher relationship developed.

Data Collection

Phases of Data Collection

This study was conducted in three phases as illustrated below. The phases were considered to be dynamic and interactive as illustrated by the dashed lines that divide each of the phases of the study.

Figure 1. Phases of Data Collection



When using portraiture, the researcher must remain "...alert to surprises and inconsistencies and improvise conceptual and methodological responses that match the reality..." (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 43). At the start, I explained the study

and obtained informed consent (See Appendix F) from all participants. Throughout each phase described below I maintained a parallel journal, also termed “Impressionistic Record” by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), of my own thoughts and responses to events. This record contributed to the iterative development of themes and the final portrait.

Phase 1

The first meeting with the instructor was held at her office on campus and at the school site where each of the student participants worked, except for one student who asked to meet at a coffee shop after the end of her school day. The main purpose of the first meetings with the instructor and students was to begin building a relationship with the participants. I conducted the first interview utilizing Interview Protocol #1 for the instructor and students (see Appendix A and B) to learn about the instructor and students’ perceptions about the overall nature and purposes of the course. The interview questions also probed to determine if the students had taken courses with the professor before or had other interactions with her. During the first meetings, I observed the work spaces of the instructor and student (i.e. university office or classroom). Participants were also asked to share documents and artifacts from the course to clarify the nature of the work that was assigned and completed in the course.

At this first meeting, I provided each participant with an inexpensive digital camera so that they could take pictures of the workspace they use at home to complete online coursework. Before concluding the first meeting, I invited the instructor to describe her perception of herself as an online instructor metaphorically and I invited the participants to create an artistic portrayal of themselves as an online learner. I informed

the participants that this artistic portrayal might be a poem, drawing or other medium to illustrate aspects of an individual personal experience beyond grades or assignments.

Eisner (2002) explains that creating art is a purposeful human endeavor. He states that,

Work in art is typically directed by an idea that is realized in the material and through the form that the artist creates. These ideas can be large or small, important or trivial; they can reveal what has gone unseen, or they can put the familiar into a context in which it can be re-seen in a new and vital way. The artist can comment on or celebrate a slice of the world (Eisner, 2002, p.51).

As I engaged the participants in this activity, I first provided them with the purpose and a variety of materials. Then I offered to exit the room so that my presence would not unduly constrain or shape what the participant wanted to create.

I realized that my presence, the fact that I asked the participants to create the artistic portrayal and subsequently to share it, would inevitably be an influence on their product. However, it was still my hope that the participants would be able to focus on creating something meaningful to them. A genuine artistic expression was described by van Mannen as,

not just representational or imitational of some event in the world. Rather, it transcends the experiential world in an act of reflective existence. An artistic text differs from the text of everyday talking in that it is always arrived at in a reflective mood (van Mannen, 1990).

After the interview, observation, and artistic portrayal activity, this first phase of this study culminated with preliminary analysis of collected data. I analyzed transcriptions of the interviews, notes from the review of documents provided by the

students (assignments, notes, projects, etc.), observations, photographs, reflections in my Impressionistic Record, and the artistic portrayals. As a result of this analysis initial themes were identified and recorded.

Phase 2

During phase two, the focus of the study shifted to learn more about the student's experiences. The locations for the second meetings occurred in the same place (office and school sites, except for one student who asked me to meet her at a restaurant prior to the start of the school day. The instructor was only asked to participate in a member check and a second interview. Interview Protocol #2 began with a member check where I invited the participants to discuss and comment on my initial themes. After the member check, the second interview questions probed their experiences with discussion boards and provided a basis for the concept mapping activity. The participants were then invited to develop a concept map to demonstrate ways in which their learning in the online course had impacted their own teaching practice. All of the participants were agreeable to performing this task. I followed up the concept mapping activity with a classroom observation session to observe the examples and connections that were illustrated. As this phase progressed, I continued to record my reflections in my Impressionistic Record. Before beginning the third phase, I conducted an analysis of the interview and observation data to revise the initially developed themes and to uncover new themes.

Phase 3

During the third phase of the project, I conducted a final member check and interview. This interview consisted of questions that arose from the first and second phases of the study. After all of the data was collected I conducted the drawing for the

8GB iPod Touch. A student assistant in the Department of Special Education assisted with the drawing. I contacted the winner, who provided me with her mailing address. I ordered the gadget and sent directly to her. I emailed the whole group, explained the procedure for the drawing and that the individual whose name won had been notified. I did not receive any replies to that email. During the final phase I also began a more in depth review and analysis of the data and my Impressionistic Record to begin writing the portraits.

Study Boundaries

A boundary is a real or imaginary point beyond which a person or thing cannot go (Mirriam-Webster, 2005). The main boundaries for this study are related to the representation of experience and the situated nature of the findings. I developed portraits that convey a negotiated understanding of how students perceived their experiences in an online class. Although I examined and sought to triangulate empirical evidence and involved participants in the construction of the portrait, this study can never claim to fully capture the participant's actual experience. Additionally, the final products of this study may not assist readers in predicting how other students will experience online classes. What is related in the final portraits will be a narrative text co-constructed by the researcher and the participants. As such, the portraits were inextricably linked to the researcher, the particular participants, the course they took, and the institution in which they enrolled. Despite the local and idiosyncratic nature of the knowledge that generated in this study, the final portraits may contribute to students' and teachers' understanding of concerns or issues that can arise and may assist them in anticipating future events.

The Iterative Coding Process

Text analysis was conducted with the interview transcripts, artistic representations, and observation notes. These data were coded using *Atlas Ti*, a popular computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) software package. Coding of all data occurred in three iterations: First to establish a preliminary code set, secondly to refine my code set and obtain input from an outside reader, and third to review text and further refine the code set. For this study, codes were most often short descriptors assigned to passages of text (e.g. instructor outreach, student issue, instructor concerns, etc.). Codes were grouped or related in ways that led to development of themes (e.g. ‘Instructor’s provision of support to students’ or ‘Concerns arising from course format’).

An outside reader was then invited to code a sample interview to ensure that I did not overlook potential themes or identify themes that were not evidenced in the data. The outside reader for this study was a doctoral student with experience in conducting thematic analyses for other research projects. She was familiar with the coding process as well as using the CAQDA software. Meadows & Morse (2001) caution qualitative researchers to carefully consider when and how to utilize an outside reader to check codes in any study. I assumed that our different backgrounds and levels of expertise would lead to different interpretations when coding or labeling themes. In order to forestall major conflicts, I explained the study and the research questions to the outside reader before asking her to code the text. The reader’s coding and my coding were in agreement approximately 80% of the time. While major conflicts were avoided by providing the reader with background information about the study, it was impossible to eliminate differing views entirely. As stated above, complete agreement about the

emerging themes was not the objective of this exercise. When there were discrepancies between what the outside reader and I identified as themes, we discussed the differences and sought to reach consensus about the meaning of the passages.

In the process of comparing my themes to those identified by the outside reader there were differences in the perspectives and understandings that informed our interpretation of passages. The outside reader had only basic background knowledge of the issues that are typically identified as important to those researching online learning, such as, developing community and rapport, handling sensitive issues or conflicts in discussion boards, implementing effective strategies and technologies for different learning activities, and developing authentic assessments of participation and learning. However, the outside reader did have a strong background in teacher education, so it was particularly helpful when she offered her perspective.

I noticed that the early themes I identified were focused narrowly on the technical and logistical aspects about teaching online that were evident in the text. For instance, I was impressed with the time, tools, and the daily tasks that were involved in teaching online. After further review and feedback from the outside reader I began to make sense of the ways in which the instructor's passion for the content influenced her actions and decisions about teaching and learning online.

I also conducted a final review of documents and my own impressionistic record. After these data analysis steps were completed I developed portraits of the instructor and each online learner. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) emphasize the challenges inherent in the process of analyzing and making sense of the data collected. Lightfoot-Lawrence and Davis (1997) provide guiding questions that can assist in the development

of the final portraits. In writing the final portraits, I attended to the questions they provided:

- Has contextual information been included as clarifying introduction to and edifying backdrop throughout the portrait?
- Has voice been sufficiently revealed and modulated so that it will inform but not distort the interpretation presented in the portrait?
- Have relationships been respected and faith kept with the participants on the scene throughout the shaping of the final whole?
- Do the identified emergent themes resonate throughout the language and culture of the actors on the site and do they adequately scaffold the interpretation presented in the portrait? (p. 265)

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) entreat the researcher to carefully consider the ethical, logistical, and creative problems that arise when working to create an authentic and aesthetically whole record. When weaving the portrait, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis advises the portraitist attend to four dimensions,

...conception, which refers to the development of the overarching story; second is the structure, which refers to the sequencing and layering of emergent themes; third is form, which reflects the movement of the narrative, the spinning of the tale; and last is cohesion, which speaks about the unity and integrity of the piece (p. 247).

Attention to these dimensions when crafting the final portraits will be valuable to other researchers and to a wider public audience.

Chapter Four: Portraits

Each of the portraits is a composite description informed by observations and conversations with each of the participants. The names of each participant are fictitious to protect anonymity of participants. As I spent time with each participant I sought to get to know them, to understand their experience in the course and what impact it had for them as teachers. Thus, structurally the portraits begin with a description of the participant, her professional background, her workplace context or a memorable event. Following this, I describe how the participant valued the course. I then provide detail of the participants' experiences or impressions from the course and any reported impact the course or elements such as discussion boards had on her teaching and learning. Woven throughout each portrait are the artistic representations that participants made to illustrate their perceptions of themselves as online learners and connections that they were able to make between the course and their own teaching. The portraits may also include photographs of the participants' space at home where they most frequently worked on the online course. Concluding the portraits are my reflections on particular issues and emergent themes or questions.

Portrait 1: Dr. Foster

“What I try to do is act as a conduit from the literature between the evidence that we know about autism combined with my practical experience for the student” stated Dr. Foster, as she explained her personal approach to teaching her online courses. Those who know her realize that Dr. Foster places high value on personal connection and is well-known for her research and passion for children with autism. Her career began in 1977

when Dr. Foster earned her Master's in Speech Pathology. During the next decade she worked with many children with autism and she became increasingly aware that she needed additional information about literacy, visual skills and learning disabilities. In the 90's she returned to graduate school. After earning her interdisciplinary Educational Specialist degree in Learning Disabilities, Reading and Language she began working for the university as an instructor and clinical supervisor in the Communication Sciences Department. She was recently appointed to a tenure-line position in the department and has a significant national reputation in the field. Prior to the *Educating Students with Autism* course, Dr. Foster had only created online modules or guest presentations in other online courses. She taught the *Educating Students with Autism* twice prior to the session in 2007 which was the focus of this study and our discussions.

She works in small rectangular office that is bright and homey despite the closed white mini-blinds covering the window. Near the door, the wall is decorated with two small hand-painted shelves, one holding a framed photo of her granddaughter and the other a delicate beaded Victorian purse. There are also shelves with colorful frames holding family photos and greeting cards. She works at an L-shaped desk which takes up the entire corner of the room. The long part of her desk is covered with stacks and piles of student papers and logs, copies of research articles, and textbooks. The short length of the desk near the window was free of papers, but holds a large flat screen monitor peppered with sticky notes and connected to a new high-end computer tower that sits near her chair. Dr. Foster's bookshelves were packed with reference books, practitioner-oriented texts, research journals, numerous video tapes and three futuristic canister-

looking drawers holding Compact Discs. Her office is in a state of organized chaos that is fairly typical of professors' offices near semester's end.

I arrived a little early, so I am sitting in a modern looking red chair at the end of her desk. She was burning a CD with some recent class lectures, videos cases, and other class materials for a homebound student undergoing cancer treatments. I told her to take her time and organized myself for our interview. I pull my digital recorder, notepad, and informed consent form from my bag. A few minutes later she spins around and rolls her chair over, so close that we were almost knee to knee, and leaning back in her ergonomic chair she gives me a big smile, and says, "Ok, now I'm all yours!" She is wearing a light-blue pant suit and has her sandy-blond hair tucked behind her ears – her smile is contagious. I explain that I want to learn about her experiences teaching the *Educating Students with Autism* course online. We talk about her experiences and the benefits and challenges of this particular course teaching online. She starts out explaining how it was a course she developed for another department and was thrilled to have the opportunity to teach.

Prior to becoming an Assistant Professor, Dr. Foster's main assignment was to oversee the training and clinical supervision of new speech pathology practitioners. The clinical practice occurred in a pre-school run by the Communication Sciences Department. Dr. Foster brought in children with autism to the department's pre-school program that ran three days per week. Her experiences in schools provided the impetus for this and she felt strongly that the children with autism could teach volumes to the new speech pathologists as they completed their required clinical practice hours. Of course, children with autism often have behavioral issues that can test the most experienced

professionals. So in the beginning, integrating students with autism into the department's pre-school program was a challenge. I asked if the department had asked her to include the children with autism in the pre-school program, she responded with a hearty laugh saying, "Noooo. It was my passion. They would have preferred I not bring those loud, noisy kids in here." However, she did not let that stop her and the department soon realized that having the students with autism in the pre-school was indeed helpful for training speech pathologists. Eventually, it was recognized as a win-win situation. While the department trained their new pathologists, the preschool and inclusion of students with autism was a much needed service in the local community

The program gained popularity and Dr. Foster's reputation grew quickly among local groups of parents of children with autism. She began consulting for nearby districts, conducting workshops, evaluating programs, and presenting at conferences about effective practices for teaching and improving the communication skills of children with autism. Then in 2002, the University's Regional Professional Development Partnership (PDP) contracted with Dr. Foster to develop *Educating Students with Autism* as an online course that would be included in an online endorsement program designed for in-service teachers and other professionals who work with children with autism. The PDP, housed in the Department of Special Education and funded by the State, is dedicated to the recruitment, preparation, and retention of special education teachers throughout the region. The intent of the endorsement program was to provide a convenient avenue for teachers to obtain coursework and become highly qualified to teach students with autism and other low incidence disabilities as required by the No Child Left Behind Act.

This was the first opportunity for Dr. Foster to develop and teach a class online, and she was very excited about it. The timing had been perfect because she had just completed a professional development course to learn about teaching online through the University's Center for 21st Century Teaching Excellence. With a big smile she told me that she "...was really fired up by the technology that I learned there. So it was really good timing – as if the heavens kind of aligned at that point for me to do this." Dr. Foster explained that the course was developed to provide teachers and other related service providers with an introduction to autism spectrum disorders, including "the diagnostic process, the etiology, the prevalence and the evidence-based strategies for the classroom." It was offered as the foundation course for the sequence and "...the following courses would prepare teachers to support children who are non-verbal, conduct qualitative assessments, and implement positive behavior support."

In developing an online course for the first time, Dr. Foster expressed that she was thrilled to be able to apply her new skills. She felt supported by the Center for 21st Century Teaching Excellence, "You know, they really gave me a lot good information on how to update my teaching and they are there if I want to incorporate some new and different things." Dr. Foster's positive experience developing the course and excitement for teaching online evidently motivated other faculty in her department to begin converting their courses to online formats. In fact, she told me, "...the department now has a little technology suite downstairs for all of us to do our online courses." She described it as a two-room suite full of tools faculty need, "...to be able to record lectures, to digitize all of our videotapes and design high quality online courses."

On another visit with Dr. Foster, she showed me the two-room technology suite. It was set up on the second floor of the building in what used to be of an observation suite for training the speech pathologists. The room was painted eggshell white and had one tiny window set too high in the wall for anyone to see out. Dr. Foster shared that about ten years ago, the department moved away from using the sterile suite for students' clinical practice. They now run the pre-school in large room set up like a pre-school, complete with a playground in the adjoining yard. The rationale was that the therapists-in-training would be able to conduct therapeutic activities with children in a more natural setting.

Inside the suite, we sat down in the large black chairs and turned on the new, high-end computer with two widescreen monitors. It had had an external hard drive, multiple speakers, and a professional microphone. Dr. Foster proceeded to explain and demonstrate how she uses all of the tools to design her online courses. She taught me about the technology and innovations she used and she spoke with familiarity about the different features of the software. She shared how she "...really loved using the Articulate® software which allows you to make presentations more interactive." I was interested to know how it worked, so she explained that first she digitizes her old lectures and then, "...if I want to record over an old diagnostics lecture, I would go down to 'record narration' right here - it's so easy, it's lovely. And then it [the window] minimizes and then I would narrate, 'This week in diagnostics, we're going to cover, you know, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,' and then you hit 'stop' for that slide. If you like it, you can play it." For the rest of our time in the suite, Dr. Foster showed me how easy it was to use the different software tools. I was amazed at how she incorporated so many tools into

the first course she taught online because she had only been teaching online for two years.

Later that same week, back in her office, I visited Dr. Foster and learned that she believed the online format itself was an improvement over traditional face-to-face classrooms. She explained, “First and foremost, I think it keeps students on top of content. Secondly, they have to apply their theoretical knowledge right away... I think that is the biggest benefit of teaching online.” As she taught online, she told me that the diversity of students provided a unique opportunity for students to look at something a little differently. She found in the *Educating Students with Autism* course that the class was comprised of speech pathology masters students from her own department, practicing special education teachers, and individuals who were taking the course and planning to teach students with autism in the near future. Dr. Foster found that a class comprised of a variety of professionals allowed for numerous opportunities for sharing, debating, and perspective-taking. For example, “...when I have parents who are also professionals [they] have been very powerful in saying, ‘Wait, this is the kid that I live with every single day.’” Although Dr. Foster indicated that a variety of perspectives is important for her students she also uses a mastery learning approach to ensure that her students learn the scientific basis of different practices and approaches.

She also recognized that some students would inevitably struggle with the amount of material and work expectations. So, in the course syllabus, Dr. Foster tried to be extremely explicit about the amount of time she expected them to spend on the course. She said that she has to remind students that,

It is important to realize that an on-line course requires the same amount of time as a course taken on campus. It is typically advised that a course should have 45 hours of work for each credit hour. This means that this coursework should take 13 hours of your time each week. Of course, the actual amount of time will vary depending on your learning style, previous knowledge, the complexity of the topic, and the site used for practicum field work (Syllabus, 2007, p.1).

When teaching, if she noticed a student who seemed to be uninterested in the course, Dr. Foster counseled them “early and often” inquiring directly about their intent and passion for learning to teach students with autism. If she felt the students were non-committal she was upfront with the student, saying that he or she might want to drop the course, “because this is a class for people who really are passionate about what they are doing.” She also found that unorganized students were quickly overwhelmed in the course, but that, “...most were able to catch up by mid-semester, once they realized that there were firm deadlines and that something was due every single week.” Dr. Foster concluded that more mature students did better online than their younger counterparts who lacked what she considered to be a necessary level of self-discipline.

According to Dr. Foster, those who did well in the *Educating Students with Autism* course were those who were highly motivated and passionate about working with students with autism, had good organizational skills, and had some prior experience with students with autism. “The prior experience was important because the course required them to apply a lot of what they were learning.”

Dr Foster also observed that the speech pathology majors in the course were often the most motivated and highest performing students in the course. She knew all of them

well and was aware of how hard they worked to be accepted into the highly competitive speech pathology masters program. Knowing their capabilities, Dr. Foster offered a few of them extra credit if they posted first on the discussion boards to ‘set the bar’ for the rest of the class in terms of thinking, referencing, and reflecting on the issues to be discussed.

Dr. Foster found that the practicing teachers who already worked with students with autism demonstrated existing extensive prior knowledge, skills and understanding about best practices. Dr. Foster worked to provide them with positive feedback and opportunities to understand the theories underpinning their effective practices in an effort “...to help them improve what they were already doing.” She found that as the semester progressed her activities seemed to provide students with knowledge and practice to help them gain familiarity with the issues and content that needed to be addressed.

Dr. Foster went on to tell me that the only real challenges she faced were dealing with students in the course who had limited experience as a teacher of students with autism. The inexperienced students often, “...did not understand the intractable nature of autism” she said, “...they call it a *pervasive* developmental disorder for a reason and the young teachers just think they’ll be able to ‘fix them’ when they get into the classroom.” She told me that these students could be persuaded to believe things about autism that were not scientifically-grounded. She struggled in guiding and informing student beliefs and was conflicted when one of the students, also a parent who had a child with autism, shared personal stories about strategies she tried with her son. In these situations, Dr. Foster faced the dilemma trying to figure out how to intervene. She felt she needed to respond in a way that did not minimize the experience of the parent, yet she also needed

to bring everyone's attention to practices that are actually grounded in evidence or research. She worked hard to guide the thinking of the group and their interactions. As a result, the entire class had an opportunity to examine issues from multiple perspectives.

Dr. Foster identified another challenge that she faced when teaching online. While she learned to request that students proactively communicate with her about any struggles or challenges they were experiencing, there were individuals in the class who became isolated by their classmates as a result of comments that they made in class discussions. Particularly, when they expressed ideas that ran contrary to the developing understanding the students had about the evidence-base needed to identify best practice. She told me that in these instances, she made an effort to address the student in an email and provide them with guidance and information relevant to the concepts that were being discussed. Dr. Foster chose to use email for this 'counseling' because she believed that providing to do so publicly on the discussion boards would stifle the conversation or 'make clones' of herself and that, "...inside a web-based course language is too formalized."

Despite these challenges, Dr. Foster enjoys teaching online and looks forward to teaching in this format whenever possible. As we wrapped up our conversation, she shared her desire to see teachers and speech therapists view children with autism more holistically. She hoped to inspire and encourage practice based on sound decision-making processes and scientific-evidence.

Reflection

I was thoroughly impressed with Dr. Foster's use of technology, organization, and awareness of her students' needs. I believe that Dr. Foster's unstated goals and expectations played a role in her pedagogical decisions throughout the course. For

instance, although she did not state it, she wanted the course participants to become passionate about teaching students with autism. She encouraged those who were already passionate and contacted students who seemed to lack it.

As she reached out to a student who seemed to be struggling or was not passionate, she first sought to identify problems or other issues that needed to be resolved. If these she could not assist the student and felt that they were beginning to flounder in the course, she would counsel the student to evaluate whether he or she might want to take the course at another time. If during the initial contact, she identified a problem that she could assist the student with, she would freely offer her help and encouragement. She would take action as she judged was necessary and reasonable to meet the needs of her students and ignite their passion for teaching students with autism. Based on numerous responses from the participants in this study a result, Dr. Foster was characterized as approachable, generous, and highly committed to student success.

In the portraits that follow, students from the course demonstrate awareness that Dr. Foster had a positive reputation and that she lived up to their expectations. This was due in large part because she was clear about her high standards and expectations from the first day. They found that she structured the coursework to make it manageable and was consistent in her treatment of all students. They seemed to know that Dr. Foster was highly committed to helping them gain mastery of the material.

Portrait 2: Guiliana

On a sunny day in April, I received a greeting that I will always remember. I was visiting an elementary school teacher in southwestern Florida. As I entered the room, one of the students rushed over and gave me a hug. As he did, he looked up at me with a big smile and said “Hello, Yellow!” I was bewildered for a moment and then impressed as I realized that he was noticing my bright yellow striped shirt. I thought this was an unusually perceptive and friendly greeting on the part of the little boy. He was a member of Guiliana’s pre-kindergarten class for students with autism spectrum disorders.

Guiliana worked at an elementary school. Her classroom was one in a quadrant of portable Pre-Kindergarten classrooms. The students in these classrooms shared a fenced-in playground around a big oak tree. The playground was alive with youngsters riding tricycles and climbing on the brightly colored playground equipment. I gathered my supplies, stepped out of the car, and went to find Guiliana. As I walked up to the playground, I could see the entire playground floor was covered in springy blue rubberized material used nowadays to prevent scrapes when children fall down. Guiliana was putting some toys away in a shed. She spotted me, and after saying hello, she introduced me to the aides, therapists, and the adaptive physical education teacher. It was almost 2:30 p.m., so they were busy wrapping up the day. Everyone was wearing comfortable summer clothes and tennis shoes. It was hard for me to tell if the casual attire at the school was the norm or relaxed because summer break was three weeks away. Guiliana was a white American woman with an athletic build, blonde hair, and a friendly smile. She wore a light blue shirt, matching shorts and a pair of sporty blue and grey sandals. We talked a few minutes about the beautiful weather. She told me that she only

needed to see a few more kids off before we could go in her classroom to talk. Then she asked the kids to say hello to me. The children were busy and a little shy, but said hello and look me over briefly before returning to their activities.

Once the kids were picked up or led to their buses, Guiliana and I walked through the gate toward the portables. I noticed a big sign on the gate reminding everyone to be sure to close the gate securely. I asked why the sign was needed and Guiliana explained that that some of the children with autism are “runners,” students who often run without warning, and can be quite elusive. As we walked, we were passed by a quiet line of six pre-k students and their teacher who were heading out toward the buses. The children were all holding on to colorful soft fabric handles attached every foot or so to a heavy duty blue ribbon led by the teacher and followed by the aide. Guiliana explained that this also helped with the “runners” because they liked holding the handles and were less likely to feel the urge to start running.

I noted that some recently planted flowers were growing alongside the wide sidewalk as we walked between the two rows of portables. The central area of the pod was shaded by a tall, sail-like blue canopy. Under the canopy, the area was set up so that students could play in a raised sand box, a water trough, or with chalk on the sidewalk. Guiliana’s portable was the last on the left and we walked up a noisy aluminum ramp that led to her classroom door. The door had a long window covered with metal mesh and an industrial knob with a massive metal plate to prevent break-ins. She explained that in her district, portables are easy targets for vandals and thieves because they are not typically protected by the main school building’s security system. Given this, I was amazed when I saw that that the room was equipped with a Smart Board system. After walking in the

bright sunlight, her classroom seemed dark. The perimeter of the classroom housed a number of learning stations focused on reading, scheduling, snacks, listening, playing, and sorting and counting. In the center of her space was a two-foot tall round table with a few chairs.

We pulled two miniature chairs off the stack and sat down to talk at the table. Guiliana was prepared with her book from the course and a little paper with notes that she wrote down about the course after receiving my email. We talked about the *Educating Student with Autism* course and she described how much she had enjoyed it and learned from the instructor. While she had not previously taken an online graduate level course, it turned out that she knew Dr. Foster, the course instructor, well from in-service and school-based team meetings. *Educating Students with Autism* was the first course Guiliana had taken to earn her Florida Autism Endorsement. She first heard about it from Dr. Foster with whom she worked during the previous few years. Even though Dr. Foster was not a teacher in her school, she served there as the team leader for the school's Transdisciplinary (Trans-D) Team which was part of a county-wide project to ensure appropriate expertise is available to educators and parents when making instructional, therapeutic, and support decisions for students with autism.

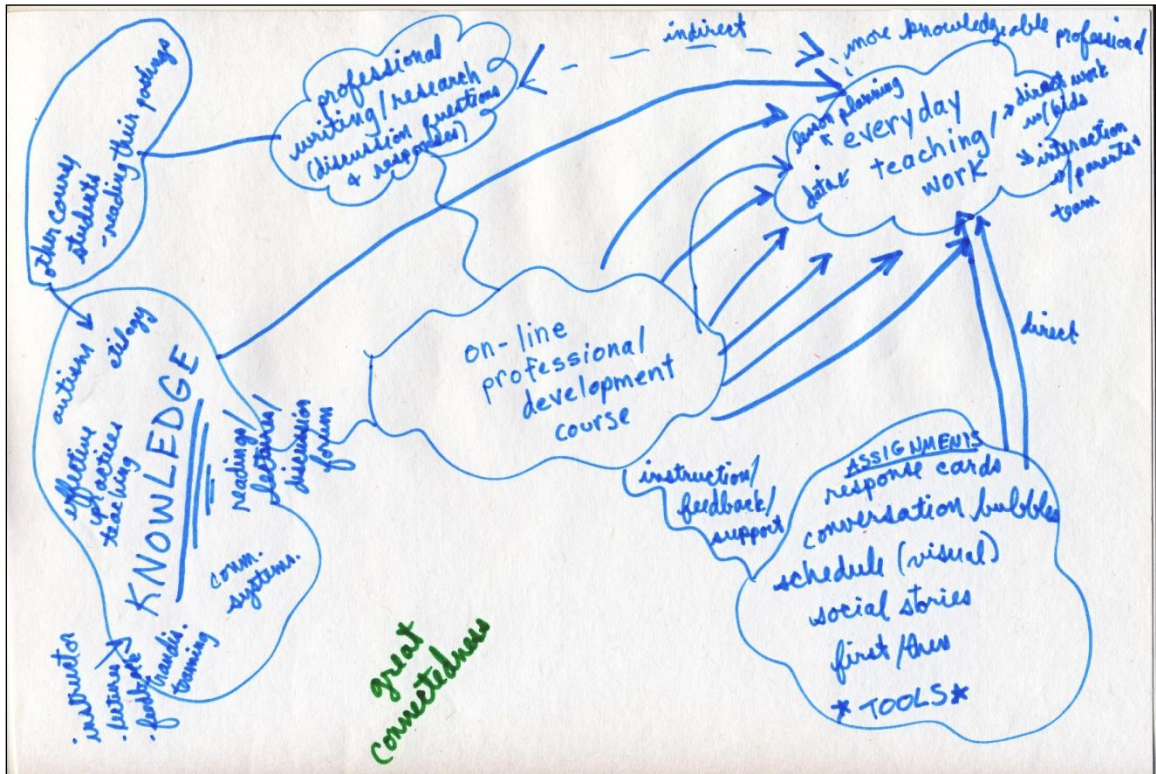
Evidently, at one of the Trans-D team meetings, Dr. Foster promoted the courses and Guiliana said, "Whoa, if you're teaching the course, I'm there!" So because Dr. Foster was teaching it, Guiliana enrolled in the *Educating Students with Autism* course right away. She said she actually took two courses that summer because she was not working. When she started talking, she seemed to struggle a little to recall specifics about this course because she took all four courses in the Autism Endorsement Program.

Though they were taught by different instructors, it was sometimes hard for Guiliana to separate events or memories from course to course. She remembers that there were only 10-15 people in the class. Since it was an online course, she mentioned that she never physically saw anyone or verbally spoke with anyone, including Dr. Foster, during the course, and that there was not a teaching assistant helping the professor. She remembered that all communication was conducted through email or on the discussion boards and that the course was highly relevant to her teaching assignment.

Guiliana shared that her school is a pre-k cluster site for young children with developmental delays and disabilities and is the site with the largest number of classrooms for students with autism in the county. As one of seven teachers in her school who teach pre-k/kindergarten students with autism, Guiliana's class consisted of a mixed group of three pre-kindergarten and four kindergarten students identified as being on the autism spectrum. She noted that most of her students also have other issues in addition to autism, such as behavior difficulties, intellectual disabilities, and severe emotional disabilities. She clarified that even though all of her students are labeled as having autism, each one is a unique individual with distinct abilities and challenges such that she uses different teaching strategies for each of them. She explained that she maintains high standards for all of her students and, although some of them are non-verbal students and must use "the access points" or state approved modified curriculum, she keeps the kindergartners working on 1st grade reading, vocabulary, and math, while the pre-k students keep busy with the typical kindergarten curriculum (pre-reading skills, letters, numbers, etc). She emphasized that all of her students are working on Florida's regular

education Sunshine State Standards. Guiliana drew a concept map, to show me how the course informed her teaching.

Figure 2. Guiliana’s Concept Map

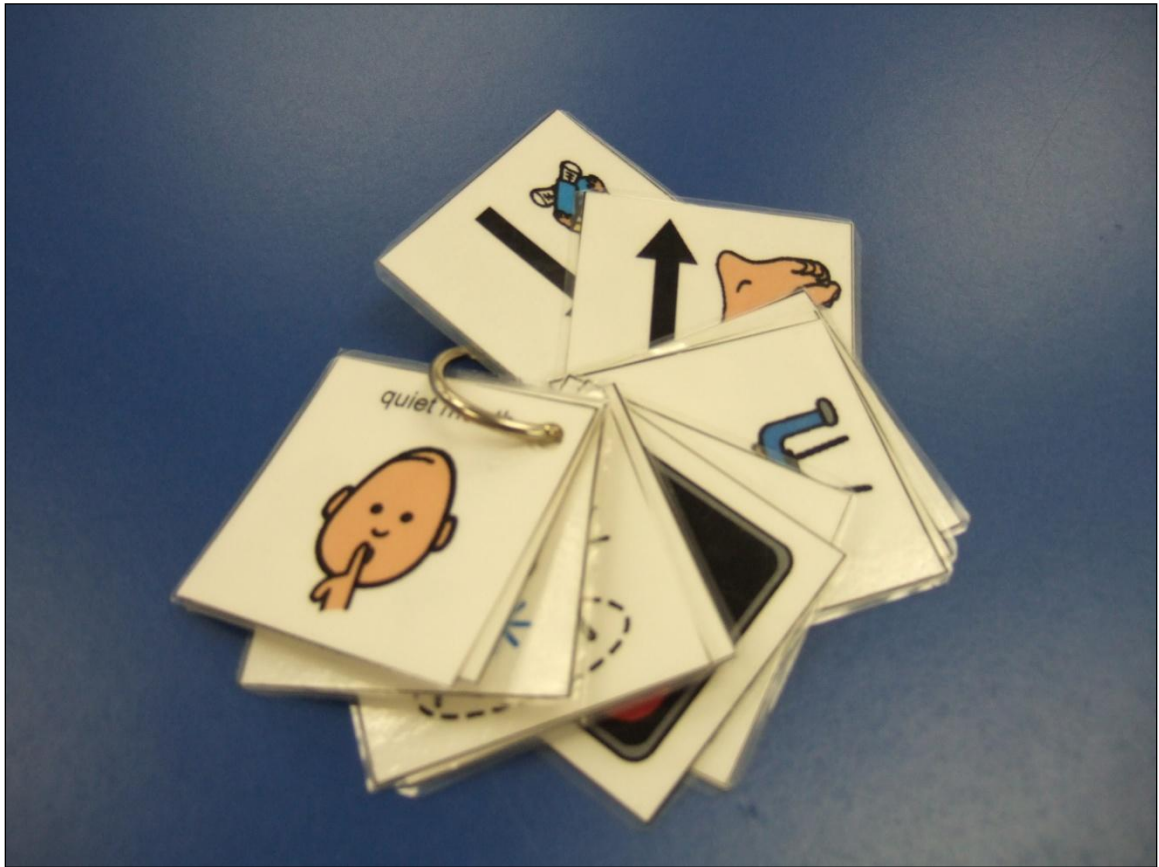


The map demonstrates that both the course overall and particular factors from the course impacted her “everyday teaching/work” in many ways. In particular, the assignments from the course (e.g. creating response cards, schedules, conversation bubbles, social stories, etc) directly contributed to her daily work with kids, her interactions with parents, lesson planning, use of data, and generally feeling like she had become a more knowledgeable professional. An additional set of factors relating to these outcomes was that, through the course, Guiliana improved her professional writing, research, and critical thinking about issues in the field. She was most emphatic about the knowledge she gained from the course and how the assignments led to improvements in her teaching.

Overall, she reported that she learned a lot in the course and enjoyed having Dr. Foster as a teacher, even though it was through an online course. In fact, she shared that before during and after the course, she had immense respect for Dr. Foster, “Every sentence out of her [Dr. Foster’s] mouth is pertinent to my life and my work.” As she wrapped up her discussion of the diagram, she made the comment that she felt a sense of “great connectedness” in this particular course.

As for the course assignments, she recalled having to ‘fulfill a time requirement’ working with a student with autism and to accomplish this she contacted a parent of one of her own students for the project. For the project she chose to explore a strategy she learned about in the text and in one of Dr. Foster’s lectures. The rest of the course work involved reading and answering a question weekly, reading her classmates’ responses to the question and replying to two of those. She remembered that in addition to the text book, there were articles posted and several other projects to complete (in addition to working with the student). She referred to these other projects as “permanent products,” and that as documentation she had to either take a photo or send a file copy to the instructor. She anticipated from my email that I might be interested in the projects and offered to show me. One project was to create an augmentative communication tool. Guiliana showed me a set of pictures for her non-verbal students to use when they wanted to express themselves; the pictures mainly illustrated action verbs. So, for example, a non-verbal student could point to the picture of the person touching a finger over his or her mouth to indicate that it was quiet time.

Figure 3. Guiliana's Augmentative Communication Tool



Another interesting product developed from the course that she shared was a scheduling tool to assist her students in anticipating and planning out the activities they would complete during the day. The white squares in the picture depict activities such as snack time, puzzle time, and circle time. They are attached to Chris's schedule with Velcro so they can be removed or reordered as needed or to show that the activity was finished. Although Guiliana showed me some of what she referred to as permanent products, she also said that she did not feel like she had access to documentation of all the things she learned: "everything I typed, everything I submitted was online, so I don't have some of the things that were products." Here she was talking about reflections and discussions

that she had online about particular topics and issues that she might have kept in a notebook if she took the class face to face.

Figure 4. Guiliana's Activity Scheduler

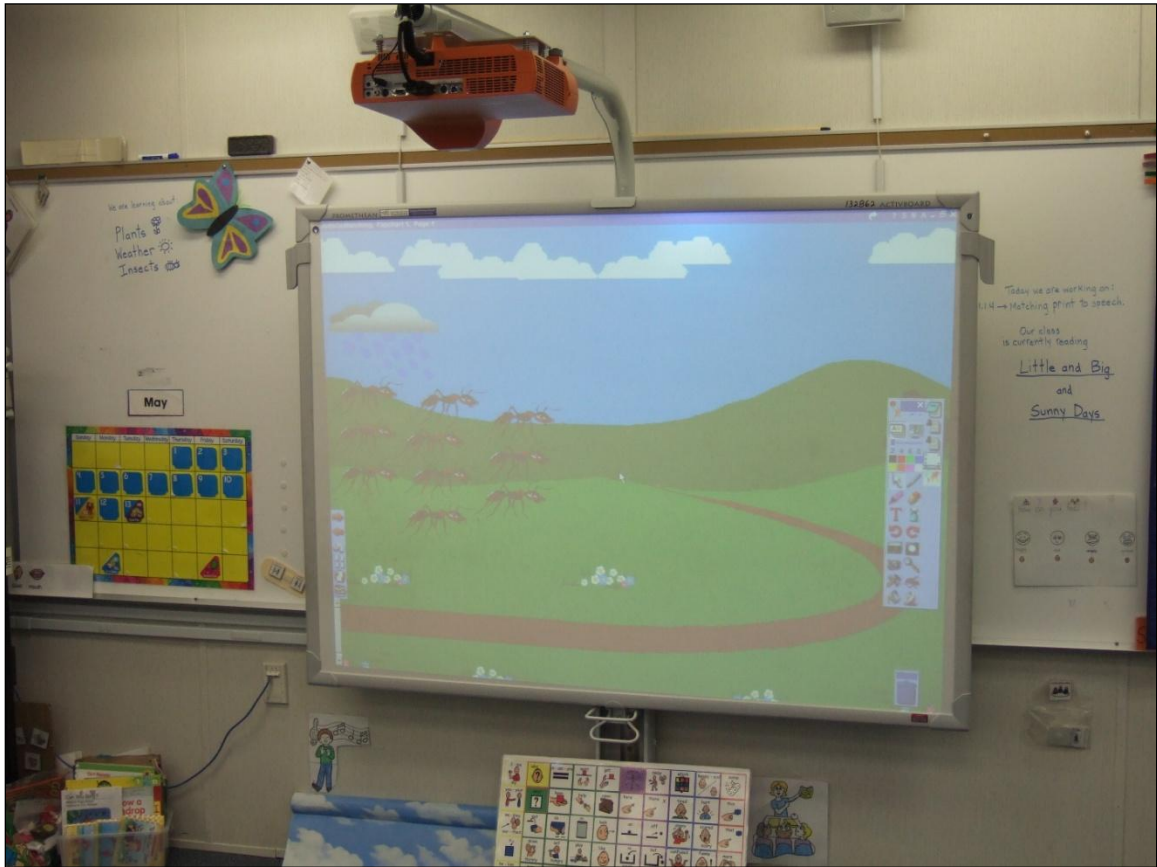


Prior to this set of online courses, Guiliana earned her English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) certification by taking five online courses offered by the county where she worked. She felt that the online user-interface of the county's courses were more user-friendly than the university-based courses. She told me that she believed taking the ESOL coursework also prepared her for handling the Autism Endorsement coursework, she went further to say that, "had I not, I would have been really overwhelmed and even panicked taking the university courses without having had that prior experience." Guiliana went further to tell me that besides concerns about the

adjustment for her in terms of ‘going paperless’, meeting graduate-level standards, and dealing with the university course management software, there were other things that gave her pause prior to taking the course. While she was aware and comfortable with the expected basic computer skills, such as uploading and downloading files and accessing the internet, she was a little dubious about whether the online format would enable her to learn what she needed to know about how to improve her teaching of students with autism. Her reservation stemmed from her disappointment about not being able to take the course with Dr. Foster in person. She said she really enjoyed getting individual attention as she had during her prior college coursework.

Guiliana found that these anxieties were somewhat unfounded when she told me how well the course ended up for her. She said that, because she knew Dr. Foster and how manageable and convenient the course turned out to be, she found that she learned a lot and she even saw that her technology skills as a teacher improved. In the year following her completion of the course, the county installed Promethean Interactive Whiteboards™ in every classroom. Guiliana was thrilled to be able to incorporate them into her teaching and said that the course had empowered her to utilize it as a way of engaging her students because it was multi-sensory and fascinated the kids. In the picture below, Guiliana uses, “The Ants Go Marching On” which is an illustrated story projected on the Interactive White Board and shows how the students can move the ants to count and learn directions and vocabulary. The most amazing part of being able to use this technology with her students was that she could focus their attention longer during “circle time” which allowed them to grasp concepts and make continuous progress.

Figure 5. Guiliana's Interactive White Board



Prior to using this technology, when Guiliana conducted circle time with a book and puppets or songs, her students would only pay attention for a few minutes. However, with the Interactive White Board, Guiliana found that her students were motivated to participate and they remained focused during the circle time for almost twenty minutes. Guiliana attributed her increased comfort and ability to figure out how to utilize this technology to teach her students directly to the experiences she had in the course with Dr. Foster.

I wanted to know what was going on in her life when she took the course. She told me that her family was well established in Florida, having moved down from a Midwestern state 5 years earlier. It sounded like the conditions for her to take the course

were ideal. She reported that her husband and ten-year old son are very self-sufficient and she was off for the summer. With no external pressures or responsibilities, Guiliana was able to focus as much as she needed to on the course. However, she experienced some interruptions. She and her family had out of town guests, went on vacation, and she attended a short local conference and a weeklong conference in Tallahassee. For these events and travels, she said she was pleased to be able bring along her laptop so that she could complete her weekly assignments and course projects.

When I asked how she set up her workspace at home, she reported that she converted her third bedroom into a home office. She described it as a very quiet place where she could be surrounded by all of her favorite stuff.

Figure 6. Guiliana's Home Work Space

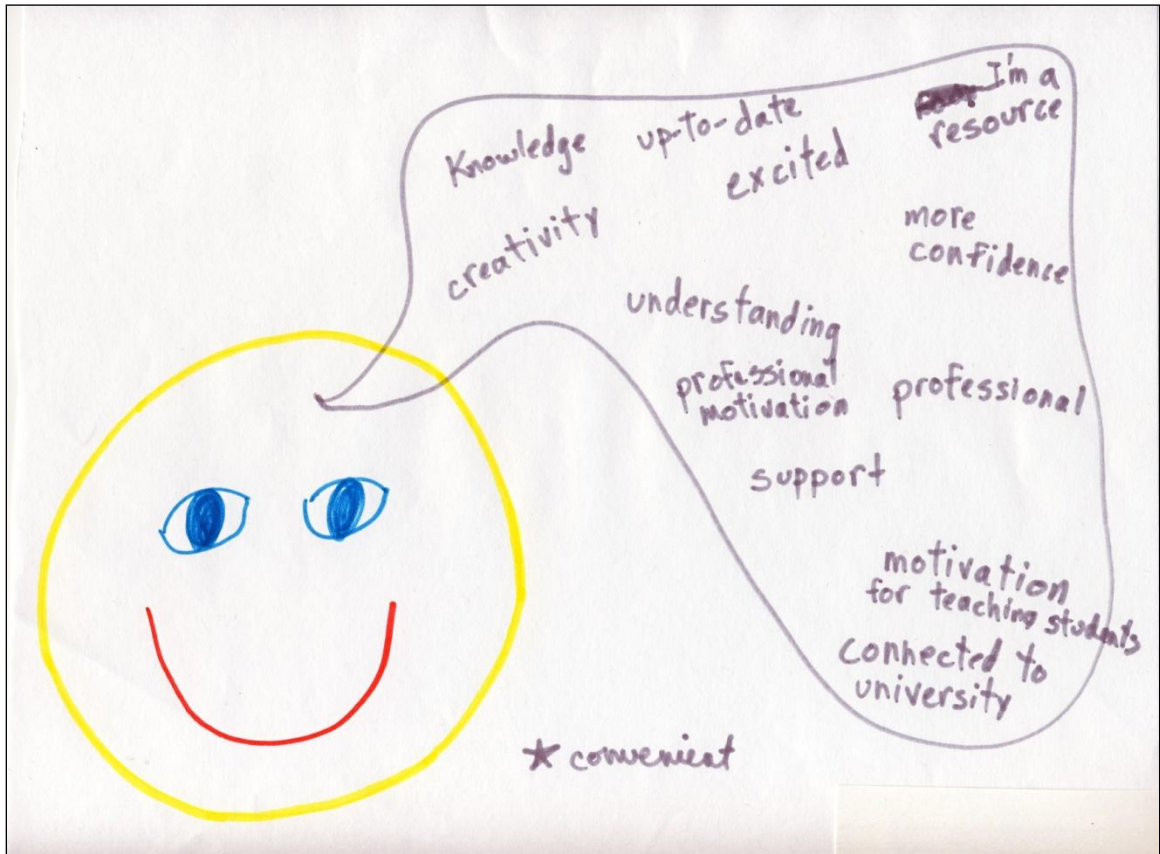


The space was organized with a printer, office supplies, outlets for laptop and other electronics, and all of the journal articles she was asked to read. She said that she especially liked to work in there because she can shut the door, “so my son and dog and cat can’t come in” to interrupt her. The coursework itself, she found, required her to set aside big chunks of time which occurred most often in the middle of the night after everyone was asleep. Of course, she told me, when they have company she has to take all of her stuff out of the room and relocate to the dining room table. Thinking about her work on the course, she said that, even though she was all set up in this home office, she found that she was totally comfortable working in airports, on planes, or in hotel rooms while travelling.

In taking the course, she wanted to gain more knowledge and understanding about kids with autism and she said that was exactly what she got. She was happy to learn about biological issues and the whole range of therapies, interventions, and approaches to understanding and teaching students with autism. She felt that Dr. Foster was highly available to her throughout the entire course for questions about assignments, terminology, or clarifications from readings. She also felt extremely well-taken-care-of and that Dr. Foster was giving her special treatment because of their existing professional relationship. The course worked well for Guiliana because she is an independent learner. However, she missed the opportunities to make regular contact or build friendships with other students in the course as one does when you are taking an on campus course. One thing that bothered her was what she perceived as her classmates’ inability to solve technological problems they encountered on their own. This was particularly irritating to her because it seemed to take up time that could be better spent on other things in the

course. Below is a picture that Guiliana made to illustrate her perception of herself as an online learner.

Figure 7. Guiliana's Drawing of Self as Online Learner



In this drawing of herself, Guiliana has a smile on her face but appears disembodied, possibly relating the distance she felt from others in the course. I noted that all of the words were positive in her representation of herself as an online learner. She stated that she felt she gained knowledge of students with autism and understanding of their needs. She learned to become more creative in her approaches to teaching her students as she explored the different interventions, technologies, and approaches in the course. She gained motivation for teaching her students because she saw that she was being more effective and seeing the result of her efforts in their improved achievement. She felt like

she was supported during the course and became more of a professional and a resource for other teachers in her school. Finally, because she was connected to the university and getting more excited about her professional work and life, she told me as she finished the drawing that she was planning to go back to school to earn her doctorate.

Reflection

Guiliana benefitted from a prior relationship with Dr. Foster who consulted with the teacher teams throughout the district. Guiliana felt that Dr. Foster's guidance influenced the success that she experienced in her classroom and in fostering the inclusion of her students in the school. Her success with inclusion may also be due to working in an elementary school. Elementary settings are often considered more inclusive by nature than middle or high schools. While these things may have been influential, I do not believe that neither her relationship with Dr. Foster nor the nature of elementary schools fully explain Guiliana's success. While Guiliana demonstrated that the course impacted her teaching in many ways she was a natural leader and a competent teacher who was eager to learn and expand the resources that her school needed. Guiliana performed very well in the online environment, she viewed it as an opportunity to improve her teaching and learn new things to share with others in her school. She was able to concentrate on her coursework because her work and home situations were not distracting and she was a very self-directed learner.

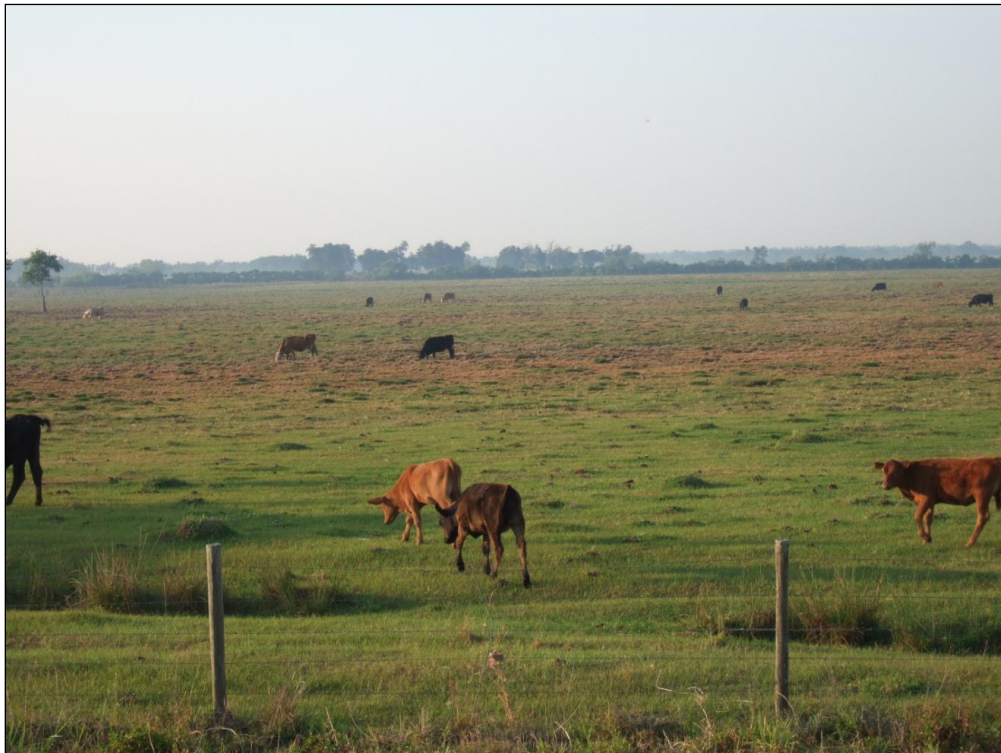
Guiliana expressed concern that the online resources lacked permanency. Knowing that once she graduated, she would not have access to the course in Blackboard and websites can be unavailable, she found that she had to do a lot of printing to keep everything related to the course. She mused that, perhaps course management systems

could have a print function that would ensure all the materials and resources could be accessed at once for printing. Guiliana might have benefited from such an option or the opportunity to purchase a packet of supplementary materials to accompany her texts.

Portrait 3: Alberta

Virtually all of the land I passed on my way to a county in central Florida could be characterized as flat and desolate – suitable mostly for raising cattle. It was very early in the morning when I drove from Tampa to meet with Alberta, one of the in-service special education teachers who took the *Educating Students with Autism* course. The sun was rising as I made the 95 mile trek on a road that was only interesting because it changed names three times. If not for the occasional farm house and fence dividing the land and it would seem like one long cow pasture.

Figure 8. Rural Central Florida Cow Pasture along the Highway



This barren landscape is actually ‘reclaimed land’ – the legacy of the phosphate mining industry throughout central Florida. I finally arrived in a rural town of approximately 4,000 people. I continued down the main road and passed five chain restaurants, a Publix Grocery Store, and a Super Wal-Mart. Despite the existence of the well-known stores and dining establishments, I doubted that I could live in such a remote area.

Thinking about the long drive from Tampa, I wondered if Alberta intended to earn her master’s degree or the Autism Endorsement when she took the *Educating Students with Autism* course. A degree in our institution would require her to make the long commute to the Tampa campus for some of the coursework. However, if seeking the Autism Endorsement, Alberta could take all of the courses online. If I were still a classroom teacher, living in such a rural area, I would probably opt for the endorsement.

I turned off of the main road, drove around a lake, and a few more minutes through the countryside. I was expecting to arrive at a school, but I was surprised that the directions led me to the School District Offices. I parked in a gravel lot and wondered if there might be a small school somewhere on the property behind the offices. I gathered my things and stepped out of the car, I noticed a woman standing on the sidewalk. She was clearly waiting for someone to arrive so I walked toward her. She introduced herself as Alberta and asked if I am *the researcher*. Alberta is a short, stocky, white woman in her mid-forties with short graying dark brown hair. She was wearing loose fitting khaki pants, a fanny pack, and navy polo shirt embroidered with her name and the district logo.

As she led me up the sidewalk toward the building, we walked under tall white aluminum shade coverings. She explained that the facility was previously an elementary school before the county converted it to offices because the school-aged population has

been decreasing in this area since the 1990s. We entered the lobby area of the Special Education Department that was in the building farthest from the parking lot and main office building. I could see that the interior walls, which used to separate classrooms, had been modified to accommodate inner doorways or removed to create connected office spaces. Alberta introduced me to Betty who is the secretary for the department. Betty has been working for the department for over 30 years. She wore a conservative floral dress and had neatly curled white hair. She asked if I would like some coffee and directs me to a makeshift coffee station that sits on top of a low filing cabinet. Although Alberta told me in our email communications that she reserved the conference room for our use, Alberta asked Betty if we can use the conference room.

She led me into 12 ft. by 6 ft. conference room that has a long table, eight chairs, and another door opposite the one we entered. The table and chairs were crowded in the small area. Sunlight entered through a span of windows covered by antique three inch mini-blinds. The wall opposite the windows is home to brown Formica cabinets. The counter top holds a small copy machine, a tape recorder, and a telephone phone. I guess that the space doubles as a workroom and may have been teacher offices at one time.

After I replaced a very wobbly chair with the slightly more stable one next to it we settled in at the table to talk. I was curious to know if Alberta had a classroom of her own, so I ask Alberta to start by telling me about what she does for the county. She explained that she is not a typical classroom teacher. She is one of three itinerant “behavior teachers” in the county. Itinerant teachers have specialized skills and often travel between many schools to provide direct services to students or consult with teachers. Alberta explained that she helps teachers to solve classroom behavior issues,

conduct assessments and design individualized interventions. In addition to consulting with teachers, she often has to work a lot of “one-on-one work with students who no one else can handle.”

Once I understood her role better, we moved on to talk about the online course, *Educating Students with Autism*. I learned that she was pursuing the endorsement, because it was entirely offered online. I was surprised to learn that Alberta took three online courses for the endorsement simultaneously while she was teaching in the county’s summer school program for students with low incidence disabilities. Then, as if taking three courses while teaching summer school were not enough, Alberta went on to tell me about how “insane and hectic” that summer had been for her in her personal life.

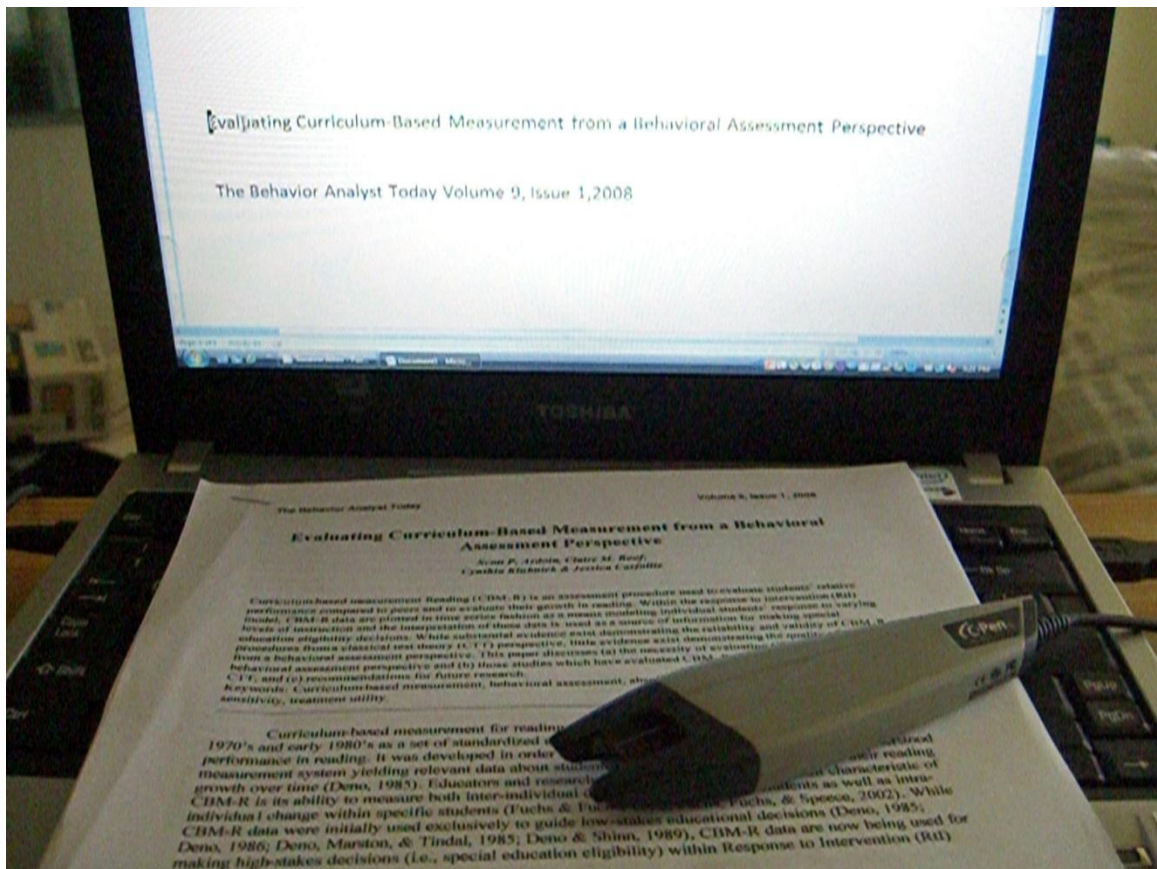
The most significant crisis she faced that summer was that her mother had a major stroke a few weeks after the course began. Alberta had to assume most of the mother’s care because she did not qualify for full-time home-care assistance. In addition to this tragedy, Alberta’s life was interrupted when a hurricane swept through central Florida. The storm resulted in week-long power outages in her area. She told me that these events were almost enough to make her want to drop the course.

Additionally, Alberta went on to tell me that when she was enrolled in the course her own health was suffering and she did not even know it. She found out a few months after the course that she had developed diverticulitis. She also shared her struggles with medically diagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Since her diagnosis in her early twenties, she realized that she often needed more time to complete readings and assignments, unfortunately she “...never managed to get the paperwork done to get the accommodations. Despite this, she did her best to cope with the situation,

“I managed, but I was struggling. I spent every day working or managing all her [mother’s] stuff. I was reading and doing stuff from the morning to night. I mean, that’s all I did my whole summer.” I could not help but admire her ability persevere and succeed in the course. Alberta’s stories made me feel as though I needed to spend more time just listening to her – that she might need a sympathetic ear. However, I felt as though I needed to shift the conversation back to the online coursework.

Alberta shared online courses were particularly difficult for her because of the amount of reading, “I’m hyper-vigilant in terms of observational skills with students and classroom situations. But, as far as sitting down and reading something, God help me!” She developed a method using a C-Pen scanner, to help process what she was reading.

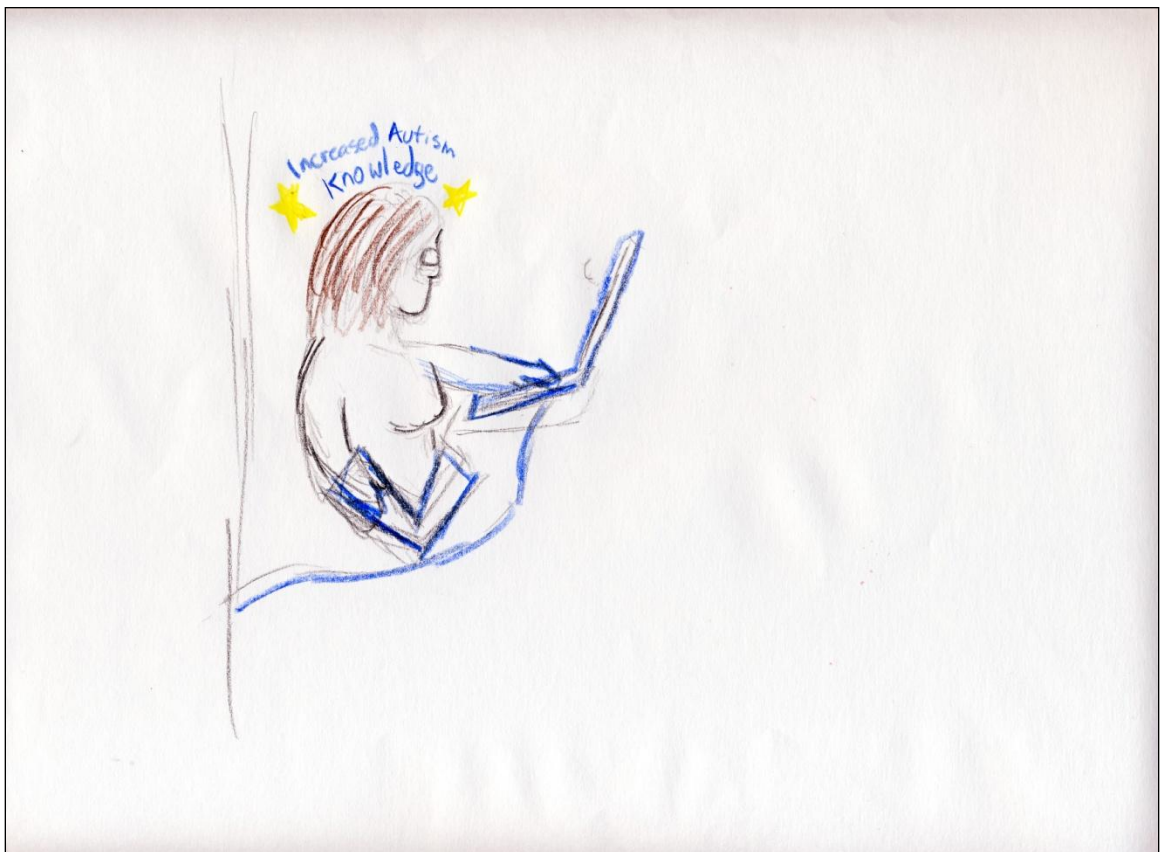
Figure 9. Alberta’s Home Work Space with Laptop and C-Pen



During the course, Alberta said that she would sit in her bed, flip on the television for some background noise, and get out all the books and articles she needed to read. As she read, she would use the C-Pen to scan in the citation information and any points that she wanted to remember into a Word document. She then checked the accuracy of the text on the screen and moved on in the article. Alberta described the process as tedious and exhausting –but necessary for every assigned reading.

When I asked Alberta to draw herself as an online learner, she drew herself propped up in bed with her laptop and textbook.

Figure 10. Alberta's Drawing of Self as Online Learner

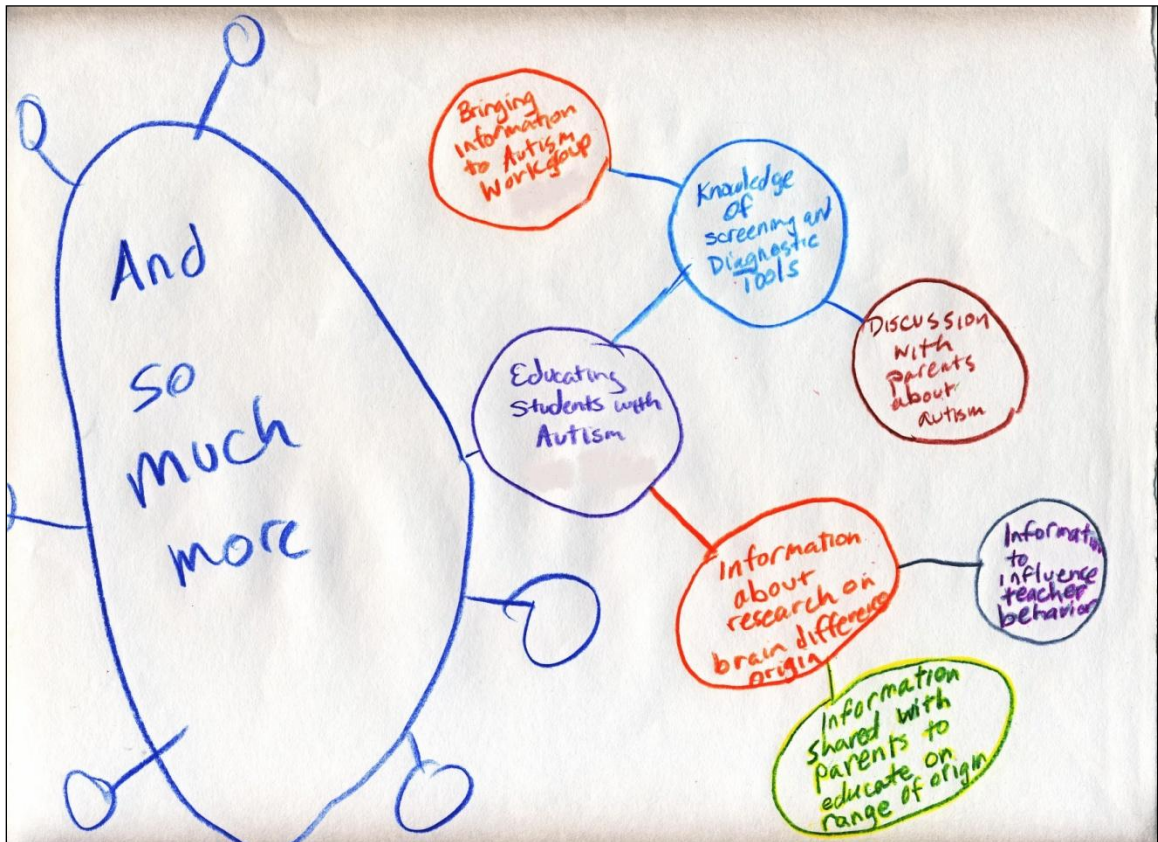


In this drawing, Alberta seemed to be floating alone in white space on the page, but intent on her work. The stars above her head highlight her “Increased Autism Knowledge” which was the primary thing she stated that she learned in the course.

She shared that early on she was doubtful that the instructor would understand her issues or be flexible with assignments because the course was online and they never met in person. After hearing all of the challenges that Alberta faced that summer, it was no wonder that she was concerned about her ability to pass the course. As a teacher educator myself, I would have probably advised a student in Alberta’s situation to drop the course and re-enroll when things were less hectic. Luckily, Alberta found that Dr. Foster, the professor who taught *Educating Students with Autism*, set realistic and reasonable demands. Additionally, she said it was helpful that in general the instructors teaching her courses that summer, “were flexible... If they’d have been rigid and docked me for every little this or that, it wouldn’t have worked.” Alberta deserved to be proud that she earned an A in each course that summer.

I was amazed to hear all that this woman endured while working toward her autism endorsement and that she earned an A. Despite the passing grade, I had to wonder if she was able to actually learn anything with all of the distractions she faced that summer. I hoped that my concern did not come across too much when I asked, “So, what did you learn from the course?” She replied that she learned a lot, “Especially as far as what research had been done, what the origins of a certain deficits may be in terms of understanding the order or sequence of events ... there was just so many things I learned.” She drew a concept map of the knowledge that she gained in the course.

Figure 11. Alberta's Concept Map



Alberta discussed that the course impacted her practice in many ways. She found that it provided her with knowledge of screening and diagnostic tools for diagnosing students with autism spectrum disorders which she could use to inform the autism workgroup in her district and when discussing the diagnosis with parents. She also indicated that she gained information about brain differences that contribute to autism. She said that she used this information to educate parents and influence teachers. She also said that it taught her “so much more” but, as an 18 year veteran teacher it would be hard to disentangle her prior knowledge from what she learned in this one class, particularly since she took this course during such an eventful summer.

We moved on to discuss her interactions with her classmates in the discussion board. Alberta seemed to view participation in the discussion board as an obligation she stated,

Personally, I did it because I had to and it wasn't like there were any relationships or anything like that for me it was just like, okay, I have to say something. Let me see, who I can comment on...

She seemed to view herself as isolated from the other students in the class, not connected as she might have been if she lived closer to campus,

...other people might have known each other. What I found when I went to another class, where we did have a face-to-face contact one or two times, was that some of these people really know each other well. So they may have more going on and they comment and talk to each other more.

As we talked about the course, Alberta explained that institutions and professors all organize their courses differently, "What they did [probably] made sense to them but as a learner, it was like, oh, everybody's their own system." This made it hard for her because she had to take time to learn a new system for each class.

In relation to her professional practice, Alberta said that the course helped her become more adept at identifying strategies that teachers should use when they had challenges in their classrooms. However, she indicated that teachers were sometimes resistant to her help, "For instance, a teacher who was new to the county, did not know how to differentiate instruction for the learners in her class and was having a lot of behavior problems." In one instance, Alberta decided to spend her own money and created close to thirty task boxes for the teachers to use with students in the classroom.

The boxes were a strategy she said that she learned about in the *Educating Students with Autism* course. However, she was disappointed in the outcome, ...I set the whole thing up for her and the task boxes for different levels of functioning. I set them up so that they could also be adapted. And, she said she chose to go back to her large group [instructional method].

Figure 12. Alberta's Task Boxes



Alberta seemed to be resigned that the majority of teachers in her district did not take responsibility for problems in their classrooms. She attributed teachers' resistance when working with her to inflexibility and intolerance toward issues that children are dealing with,

...their agenda is to get a student out of their room. Their request for help isn't about getting behavior services or getting help with a behavior plan, they're [really] saying, "I want this child out of my room." So it's not going to matter if I do anything. I wish I could go in and assess the situation [with the adults] ...there are a lot of things I've learned to spot, games people play...

Although I could tell that she liked having someone to talk to about the challenges she faced. I knew that the hour she said she could spend with me was almost spent. I asked if she might show me anything she kept from the course. Alberta was excited and eagerly invited me to come and see and all the things she had made during the course. We left the conference room and wound our way through some cubicles to her desk. The space was well-organized. A bookshelf with the labeled task boxes filled the wall beside her desk. "Each labeled box contains tools [she] developed for assessing behavior problems or doing interventions with kids."

Alberta shared that in the upcoming year, as she would be done with her Autism Endorsement and was going to be a member of the county's new Autism Disorder Screening Team. She said that her county is finding that, "there is an increased "autism" diagnosis from those with children previously diagnosed developmentally disabled."

However, Alberta stated that her

concern is for the individuals and families of those with autism. There are similarities in behavior between individuals with other developmental disabilities and autism but there are also differences. People sometimes only focus on the similarities because of publicity, parent groups, less informed doctors, etc...

This she said can lead to

...parents focusing on obtaining a label of autism for a child rather than trying to address the needs of the child. Autism and another disability such as severe cognitive impairments have similarities and differences and if we only look at similarities we will end up with a meaningless label of autism due to the over diagnosing of the disorder. This is the reverse of what took place in the early '90s and previously when individuals who had the diagnosis of autism had the label dropped in order to procure the funding for services. At that time funding for particular types of services were provided for those diagnosed with "mental retardation" and not those diagnosed with autism.

As we wrapped up our discussion, Alberta indicated that she was looking forward to helping in the screening and appropriate assessment of students with autism. She also seemed to be recalling more of the concepts and ideas she learned in the course, "This course [gave] me more knowledge about important components of autism, the importance of joint attention, the history of the diagnosis and good tools for assessing."

She was glad she took the course and "got good" at doing online work. She mentioned that her county recently hired someone to ensure that all in-service for teachers will be delivered online, so she knew that she would be doing much more online training in the future. "And as for doing it all over again?" I asked. Alberta told me she would definitely take one course at a time and give herself more time to process the information that was provided. She explained that she really needed the most current information and research available. I summarized that I heard her telling me earlier that her new mission was to change the focus of responsibility from "the student is the problem to the teacher is the problem." She said, "Exactly, it is the teacher's

responsibility to serve the students and mine to sway them with the most current and emergent research.” Alberta’s commitment to learning more about ways to help students with autism, low incidence disabilities, and behavior challenges was evident as she discussed her desire to be a lifelong learner.

Reflection

This particular portrait caused me to stand back and think about my biases toward small and rural districts. As I listened to Alberta’s stories describing the hardships she endured my initial reaction was that she was not talking about things that related to the course. I felt challenged to keep her focused on addressing my questions in a substantive way. There seemed to be a tension between her purposes for participating and my purposes with the research project. At the first meeting, I was a bit uncomfortable because we were interrupted quite a few times by people passing through the conference room. I wondered if they really needed to use this passage between the offices or if they were just curious to hear what we were discussing. The department secretary and Alberta’s co-workers displayed body language suggesting to me that there was some tension between them. Her boss gave her a time limit for participating in the interview, yet, as I tried to respect that limit and wrap up, Alberta seemed to want to continue. I was concerned that my presence would worsen her relationships with her co-workers and her supervisor.

I wondered if Alberta took the course as a way to connect with others for true professional development or if was there a more personal need? Was she needing for attention or contact as a result of living in rural area? The rural district and 70’s furniture in the district office made me feel as if I were stepping back in time. Having lived and

taught in a semi-rural district myself, I understand the need for collegial contact with other professionals in special education. When the course ended she may have experienced a sense of loneliness because she was no longer connected to others online or receiving attention from the professor. So it made sense that she was interested in participating in the study. During our second meeting, I thought she may want or need attention that I was not in a position to provide. Eventually, I concluded that Alberta's struggles with balancing life and work expectations, while trying to meet her own needs, were similar to those experienced by many women in higher education and society. Including Alberta in my study provided opportunities for me examine my own biases and identify challenges related to presenting the lived experiences of others in the form of a portrait.

Portrait 4: Trudy

I just happened to be watching TV when the Bay News 9 news anchor shared that some teachers at her elementary school won first place in a national inclusive model school competition held by the American Association of Teachers. They switch to the on-scene reporter in New Port Richey and I am amazed as the interviewer introduced Trudy. It is a very pleasant surprise. Just a few months ago I was in the same room interviewing Trudy for my dissertation study. I recognize the patchwork carpeting and the drop-ceiling fixtures lined with pink tissue paper to soften the harsh fluorescent lighting. The desks in the center of the room are still arranged to hold groupings of six students and mobiles dangle from the ceiling. Stations line the perimeter of the room stocked with supplies for art, spelling, reading, puzzles, and other activities. Trudy explains how their program works and introduces her team who talk about their experience working with Trudy. As

the reporter wraps up, congratulating Trudy and her team, I'm thrilled to hear that they won an all expenses paid trip to the AAT conference next summer in Chicago.

Trudy, a thirty-year veteran exceptional student education teacher was the most experienced of all the participants in my dissertation study. She was keenly aware that the field of education has undergone extensive changes and she works hard to stay current. I recall that when I asked why she took the *Educating Students with Autism* course, she said, "I didn't want to be doing stuff that used to be great." This comment represents her inclination for forward thinking and commitment to her own professional learning. Yet, Trudy and I both recognized that it would be difficult to attribute her teaching craft to the course because she had such extensive experience in the classroom. Throughout our time together she did identify a few specific things that she changed in her classroom and her approaches to teaching students with autism as a result of taking the course. She also shared her honest opinions about those changes.

I recalled my first visit to her room, I arrived an hour before her lunch period and observed her class. While her students were grouped and working at the different stations around the room, they were allowed the freedom to access what they needed, such as sharpening pencils, getting water to drink, and finding supplies that they needed from other areas of the room. They were allowed this freedom as long they did not disturb others and moved to the next center promptly when Trudy's timer rang. The students who visited the center near me were decorating and cutting out paper butterflies that they would read about and later add to the mobiles that hung over their desks.

During her lunch break we sat in tiny chairs at the round art center table and talked about her experience in the online course, *Educating Students with Autism*. I

remember nodding and leaning forward to hear her as the lunchtime announcements came across the intercom. My appreciation for Trudy's extensive experience as a teacher grew quickly. It was easy to tell that this energetic African American woman in her mid-fifties dressed comfortably in jeans, navy school polo shirt, red flats, and funky eyeglasses was a leader in her school. She had a great sense of humor and a high level of awareness about her personal learning processes. She let me know that she wasn't the biggest fan of online courses.

In her thirty years of teaching, Trudy was always in exceptional student education (ESE), but in the last fifteen to twenty of those years she began to work as a co-teacher supporting students in inclusive settings. I asked what changed this year and found out that, "We [the school] were looking at losing an ESE teaching unit, so I volunteered to step into a general education vacancy... just until our numbers came back in ESE to justify having my extra position... because they didn't want to lose one of our other wonderful ESE people." It did not sound like having to teach outside of her chosen field was an inconvenience or that Trudy was being a martyr for her team. Teaching out-of-field was Trudy's way of doing what needed to be done to support her school, the kids, and at the same time continue to improve her own teaching craft.

She told me that next year she will go back to her ESE position with a different view of her role now that she has experienced what it is like to have a co-teacher come in and support kids in her class. "...it really gave me sensitivity for what I ask people to do accommodations, [she now thinks] 'Am I making it doable?'" She realized that as a general education teacher she now needs to consider, "...if I can fit that in or I ask if the special education teacher can make all those materials and give me everything? I

sometimes think, don't ask me to make that picture symbol schedule or that whatever. You give it to me and I'll implement it."

Trudy said it was time for her students to get out of lunch. We walked to the lunchroom to gather her students. The students were laughing and talking when we arrived; but Trudy was not at all bothered by their chatter. I noticed that students from other classes are also allowed to talk to each other as other classes they walk single file along the painted sidewalk lines. The sidewalks were about six feet wide and in between the lines there are graphics painted by different classes or student groups. Heading back to the classroom, we passed a fascinating painting of musical instruments and notes that was designed and created by the chorus in 2004. There were tall awnings on steel posts with inspirational words painted on them. We walked by posts painted with the words: Pride, Achievement, Honor, Caring, and Wisdom. Trudy and I were at the rear of the line and the students near us seemed happy. They shared what they ate for lunch until we reached the classroom. When we returned to her room, she put her students to work and I took the opportunity to thank Trudy and say good bye to her class. We made arrangements for another visit during the following week to talk again. I left the school site excited by the atmosphere and school culture.

I returned to Harrow the next Tuesday which happened to be during the last week of school. I had to wait in the front office for Trudy to pick me up after the final bell. Because it was the last week of school, the office was buzzing with parents dropping off cupcakes or other food for parties and the staff. However, the security at the school was still a priority despite the relaxed atmosphere. Everyone was required to check-in with the staff in the main office. When I checked-in, the secretary took my license and put it in a

scanning machine attached to a computer designated for logging in visitors. The machine made a copy of my ID for the log and printed a visitor's sticker with my photo in the upper left-hand corner. The sticker clearly displayed my photo, full name, who I was visiting and my arrival time. I affixed it to my shirt and sat down to wait. There was a magazine rack near my chair and I picked up the school's most recent Quarterly Newsletter. I read that the third quarter was busy for each grade level. The third graders went to Busch Gardens as part of their Safari Unit. The fifth graders went to NASA to learn more about science, math, and technology. The whole school took the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) and hosted a family night. Trudy arrived and we headed back to her classroom to talk more about her experience with the *Educating Students with Autism* course. She took a digital picture of the space that her husband set up on the dining room table for her to complete the online course work. The photo was grainy, but showed her laptop and printer assembled on her dining room table. She told me that she has a home office, but it was set up with her Macintosh computer that did not have the necessary software for her to participate in the course.

Figure 13. Trudy's Home Work Space



In addition to having to utilize her dining room table for the course that summer, Trudy told me the only other real problem was getting the text book. She lives over 50 miles from campus and said that,

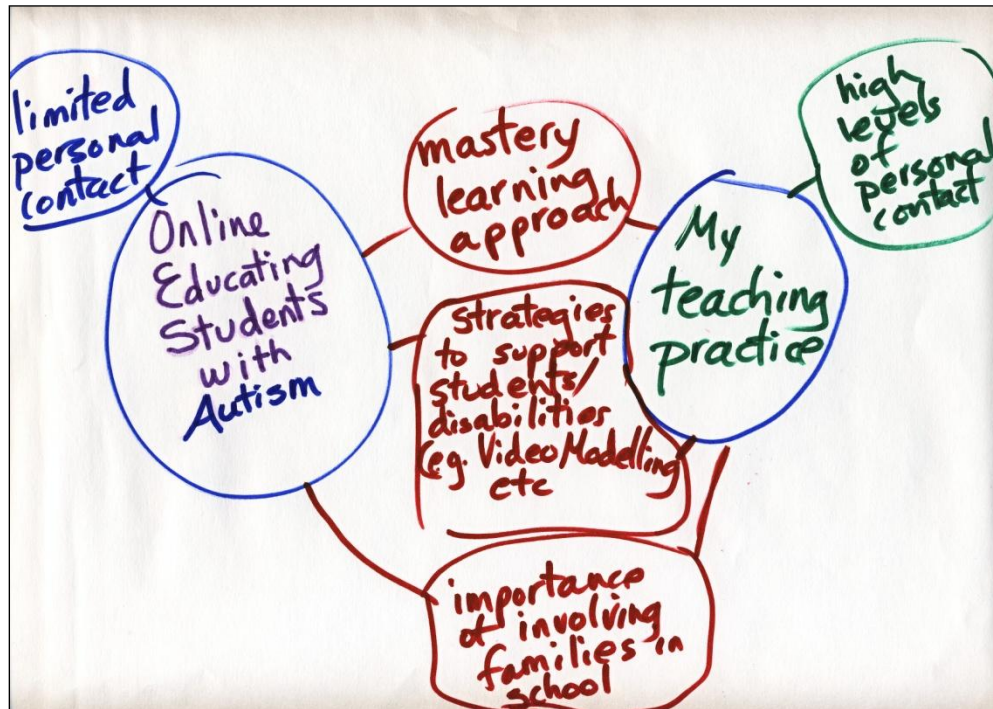
There was some delay, something about the text not being ordered, so I had gone up to Tampa to get them and they didn't have them yet, so I had to make a couple of trips to the bookstore.... Once those were available, everything went smoothly pretty much after that. I could do most of my research online and I had a lot of support here from my staff people who have [technological] expertise that helped me out.

Then I asked her to discuss the things she liked and disliked in the online course. Her answers dealt with her need for personal interaction,

...I did miss the give and take of class discussions in a live time format. 'Cause I thrive on that. I like to have that give and take – when somebody says something and it triggers something in my brain. And there wasn't that opportunity with the online format. So, I didn't really get to know the other people taking the classes as well as I would have if we had met in a classroom.

From her description, I gathered that she did learn much in the context of the course, but not in the way that comes most natural to her. So, I asked Trudy to draw a concept map to illustrate any relations the course had to her own teaching practice.

Figure 14. Trudy's Concept Map



She used bold colored markers to put 'Online Educating Students with Autism' in a circle on the left and 'My Teaching' in a circle on the right. In between the two circles she wrote three commonalities between the course and her teaching: 'mastery learning approach, strategies to support students with disabilities (e.g. video modeling, etc.), and importance of involving families in school'. On the outside of the circles, she noted the major differences: attached to the Online Course is 'limited personal contact' and 'high level of personal contact' that were related to her own teaching. Trudy explained that she learned a lot about new things she could use in her inclusive classroom, "...some things, of course, I had heard of before or I had even done before. Some things were just new to me and it was just like, 'Wow, that makes sense. Why didn't I ever hear about this before?' Video modeling for instance – is a logical strategy to use with the kid who loves

to just focus intently on videos.” She went on to say that there were so many good things to learn and that Dr. Foster was someone she had looked forward to learning from. Yet she told me, “sometimes I felt like I was on overload, like: Wow, that’s good. Wow, that’s good.” Having the course delivered online was helpful “...one of the nice parts of the online is that you didn’t have to frantically take notes where if you missed something in class, that was it – I had the lectures [online] and I could go back and refresh.”

Thinking about Trudy’s teaching assignment, we discussed how interesting it was for her to take the courses for the autism endorsement while assigned to a general education classroom that included students on the spectrum. To illustrate just how timely the courses were for her, Trudy told me about Brittney – the only student in her class identified as being autistic. She pointed to a desk near us and she explained that Brittney uses a pocket scheduler. I could see a clear plastic pocket attached with Velcro to the top of the desk. The pocket held a set of 3x5 index cards with pictures of classroom activities. The one on top was what Brittney was supposed to be doing. When that activity time is over, she would move it to the back of the stack and she knew that the next one on top was her new task. She pointed out that there was a spot for the pocket to be attached when Brittney goes to any station around the room. Then Trudy pointed out that Brittney’s little blue chair had a pad across the seat. It was called a Lap Pad, placemat sized pad filled with enough flaxseed or sand to put gentle pressure on the child’s lap to reduce fidgeting and provide a sense of comfort. Learning about these modifications were, as Trudy put it, “...some of the good things that came out of that online class.” She also shared with me her intense respect for Dr. Foster as a professional and an educator.

She felt that Dr. Foster created a very safe and positive learning environment for her and the other students. She explained one example where,

“She [Dr. Foster] would do the lecture. After we viewed the lecture, we would have discussion questions assigned to us that would go along with the reading and the lecture. We would have to synthesize a response to the assigned discussion questions and we would post it on the discussion board. And, then, other people would respond to us and we would respond to other people. So you’d get responses from lots of different classmates and then she [Dr. Foster] would also give us feedback. She was very much into everyone being successful, learning, and meeting her stated objectives. I didn’t feel like there were trick questions or, you know, she was very much about people growing professionally.

However, Trudy clarified for me that Dr. Foster was not disingenuous or overly positive with her feedback. Keeping in mind that Trudy is a veteran teacher of thirty years she pointed out that “...if there was something that I needed to go back and re-look at, she would state it in a way that wasn’t threatening – it was always, ‘Think about this when you’re doing that...’ So, there was corrective feedback, but for the most part it was just very encouraging.” In fact, Trudy liked learning from Dr. Foster so much, she tried to have her come and work with her school’s multidisciplinary team. Unfortunately, Dr. Foster was too busy that semester to come. To this Trudy replied, “So I just had to be happy with sharing what I had learned from her course with our team.” It sounded like Trudy learned a lot from the course, so to wrap up our discussion, I ask Trudy to illustrate how she perceived herself as an online learner (Figure 3).

Figure 15. Trudy's Drawing of Self as Online Learner



Her illustration was interesting because of the level of abstraction she worked from. Trudy utilized the metaphor of a garden to talk about herself as an online learner. She viewed the course as empowering and providing her with experiences of success and these things she drew as the clouds and the sun. She drew herself as the flower growing despite obstacles that were represented as small stones bordering the garden. Listening to Trudy explain her illustration was inspiring. In the limited time I spent with Trudy, I could tell that her picture is more than a sketch. As a teacher who is a lifelong learner she seeks to empower her fellow teachers and students to be successful and grow. No wonder

she and her team were recognized and won a national award for their teaching philosophy and inclusive program!

Reflections

Trudy was an interesting and highly motivating woman to be around. She connected with others easily and was eager to share her knowledge and opinions. Trudy was a lifelong learner whose perspective was shaped by many years of experience as a special education teacher. She was intelligent and engaging and I identified with her values as a professional. Undoubtedly my admiration for her and her accomplishments as an inclusive educator influenced the composition of the portrait that I wrote about her.

I perceived Trudy's dislike for online course work as driven by her preference for personal interaction and communication. In my understanding, she viewed technology as a prop or a tool that was useful on an occasional and limited basis. Technology was not a vital part of her own life or her beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning. To some extent, I agreed with her views on technology and teaching. I believe that there is a need for infusing technology in education because children need to become adept with the use of information technology as they construct knowledge. However, similar to Trudy, I also believe that technology is overemphasized and often too pervasive in the lives of children. I agree with her that personal relationships are the most important factor in teaching and learning.

The course offered Trudy access to resources and new information, so in a very pragmatic sense, she took what she needed and used it as a spring board for opportunities to improving her teaching and her school. Trudy's maturity as a teacher and her

leadership role in her school provided her with opportunities to take what she was learning and use it in her daily work connecting, teaching and inspiring.

Portrait 5: Irene

It was Monday morning and school was going to start within a few minutes. The students of the large high school in western central Florida were rushing to their classrooms. When the bell rang the hallways were deserted. I was sitting with Irene a special education teacher and the Exceptional Student Department Chair at Union High. She was wearing a navy skirt and the school's white polo shirt. Her dark brown hair was up in tight bun – a striking Latina woman in her late 20s.

Irene had first period off for planning and had agreed to talk with me about her experiences in the *Educating Students with Autism* course that she had taken the previous summer. As we became acquainted, Irene, she shared that over the last five years she had taught a little bit of everything. Her primary teaching assignment was usually to provide twelfth grade reading and life skills content to students with low incidence exceptionalities. However, this year was an exception. I began to tell her how my teaching background was similar to hers, but did not have the opportunity to continue the story. We were interrupted when the teacher next door entered the room with Janie – a seventeen year old female student with autism. Janie was screaming and flailing her arms at the teacher who was calmly corralling her into the Irene's room.

Irene smiled as if asking me to 'hold that thought' and then walked over to Janie. In a hushed voice Irene told Janie to "hush now" and asked why she was upset. Janie continued to wail at the women. The other teacher answered for Janie, saying that Janie just started "going off and threw a book across the room almost hitting another student."

She asked Irene to let Janie stay to keep her away from the other kids. Irene agreed but requested that the paraprofessional come over since she was still meeting with me.

The paraprofessional, a short, heavysset, African American woman named Tara, came over from classroom next door. Tara brought Janie's backpack, a workbook, and told Janie to sit down and work. Janie had other plans though; she started knocking over the empty desks and dashed over to the blue cabinets where she started hitting her head against the cabinet door. Irene and Tara ran to stop her, but she moved away quickly and pounded the whiteboard with her clenched fists. Judging the situation, I did not see Janie calming down anytime soon. I was pretty sure we would not be able to talk about Irene's experiences taking the *Educating Students with Autism* course online last summer.

However, Irene and Tara held Janie's arms and promised her some lotion. The promise redirected her focus long enough for them to her sit down at the table where Irene and I were sitting. Tara stood behind Janie's chair so she couldn't push back to get up. She rubbed some lavender scented lotion onto Janie's arms and dabbed a little under her nose. Janie started smelling her arms and the wild look in her eyes faded a little. Tara reached into Janie's bag and pulled a hairbrush out. She began brushing Janie's hair in a slow rhythmic manner. Janie's aggravation seemed to recede further.

Irene dimmed the lights in the room, sat down with me, and tried to resume our conversation. However, Janie blew up again. She tried to hit Tara and lunged across the table to grab my tape recorder. Tara backed away – evading the blows – and I was able to save the device. I offered to go and let them focus on calming Janie down before Irene's planning hour ended and her second period students arrived. Irene seemed grateful as I excused myself and suggested that I come back after-school sometime later in the week.

When we met the next week, after school, Irene apologized for the disruption of our first meeting and joked that taking the online course was less stressful than her teaching assignment. I assured her that there was no need to apologize and how I understood that student and safety issues take precedence above all else. Irene then told me about how it turned out that Janie was hungry and was able to calm down after they gave her something to eat. I was glad to hear that Janie was able to get through that day and did not have another big outburst all week.

As we talked, I learned that Irene faces many challenges as a high school teacher and in her role as the special education department chair for her school. She shared that the main issue she was dealing with now was not addressed in any of the courses she had ever taken. She was referring to a major change in her teaching assignment.

I've always taught students who are working towards their special diploma. Last year, and in years past, here at Union and in my previous job I taught in a self-contained environment. It is the population I enjoy and I have the most expertise with [students with] mental retardation and autism.

The problem she faced now was that her teaching assignment had changed completely and she was now required to teach traditional academic courses in an inclusion setting. She took the four courses required for the autism endorsement, but was actually pursuing her Master's in Exceptional Student Education. And all of these courses would be great if she were still teaching her usual community based work program. Irene went on to qualify her earlier statement, saying that in the *Educating Students with Autism* course she enjoyed learning some good classroom management and behavior strategies to use

with her students. She said that she especially enjoyed taking it online during the summer.

I asked Irene to illustrate her experience as an online learner in the *Educating Students with Autism* course. At first, Irene was reluctant to draw anything. She cautioned me not to expect any work of fine art and I assured her that I had no such expectation. So she picked up a few colored pencils and began to think about the course and draw herself as an online learner.

Figure 16. Irene's Drawing of Self as Online Learner



Irene shared that she has a home office devoted to her online courses and to developing her lesson plans and other creative endeavors, she loves tigers and animals and used them to decorate her space.

Figure 17. Irene's Home Work Space



Picture #1 of my home office where I do work for classes. I was going to clean up the area before I took the picture, yet I left it as is, as sometimes it is cluttered, sometimes not!

Irene explained the picture saying that most of all she enjoyed taking the course in the summer because she had been able to complete her assignments sitting under her lanai by the pool.

Figure 18. Irene's Preferred Home Work Space for Online Coursework



After talking about her pool, she was quiet for a few moments and wistfully told me that she actually did not have chance to swim at all that summer because the course had been so time consuming.

She went on to tell me that she had to put other things on hold as well, such as her regular summer babysitting job. Still talking about her picture Irene explained that the word "info" in the circle with the two-way arrows to represented the relationship between within the course and her own thinking. She recalled a give and take of information provided by the course and the sharing of her own professional experience and thinking.

She said that she felt “more efficient” when taking online courses than in face-to face courses because while sitting through a lecture in a traditional class,

You have to sit through it, then and there, whether you’re tired or hungry or whatever. But with an online class, I don’t have to do it [like that] I might have to do it within a certain amount of time, but I don’t have to do it when I don’t feel like it.

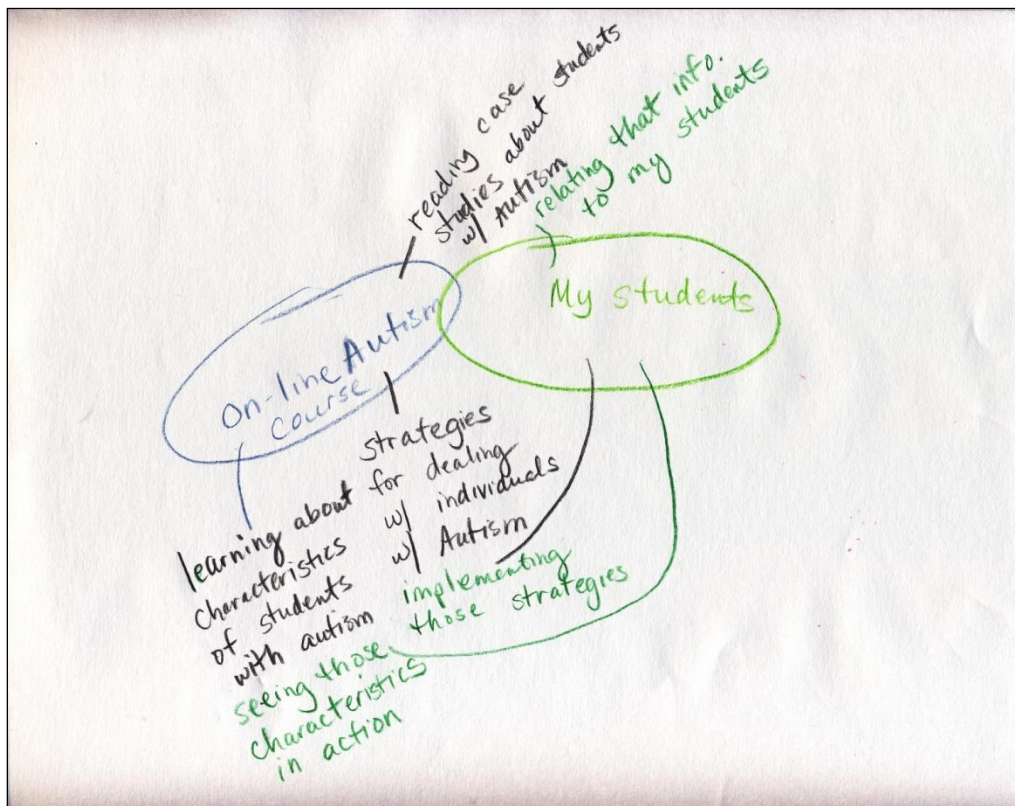
This was great for Irene because she reported that she spent about 15 hours per week on work specifically for this course. She shared that she also took two additional courses that summer, one online and one on campus. However, she was emphatic that *Educating Students with Autism* had the most intensive work load of the three.

As she reflected on the *Educating Students with Autism* course, she told me that she was surprised that she could actually learn in an online class “...you can still learn even if you never meet face-to-face with the instructor or with anybody! You can still get as much information off an online class as you can a face-to-face class.” She had been a little nervous about signing up for the course, because she had heard about Dr. Foster’s high expectations. However, the anxiety was gone in the end when she finished the course with an A.

She said that the course was helpful, “... it gave us a basic understanding of autism, how autism was diagnosed, the common characteristics of autism, some of the theories of why people have autism, and some of the treatment options – just a basic overview.” Further Irene stated that she really liked that Dr. Foster structured the course activities to ensure students mastered the material. “We had to keep doing it until we got it right.”

She recalled that Dr. Foster “did audio-video lectures where she spoke and had the PowerPoint presentations to go along with it. I’d always print out the PowerPoint presentation ahead of time.” She said that, “there was usually also some stuff on the Internet or other resources that we had to read” and that she established a pattern of, “read that, do the lecture, do the quiz, do an assignment....” I asked Irene how the course informed her teaching. She drew a diagram to illustrate the connections.

Figure 19. Irene’s Concept Map



To explain how the course impacted her teaching Irene spoke in very general terms. She recalled that she learned about the characteristics of students who have autism and was able to “see the characteristics in action” with her students. She noted that she learned about and was able to implement strategies for dealing with students with autism. During

the course, Irene also read case studies about teaching students with autism that helped her understand her own students.

Irene share that she recalled doing in a field experience project and because she wasn't teaching that summer, she had to work with a student enrolled in summer school at a nearby elementary school. Irene found that doing the field experience was one of the biggest challenges that she faced in the course because she felt like an outsider. In fact, she ended up involved in dispute with the school's leadership.

The teacher and all the other teachers that were there at summer school treated me like I was an equal, but the paraprofessional in the classroom thought I was intruding on her territory. ...then towards the end when the principal returned from a trip and suddenly was a problem with me being there. I'd gotten everything cleared with the assistant principal, but all of a sudden it was a problem. It was really a personal battle between them.

Luckily, Irene was able to finish her work for the course, but was distracted by the events that had unfolded in the elementary school. And although there was more to the story, she did not really want to share all the details.

Irene was unable to describe more specific connections between the course and her teaching. This may have also been due to the recent change that Irene experienced in her teaching assignment. As her school to this inclusive model Irene was worried that she did not have the academic content knowledge that she needed. She said,

In past years, I've taught the work program where we went out in the community four days a week. But now, it's different in that they took the work program away from me. And now, I'm also teaching FCAT.

Irene expressed to me that in addition to not having training, she was frustrated by not having any curriculum or textbooks to assist her in meeting the new demands of her assignment. She shared her concerns that the students who needed to be learning life skills like: How to ride the bus or shop for groceries were now stuck in classrooms doing worksheets in preparation for the FCAT. Exasperated, Irene told me that additionally,

I'm teaching a new course: Self-Determination, which the state mandates on the transition section of the IEP (Individualized Education Plan). Self-determination must be addressed for anybody that's in special education. So the County mandated that all ninth-graders on special diploma take Self-Determination. They tapped me to teach that course – I don't know why. There really aren't any materials for it.

Irene's situation was difficult. She took courses, particularly the Autism Endorsement courses to enhance her skills for teaching students with low incidence disabilities.

Unfortunately, her world was turned upside down in the year following the completion of the *Educating Students with Autism* course. It seemed that there was not much content from the course that Irene was able to relate to her new teaching assignment. Her frustrations doing the field experience and in not being able to apply her learning resulted in a feeling of being lost and helpless. Despite this Irene believed that the next time she taught students with autism she would be more aware of strategies to use.

Reflections

Unfortunately, Irene's situation overshadowed much of our discussion about the course. However, it was a good example of how policies are often improperly implemented in schools. This school wanted to create opportunities for students with disabilities to access the general curriculum. Yet, rather than assigning Irene to teach content she was not fully prepared to teach, the school might have more effectively drawn on her expertise by having her co-teach with content teachers and participate in content related professional development until she gained the expertise that she required. It seemed that the school implemented inclusion without providing the necessary training and support to the teachers involved. As Irene spoke about the mismatch between the courses and her teaching assignment I felt awkward and struggled to reply. I fought the urge to direct the discussion into a critique of policy implementation or school restructuring because it was not the intent of the study. I also thought about the pressure that principal may have been under to restructure due to the high stakes nature of Florida's response to NCLB. The contextual and policy issues were on my mind when I met with Irene and they undoubtedly influenced the way that I wrote Irene's portrait.

Personally, it was upsetting to witness how disillusioned and unhappy Irene felt about the circumstances of her teaching situation. She was not doing what she loved or feeling capable of making a difference with the youth who needed her. She complained to her school administration and the union, but her concerns fell on unsympathetic ears. I think she agreed to participate in this study to have an opportunity to voice her concerns to someone outside of her school district. Since the time of my meetings with Irene, she communicated that a new principal was assigned to her school.

Portrait 6: Brittney

During the spring of 2007, Brittney, a twenty-five year old special education teacher worked full-time and attended graduate school while recovering from a serious car accident. The short, bubbly white woman, with curly red hair, had undergone a major surgery. Brittney's parents, moved in to her apartment near the university to support her recovery. While she was home-bound she enrolled in three online masters-level courses. Her father built a special desk for Brittney to complete her coursework. It was angled so she could read or type on her laptop without tiring her arms. He also made it tall enough so that she could position herself under it in her special orthopedic wheelchair.

The doctors told her that she would have to take a year off to recover. I could imagine her laughing as she replied,

...And I told them they were crazy. I went back fourteen weeks later and just taught my kids, just like you'd teach them everything else – how not to knock me over or bump me or... They learned really quickly and they were great about it. I guess I finished out about the last nine weeks or something.

Then that summer, almost fully healed, Brittney enrolled in *Educating Students with Autism* online and another face-to-face course on campus. Though she was mostly recovered she was still unable to walk to class and had to use a wheelchair.

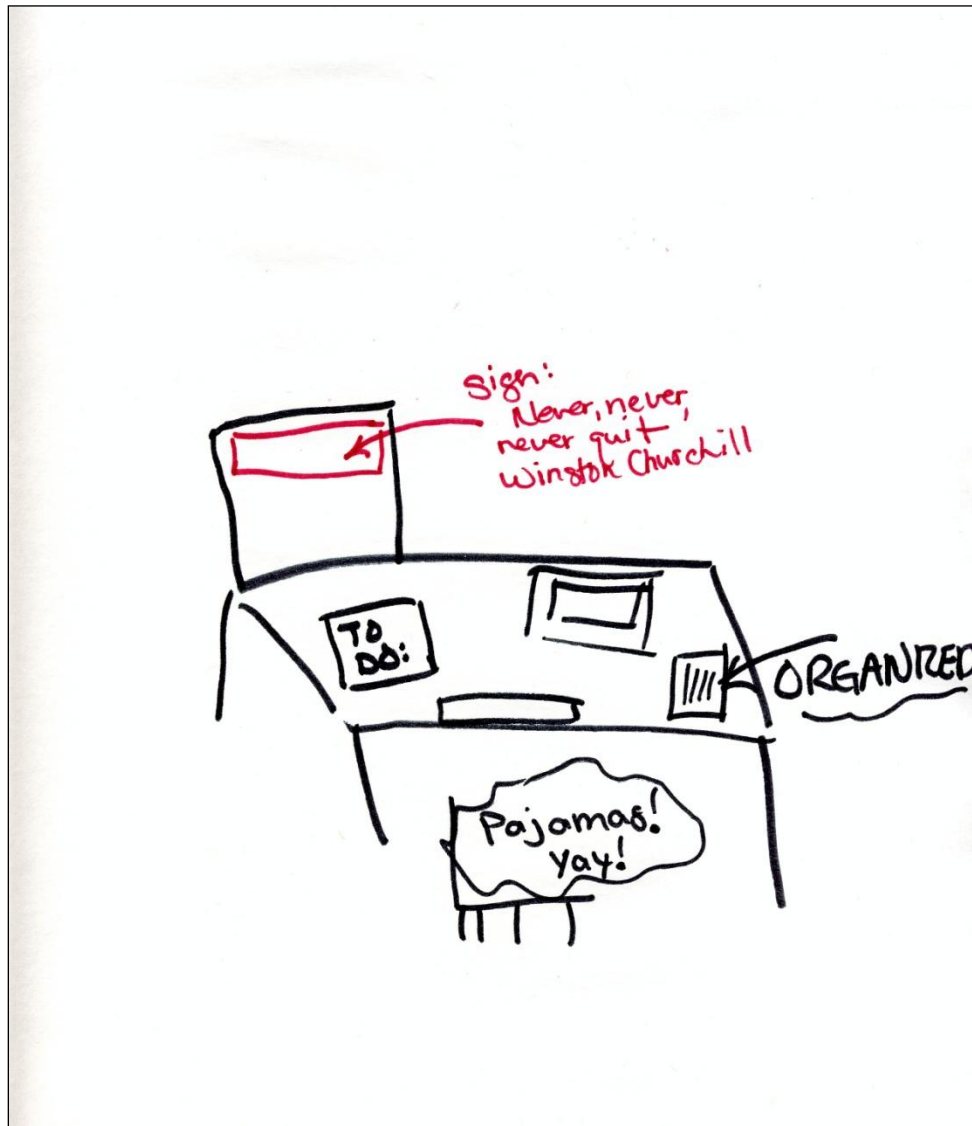
Brittney's story was amazing to me, but she just shrugged her shoulders as if it were no big deal. Brittney and I were sitting at a coffee shop near campus to discuss her experience in the *Educating Students with Autism* course. She shared the story so that I could understand just how helpful having the course online was to her. The course helped

her keep her mind off of the pain and gave her something to keep from getting bored while she recovered.

Brittney did not plan to become a special education teacher. Her undergraduate degree was in speech and language disorders. However she found herself working as an itinerant speech pathologist serving over ten schools. When the principal at one of her elementary schools near the university offered her a full-time position, in a pre-kindergarten unit for students with autism, she jumped at the chance. She was tired of commuting to so many schools and the elementary school was an easy drive down the highway from her apartment so she accepted the position. To become a certified teacher Brittney participated in the county's Alternative Certification Program (ACP). During her third year of teaching she decided that she needed to know more about teaching students with disabilities. Then while completing the ACP, Brittney decided to pursue her master's degree with an emphasis on Low Incidence/Intellectual Disabilities. Four of the courses were required for her to obtain the state endorsement in autism and she believed that the master's courses would enhance her understanding of her student's needs. The surgery coincided well with the online offerings in the masters program. She was happy that she would be graduating in a few months with her Master's in Special Education.

Brittney really appreciated the online courses. When I asked Brittney to draw how she saw herself as an online learner, she drew her desk, her tools, and the things that motivated her.

Figure 20. Brittney's Drawing of Self as Online Learner



She said that once she was healed that summer taking the *Educating Students with Autism* course in her pajamas made her especially happy. She talked enthusiastically about her workspace “I have my desk with everything labeled on it. You know, I always say that my kids’ autism is contagious. I have picture labels for everything I need at this point. ...and I printed off every single PowerPoint.”

She also wrote the quote that motivated her most: “Never, never, never quit – Winston Churchill.” Interestingly, the quote was one she picked up from her boss in her

very first job. Brittney shared the story about how she picked up the quote and made it her own – a story which I thought illustrated her positive (if slightly defiant) attitude, humor, and wit:

My very first job out of college was a speech pathology assistant and I had the most horrible boss ever and she had this sign on her desk. I worked in a really tiny town and I didn't get along with her. And she said to me one day, "Why don't you just quit?" I said, "How funny you said that, 'cause you have that sign on your desk." And now anytime I see it, I'll buy it. So, I have a bookmark that says it and I write it on stuff and, so, my mom actually got me a sign that said that for my desk.

After that, we talked a little more about her overall impressions of the course and of taking classes online. She seemed relaxed and twirled her hair around with her pen. She recalled that she did well in *Educating Students with Autism* and she enjoyed Dr. Foster as the instructor.

Brittney said that the course was memorable and that the purpose was: "To learn as much about children with autism as possible, the characteristics, the behaviors, how to work with them." However she said that online courses are: "...always hard 'cause you never know what to expect." To explain she said that she is a little over-eager in class sometime, "I'm one of those people who sit in the front row of the class...you know, the annoying person who asks the questions and has all her work done on time." When she reflected on instructors of other online courses she had taken, she said that "Dr. Foster was one of the best about letting us know exactly what we needed..." She said that she

does not usually take courses online because she just enjoys the face-to-face interaction more. She told me that she thrives on professor's feedback, but she said:

I felt like she (Dr. Foster) really wanted us to learn from it. Some of the professors just kind of want you to get through it, but she really had the end goal of knowing that we knew and what we wanted to do (in the classroom) when we were done with it.

As a student, Brittney was highly aware of her professors' attitudes and competency. To that end, Brittney did some research online and asked other teachers in the county what they thought of Dr. Foster before she signed up for the course. Laughing, she told me,

I thought, 'she [Dr. Foster] better know a lot about autism if she's teaching this course.' And then I 'googled' her and found tons of articles and research she had done. So, then, I was immediately impressed. And she had a lot of the same philosophies of teaching kids with autism that I have, which I really like.

Even still, she did not have high expectations for the course when she took it. About her expectations, she said, "To be honest, nothing! I thought, I know how to educate students with autism. This is ridiculous. ... Who's going to tell me more about my classroom than what I already know?" Yet, looking back Brittney said that this was a great course "for autism" and she would recommend it because of Dr. Foster's attention to detail and extensive knowledge base. Brittney shared an experience she had with another online course instructor to illustrate why she appreciated Dr. Foster's responsiveness so much. She said that the other online instructor was inconsistent when grading.

They were 20-point papers and he would give you terrible comments and then give you a 19 out of 20. And, then, another week, you would get horrible

comments and get a 14 out of 20. It never really matched. And, then, a lot of time his comments didn't make sense.

Further, the professor did not adhere to the stipulations he published in the syllabus,

There was a very strict policy that the papers had to be due every Monday by a certain time, and my close friend was in the course with me, but I don't think she turned a single paper in on time and got full credit on almost every paper. Whereas, someone else in the course turned in papers late, and she would get half credit just like he had said. We emailed about that. I mean, people complained about it throughout the course and he never addressed it. I'm really glad that it happened this semester at the end of grad school. Because I think if it was at the beginning, I wouldn't have made it through grad school. It was that frustrating of a semester.

The negative online experience she described stood in stark contrast to her experiences in the *Educating Students with Autism* course. Brittney was thoroughly impressed with Dr. Foster's teaching and online course management because she did what she promised and was extremely consistent.

Another reason Brittney believed the course left her with such a positive impression was that she had the opportunity to fulfill her field experience requirements in Dr. Foster's Pre-Kindergarten/Autism clinic on campus. She found that the experiences in the clinic and working with Dr. Foster directly gave her an opportunity to reflect on her teaching and behavior management style. In the clinic she compared her own way of working, now that she was a classroom teacher, with the students who were there filling their clinical requirements to become speech pathologists. She said that she could see that

the speech therapists who were in training were struggling with how to react to students with autism.

...they were speech clinicians, so they didn't really understand the behavior support aspect of it, so, a lot of times, we would bump heads in what I thought the kids should be doing and what they thought. It was interesting to watch other people work with autistic kids and how, what they expected of the children.

Brittney described herself as an extremely strict teacher. "I know what it is like to be in a clinic setting and have this autistic kid screaming at you and not knowing how to fix that behavior and support the positive behavior in the long run." The field experiences were affirming for Brittney, enabling her to see that the strategies she used – though strict – enabled her to see success with students in her classroom.

Although Brittney seemed to be pretty sure of herself, she acknowledged that as the semester progressed, she found that there was a lot more she could learn about students with autism. Brittney talked about how Dr. Foster helped her make sense of what she was learning in terms of her own classroom and challenges she was experiencing as a fairly new teacher.

She [Dr. Foster] was thorough and I felt like I got really good feedback from her. She graded my work with a lot of detail and I like that. I want to know what I did wrong. I want to know her comments. In comparison to teachers who just throw a grade on there she really looked at your paper or your work and didn't just and didn't just think of autistic kids in general – she thought of your situation. She knew how and what I was doing. She watched me in the clinic setting, but she also knew that, outside of the clinic setting, I worked with my own class.

Further, when Brittney experienced difficulties in her classroom after taking the course she was able to use some of the sensory strategies that Dr. Foster presented in the course. The challenge she faced occurred during the 2007 – 2008 school year that, "...it just clicked, 'Oh, this could work if I modified it a little bit' and it helped." But even though she was using the strategies from the course she found she needed more assistance.

I seemed to recall she had done some sensory strategies and I wasn't familiar with one of them. I wanted more detail about how it worked because I have some students with massive sensory deficits in my classroom. It's like a daily struggle, minute-by-minute, for some of my kids because of their massive sensory issues.

She also felt comfortable enough to contact Dr. Foster for help in this situation even though the course had ended. In particular, Brittney described the problem she had with a young boy in her classroom. He was diagnosed with autism, ADD, and schizophrenia. He was constantly over-stimulated and hyperactive, and unfortunately, and was not consistently taking his medications. So he was uncontrollable and disruptive in the classroom but, with Dr. Foster's help, Brittney was able to figure out ways to calm him to help him learn and make it through the day,

He also has tactile issues and food issues. ...from waking up in the morning 'till going to sleep, it's sensory [overload] all day long, the lights, noises, smells... We discovered he just needed real deep pressure. He needed [to play with] fidgets. He needed something different to sit on.

Brittney also relied heavily on the other students in the course through the discussion board feature of the course management software. She knew a lot of the students in the

course who were also teachers of students with autism in her county. She accessed the discussion boards a lot.

...probably daily – I really kept up with it. You know, sometimes you can just post a couple discussions a week but, we would get into big conversations, so I was jumping online, checking all the time to see if anybody had responded to you.

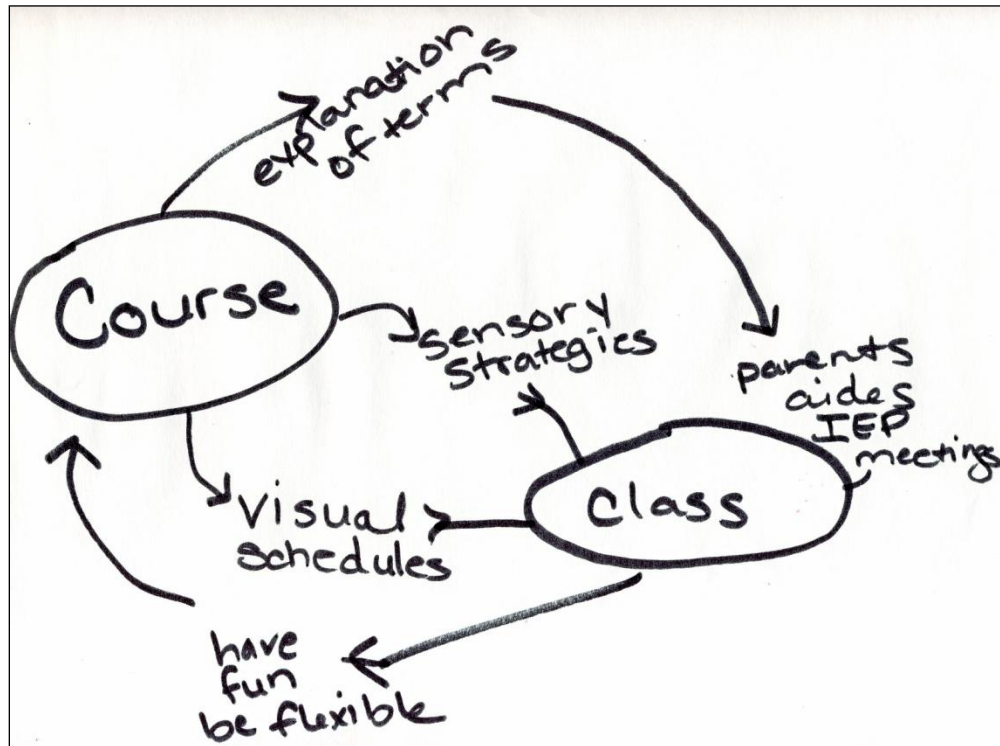
Brittney made a lot of friends in the discussion board for this course and in other special education courses she took for credit toward her masters' degree. She found that even though she never met them she felt that knew them and their personalities. Brittney used a lot of the tools available to her through the course management system and believes that,

You really learn more about people's personalities online, because you have to figure out their tone. You don't know what a person's [really] saying and there's always a little private message you can do during an online discussion. We always do online chats [in courses] and you're telling each other jokes back and forth while you're trying to work. ...Nine times out of ten if I'm in an online chat, I'm on the phone with one of the girls who's in the online chat, too.

Brittney was explicit about the connections that she was able to make as a result of the course, feedback from Dr. Foster, and learning from her peers. She drew a diagram to show the relationships that she perceived between the course and her own classroom.

Among the many ways that she felt this course influenced her teaching Brittney discussed how learning terminology helped her work with parents or aides, particularly in Individualized Education Plan Meetings.

Figure 21. Brittney's Concept Map



She also discussed the sensory strategies that she learned about. After taking the course Brittney said that she had become a lot more adept at applying sensory strategies in her classroom. She also gained more understanding of visual schedules.

Well, you know, that class really did teach me more about visual schedules than I think any class has. I'd always heard about them, but nobody had really explained them to me. I used them in my classroom, but I learned that I wasn't using them in the correct context. I had them up, but I wasn't using them consistently. Now with our daily schedule – They're [her students] so funny, because if that arrow is on the wrong thing, I hear it. It's unending!

Brittney was thrilled to be able to implement strategies that really worked in her classroom. She reported sharing the strategies that she found effective with other teachers, particularly those who have her students once they graduate from her Pre-K

through 2 classroom. Brittney was clearly passionate about her work and said that one message she would share with other teachers of students with autism is to “Have fun and be flexible!” and of course “Never, Never, Never, Quit!”

Reflections

Brittney asked for our first meeting to occur at a coffee shop near campus rather than in her classroom. At the meeting she fidgeted with her hair and a pencil. She seemed uneasy because she was constantly shifting on her chair. This body language contrasted starkly with her peppy voice and calm facial expressions. Observing her body language and considering her choice of meeting place, I wondered if she was nervous about participating and inviting me to her classroom. After I learned about her accident and injuries, I concluded that she may also have been tired after working all day and uncomfortable in the wooden chair at the coffee shop. Whatever the motivation for scheduling the meeting at the coffee shop she invited me to her classroom for the following meetings.

As we got to know each other and rapport between us grew, she openly discussed her reservations, expectations, and challenges with me. She did not provide a photograph of her workspace for the online course; however, I believe this was because she was busy near the end of the school year. She brought a clinical speech pathology background to her work and analysis of student issues. She was unafraid to ask for help and built relationships with people who could help her become a better teacher. As an online graduate student, Brittney was also attuned to issues of equitable treatment of students by instructors. She would not play favorites in her own class and she expected that college professors uphold the same standard. This was another respect with which she was very

pleased with Dr. Foster. Writing about Brittney was fun, she was enthusiastic and articulate. Brittney was passionate about teaching students with autism. She never intended to be a special educator, but she was as ‘with-it’ as a novice teacher could be.

Portrait 7: Caroline

I arrived at Simpson Middle School around lunchtime to meet with Caroline. The school was located under a canopy of oak trees in an older residential neighborhood just outside of downtown Plant City, FL. Caroline was able to meet with me while her students were at lunch. She was a petit, white woman, in her early thirties with her shoulder-length brown hair in a bobbed hairstyle. She wore a knee length tunic dress with floral print and brown sandals. She was ready for summer break!

At the time of our meeting, Caroline was finishing her fourth year of teaching in a self-contained sixth grade class for students with severe disabilities. During her second year of teaching, prior to the birth of her children, she taught in a pre-kindergarten setting for students with autism. It was her first experience teaching this population. The school district paid for her to attend a workshop on the east coast for training about how to teach students with autism. Even with the training she did not feel well prepared for the challenges of teaching students with autism. Then Caroline had two her girls and became a stay at home mom for four years. Caroline wasn’t sure if she would go back to teaching at all due to the demands of raising her own family.

While staying home with her children Caroline took a few online courses just in case she decided to return to the same classroom. Her husband also began working on his Master’s in Business. As their girls reached school age, Caroline’s family began to need additional income. So she called her former principal who instantly welcomed her back.

When she returned she had the same assignment teaching pre-k students with autism. She took the first of four courses toward the Autism Endorsement entitled, *Educating Students with Autism*. She said that she learned helpful information and enjoyed the course. However, after her first year back, she decided to seek a teaching position that did not involve working with students with autism. If she had remained a teacher of students with autism she would have been required to take the additional courses for the Autism Endorsement to be considered highly qualified.

Nearing the end of her fourth year as a teacher, Caroline was now at Simpson Middle. She was assisted by the same aide who worked with her before her maternity leave. The aide requested to be moved to Simpson Middle so that she could continue to work with Caroline. The two women have a loyal following of parents who enrolled their children at Simpson Middle just so they could be in her classroom. Although Caroline no longer teaches in a unit exclusively for students with autism, she found that many things from the course have assisted her in teaching students with other low incidence or severe disabilities.

Caroline has many qualities that attracted her aide and the parents to follow her to another school. She is thoughtful, kind, and soft-spoken. She is consistent and knows her own limitations. She will work collaboratively to meet the needs of her students, but has no problems saying no when she disagrees or is at risk of over-committing herself. Caroline is also highly organized and has high expectations for herself, her students, and others.

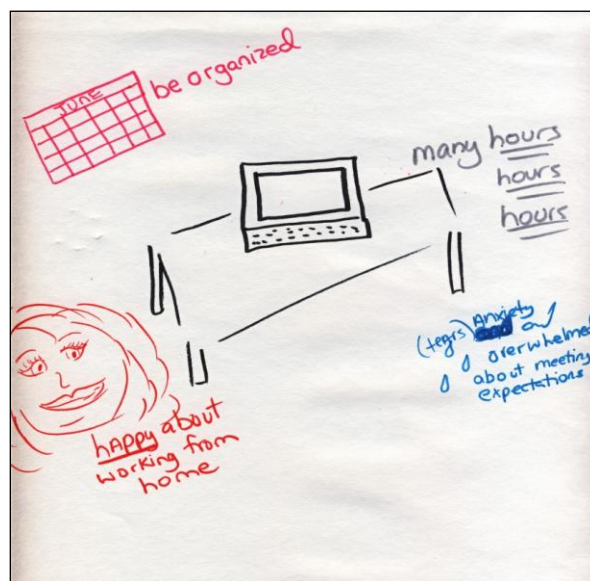
Caroline clearly articulated a number of things she liked and disliked about her experiences in the online graduate course *Educating Students with Autism*. When I asked

Caroline to describe overall experience in the course, she said it was positive. She really enjoyed the professor Dr. Foster, whom she described as,

Very specific, very detailed, very easy to follow ... you didn't question yourself, "What does she want?" You knew. And I've had professors where no one knew what they expected and you had to ask them over and over. She could explain it to you, and if you did have a question, she was very, very calm and very explicit, but, yet, so kind. You know? Instructors usually take the time, because they have to. She took the time 'cause she wanted to.

Further Caroline explained that she does not typically like taking graduate-level courses in general. In the past she often had the unfortunate experience of being overwhelmed to the point where she felt so much anxiety that she cried. However, though Dr. Foster's course proved course to be a lot of work, she found that it did not have to be painful or overly anxiety provoking. At this point in our conversation, I asked Caroline to draw a picture to help me understand how she thought of herself as an online learner (Figure 1).

Figure 22. Caroline's Drawing of Self as Online Learner



She recalled that when taking the course, she was happy to be able to complete all of her work from home. She admitted that she actually did get anxious and cried during this course. She cried because she was overwhelmed and wondered if she would be able to meet the expectations of the course. She worked very hard on everything, spending approximately one and a half hours per day to keep up with the assigned readings. She found that she had to be extremely organized and also learned that organization can be a key tool for working with students who have autism or other disabilities.

While Caroline shared that although the *Educating Students with Autism* course was a little stressful for her, most of the things that overwhelmed Caroline were not issues with Dr. Foster's class,

No, I didn't feel at all like I was doing anything wrong. You know, many times you do your work and you feel like, 'Oh, my god, they hate it,' or 'What did I do wrong on it?' and they don't tell you or their feedback is negative or whatever. No, I didn't get that from her. ... I know emails are very difficult, but I didn't feel like I was talking to a professor. I felt like I was talking to a teacher who was really teaching.

She said that from the start, she had a positive impression of Dr. Foster because she did things that showed an interest in making the course personal.

At the very beginning of the course, she had herself videotaped, talking to us, and we could see her in her office, giving her expectations verbally. And I really liked that, 'cause that made me feel like I was right there with her and that she was talking to me. I really liked that she took the time to do that.

Caroline took the course in hopes of learning more about students with autism, “What is their mindset? What do they think? How do they feel? What should we do as educators to help them? Because they’re, they don’t think like typical children, but, yet, you can’t totally determine what they’re thinking.” Using the discussion board features in the course, Caroline found that she could learn a lot of useful information from the other students in the class,

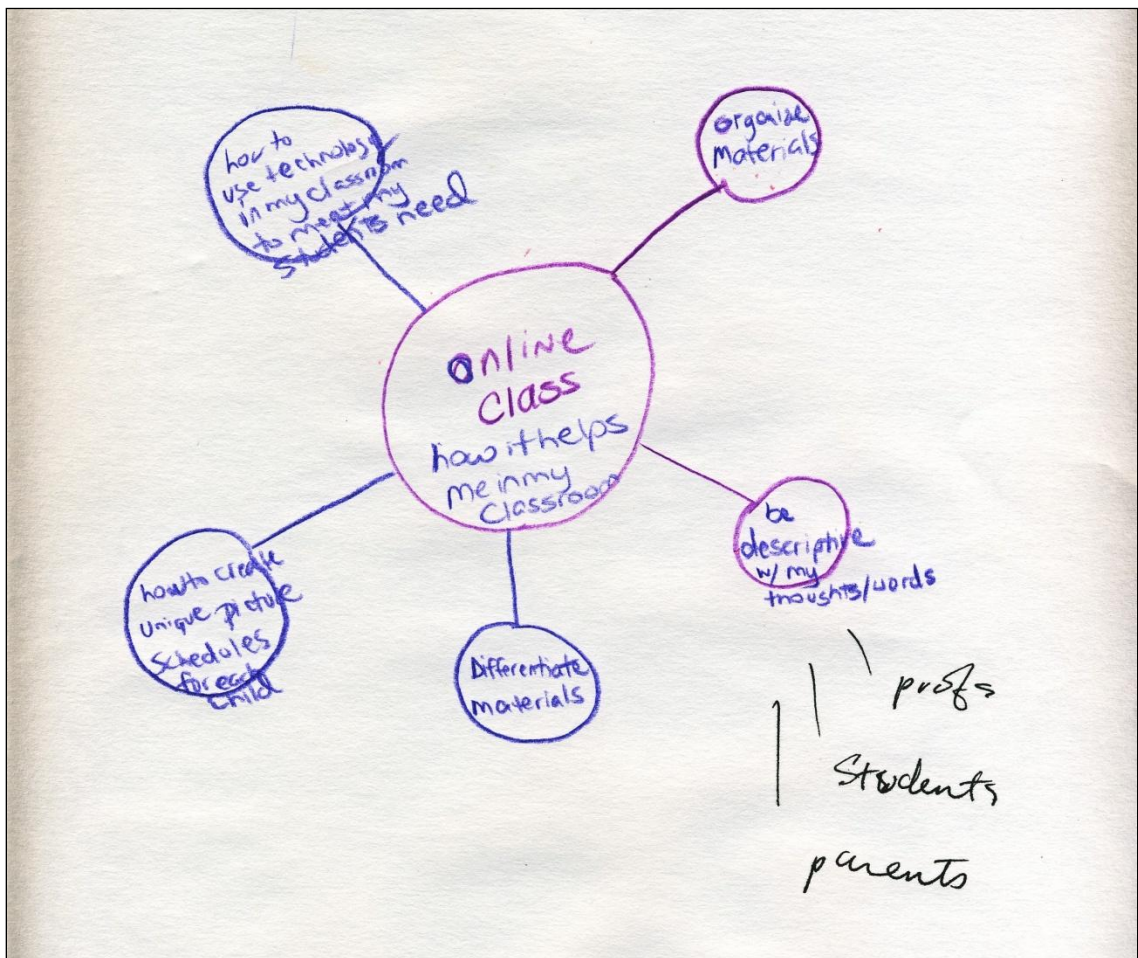
I learn from other people when they write. I’m like, ‘Oh, I didn’t think about it like that’ ‘cause basically there were a lot of different perspectives. . . .people used experiences from their classrooms and that makes you think, too. Because, then, they’re saying, ‘This is what my class was like. This is what I tried.’ And, so, that really does help me.

She also found that Dr. Foster was able to help her answer these questions and go beyond them to develop skills that she applied with her own students.

To illustrate this, Caroline recalled a conversation she had with Dr. Foster that revolved around the major assignment required in the course. Caroline did her field experience requirements in the classroom of one of her friends. The young boy Caroline worked with for twenty hours that summer was challenging. Although she declined to discuss his specific behaviors with me she explained that she videotaped herself working with the child and uploaded it video for Dr. Foster to review. Then they discussed strategies that Caroline was able to use with him. Caroline earned an A for the project and actually identified that strategies enabled the boy to perform better in school. I asked Caroline to illustrate the ways that the course impacted her teaching. After drawing a concept map, Caroline discussed it with me. She said that throughout the course, Dr.

Foster's used of technology to meet the student needs everyone, including her own. She found that this modeling helped her think of ways that she could use technology to meet her students' needs. The course helped her learn to organize and differentiate her materials and develop individual schedules for her students. She also linked the course to improvements in her own communication skills with professors, parents and her students though this was something I noted on her concept map once she discussed it with me.

Figure 23. Caroline's Concept Map



Caroline also learned how to create unique picture schedules and differentiated lessons for her students. To accomplish this, she learned to ask questions and dig deep to identify students' needs,

I think it's just processing of, 'What does each child need? What, what is their... We know their disabilities, so what do they need? What do they need to learn?' And 'What are their quirks? What makes them mad? What sets them off? What makes them happy? What... you know. So, I think it's just basically learning each student and meeting their need on their level [making the effort] to differentiate.

Despite not having students with autism in her class this year, she still found these strategies to be helpful during her fourth year of teaching. Additionally, as a result of her communications with Dr. Foster and with the other students in the course, Caroline reported that she learned to be more descriptive when communicating her thoughts. Particularly when communicating with parents but also with other professionals and her students. Beyond that Caroline attributed her organizational skills and habits, in part, to the course.

Caroline's spaces were highly organized. When other teachers or administrators visited her classroom they always commented on her organizational skills. However, Caroline pointed out that home office spaces are often necessarily cluttered with cords, supplies, and accessories. She took a photo of the space she utilized at home to work on the course. Though she expected clutter in a home office, Caroline still could not accept this cluttered look. So she and her husband set up their shared home computer in a converted entertainment center with doors that could be closed. Prior to this arrangement and before her husband began graduate school, Caroline set up her computer on a bakers rack in the corner of her kitchen. It was an efficient place for her to complete her work while she was raising her two young children.

Figure 24. Caroline's home workspace for online courses.



Looking toward the future, Caroline hoped to stay in her classroom with her aide and the same population of students. Should she wind up teaching more students with autism and be required to earn her endorsement, she knows she can always pick up the other courses she needs online. However, even after the positive experience with Dr. Foster's *Educating Students with Autism* course, Caroline plans to research all aspects of a course so that she knows the expectations before enrolling in another course. Some of the things she will consider are,

I don't want to have any surprises. I want to know exactly what their expectations are, how do they grade, what are the basic rules or procedures. And I will want to see their own personal philosophy and what do they expect from me. I want to know these things upfront before I even look at any assignments. And, then, I

want to go and look at the assignments. Let me look at every bit of it. I want to know, in advance, what's due at the end. So, basically, I will just want to get a brief overview of the whole course.

Anyone who knows her would say that Caroline's need to know all of these things does not originate in a desire to avoid hard work. She has seen from Dr. Foster how well a course can be delivered online and she does not want to settle for less.

Reflections

Writing about Caroline was different for me. She was very subdued and a bit nervous talking about her experiences. It was as though she wanted to give me the right answers. During all of our interactions, I explained that there were no 'right answers' but this did not seem to alleviate the nervousness she displayed. Caroline faced challenges with the course found that it conflicted with her personal goals and needs. Despite these challenges, she was impressed with Dr. Foster, whom she perceived to be a caring and approachable teacher.

The interviews also occurred at the end of the school year and though she only had a week of school left, she had already packed up almost her entire classroom. She did not want me to conduct a classroom observation because her plans for the week included videos and games. She said that she was doing this because there were so many school events that she could not keep her students focused enough for real work. I wondered if she was anxious that I might judge her for not doing more 'academic' things during the last week of school. I tried to reassure her and let her know that was not part of my research.

As Caroline talked about her career decisions, my first reaction was puzzlement over why she disliked courses so much that she would change jobs to avoid having to enroll in more of them. It was hard to discern the basis for her decisions. As I learned more about her, I found that she sought to keep things manageable in all aspects of her life. She prioritized her family and raising her children first and refused to subject herself to situations that would interfere with her ability to care for her family.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Throughout the last decade (1999-2009) Florida's Bureau of Exceptional Education Student Services, in partnership with Institutions of Higher Education, created the Florida Virtual ESE program to develop and deliver online professional development courses. The state also provided tuition support for teachers to participate in online professional development coursework and earn credentials necessary to be considered Highly Qualified under NCLB. Online course delivery is thought to be a cost-effective approach to the provision of professional development for in-service teachers (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, McCloskey, 2009). A review of the literature identified a need to examine what it takes to create meaningful online learning experiences that facilitate the goals and objectives particular to the field of special education. Thus, this study explored the nature and qualities of the instructor's and students' experience in one Virtual ESE course entitled: *Educating Students with Autism*. These experiences were woven into portraits that highlight the importance of relationships, course design and content. The portraits illuminated idiosyncratic issues that emerged within the context of student's professional and personal lives and impacted their engagement in the online course.

Study Overview

This study utilized Portraiture Methodology because it provides a systematic framework to develop understandings of lives, pedagogy, or cultural institutions. The products from this genre of research approach are compelling, empirically grounded, and

meaningful portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Data collection for this study included: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, document reviews, and the analysis of artistic and photographic data. These data documented different aspects of each individual's experience in the online course and the relation of the course to her teaching practice. The resulting portraits respond to the research questions listed below. Of the research questions, the first four focused on the instructor and the remaining questions related to the students in the course.

1. What were the instructor's perceptions of the overall nature and purposes of the course entitled *Educating Students with Autism*?
2. What were the instructor's perceptions of the nature and purposes of the pedagogical tools utilized in online courses?
3. How did the instructor describe the teaching strategies she employed in discussion boards?
4. What salient concerns emerged from the instructor's perspective about discussion boards for facilitating learning?
5. What did students report about the nature of their experience in the course entitled *Educating Students with Autism*?
6. How did students perceive their experiences in the course as having an impact on their philosophies of teaching and learning?
7. How did students perceive their experiences in discussion boards relating to the use of discussion in their class?
8. What salient concerns emerged for students about discussion boards for facilitating learning?

Data analysis for this study involved the identification and verification of themes using *Atlas Ti* and an impressionistic record, where I recorded information about the interactions that occurred with each participant. While the full portraits were presented in chapter four, brief summaries of findings from each participant are provided in the following section.

Findings Related to the Instructor

As I spent time with her, I was impressed by Dr. Foster as an enthusiastic and competent online instructor. Dr. Foster was very clear about her purposes for teaching the course entitled *Educating Students with Autism*. Through this course and others that she taught Dr. Foster hoped to empower teachers and speech therapists who work with students with exceptionalities. She also hoped to spread her passion for improving the lives of children with autism. She did not claim to provide “cures” for autism, but she did her best to identify and disseminate research-based strategies. By teaching teachers to recognize and utilize these strategies Dr. Foster hoped to enable students with autism to succeed in their home, educational, and community environments.

Dr. Foster, a recognized scholar in the study of autism, helped herself stay connected to practice by supervising clinicians and working with children diagnosed with autism on a weekly basis in the pre-school that her department established. She articulated and enacted a constructivist teaching philosophy that built on adult learning theory and the principles of mastery learning. She deftly used the latest teaching tools available to her in the online environment. Dr. Foster provided multiple opportunities for the teachers who took her course to learn and demonstrate their mastery of concepts or skills. The tools she used when she taught the *Educating Students with Autism* course

included: video vignettes, case studies, reading quizzes, and weekly topical discussions. She also communicated with her students regularly so that she could address their individual needs. If a student had challenges Dr. Foster would make contact by phone or email to help identify and problem-solve the student's issues.

Dr. Foster sought to help the teacher bridge theory and practice through the discussion, projects, and assessments she designed. Each week she provided students with a choice of three questions to which they responded based on their own Pre-K-12 teaching experience. She required thoughtful discussion board posts substantiated with at least two quotations from the text. She also asked that they respond to each other. The students who participated in this study indicated that they appreciated this process because it created opportunities for conversation, constructive debate, and perspective sharing.

Dr. Foster indicated that the affordances of the online medium were adequate for her to teach and assess teachers' practice in the local area. She expressed concerns about assisting teachers who took the course from outside of the university's catchment area. If they experienced challenges during the course and lived nearby, Dr. Foster was known to drive to the school site and consult with them about the problem. If they lived farther away, Dr. Foster could only consult with them via email or telephone.

Findings Related to Students

It was not the goal of this study to causally attribute teachers' professional learning, changes in attitudes/beliefs, and teaching practice to the online *Educating Students with Autism* course or to particular aspects of the course (discussions, projects, feedback, formal & informal interactions with professor & peers). However, individual

participants did indicate that the instructor, course structure, activities, and projects assisted them as they refined their philosophies of teaching, expanded their perspectives on educational issues, and enhanced some of their professional skills or capacities. This study identified a wide range of personal challenges experienced by participants within the context of the course. Additionally, it provided a forum for participants to describe supports that were either provided or needed. The summaries to follow are organized by each study participant.

Guiliana. Despite a portable classroom, Guiliana's situation was almost perfect. She worked with a team of pre-kindergarten teachers and provided intensive instructional services to students with autism. Her school was one of four in a medium-sized district that housed such teams. This allowed the district to target resources (i.e. training for teachers and services for children with autism and other low incidence disabilities) for maximum impact. The district also had a contract with Dr. Foster, specifically to establish, facilitate, and support teacher teams designed specifically to improve services for students with autism. Guiliana's home life was also conducive for participation in an online course. Her husband and ten year old son were "self-sufficient" and enabled her to pursue her professional development goals during the summer and throughout the year.

As a self-declared independent learner, Guiliana believed that she did well with online courses. However, she still missed the face-to-face interaction of on-campus courses. Despite this she believed that the course was extremely helpful. She stated, "Every sentence out of her [Dr. Foster's] mouth is pertinent to my life and work." Guiliana shared that the course encouraged the increased use of multi-sensory and individualized strategies for instruction, improved her classroom management repertoire,

and helped her refine communications with parents. She became facile in the use of schedules to structure her students' time and learned to arrange the environment to enhance learning. She found that the course also provided her with new ideas to share with the other teachers on her team. Guiliana worked hard and drew upon the extensive resources available to her. She was able to help all of her students attain kindergarten or first grade levels and to graduate many of her students into 'inclusive' classrooms when they moved out of pre-kindergarten.

Alberta. Alberta's successful completion of the *Educating Students with Autism* course is remarkable. She faced numerous challenges some of which might have caused even the best student to drop a course. Her ADHD made it hard to keep pace with the class reading schedule. Her mother's stroke divided Alberta from her studies at times. Her own health was deteriorating due to diverticulitis that was discovered in the months following the summer when she took *Educating Students with Autism*. Alberta lived in a county that was hit hard by hurricanes and she quite frankly had an impossible job. As one of two behavior specialists in a very small and remote county, her role was to provide support to teachers who taught students with emotional and behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorders, and other low incidence disabilities.

Alberta reported that she enjoyed the course and learned many strategies and techniques from the course, but felt unable to assist teachers in utilizing these techniques. Alberta explained that she obtained her position in the county because she had been successful in working with children with severe behavioral issues. She acknowledged that she was not prepared to be a teacher of teachers and this course was not designed to prepare her for that task. Alberta was motivated by her belief that students with autism

needed to be protected from the negative attitudes of teachers. Notwithstanding some of the challenges she faced, this course seemed to provide a useful space for her to connect with other professionals.

Trudy. Trudy probably could have taught the *Educating Students with Autism* course. However, even as an experienced master teacher, she reported that the course provided her with up-to-date information on autism spectrum disorders and strategies that she used in the classroom. Specifically, she learned about video modeling and utilized new assistive technologies. While participating in this study Trudy's classroom situation was unique. She was assigned to teach general education classes rather than special education as she had for more than thirty years. However, she was extremely happy to be able to demonstrate teaching inclusively as there were a few who did have disabilities, including one student with autism in her classroom.

Trudy effectively accommodated and modified curriculum for her inclusive general education classes. However, Trudy enrolled in *Educating Students with Autism* so she would "not be doing stuff that used to be great". She found that most of her teaching methods were affirmed by the course, as was her philosophy of education. She believed in mastery learning, a philosophy that she was thrilled to find out that Dr. Foster shared.

Though a master teacher and life-long learner, Trudy was not a career student. She was content with her Master's in Special Education and National Board Certification. She had difficulty participating in the online Autism Endorsement courses when she used her Apple computer. To fulfill the requirements of the online course her husband had to set up a PC workstation on their dining room table. Trudy was not a fan of online course delivery; she preferred to have face-to-face interaction and to "really get to know

people.” Despite her distaste for the online format, she learned a lot of strategies, affirmed her teaching and gained from others’ perspectives about the importance of involving families in students’ school life. Trudy was an inspirational teacher who was interested in her own growth and learning. She felt empowered by the course and found that it helped her as she worked to provide leadership in her school through mentoring and promoted the cultivation of a positive learning environment for all students.

Irene. Irene, a high school teacher and Special Education team leader, worked in a semi-rural county. She took the *Educating Students with Autism* course as she pursued her Masters degree in Special Education. She emphasized the disconnection between her teaching assignment, her preparation, and the courses that she was taking toward her degree. She believed that prior training did not prepare her for the teaching assignment that required her to teach inclusive general education courses. Prior to the change in her teaching assignment, she taught a community-based work program for students with low incidence disabilities. She shared that the county and her principal made this change and did not provide the additional professional development needed in the academic content areas that she was now expected to teach.

Despite her dissatisfaction with her teaching assignment Irene enjoyed the online course. She enjoyed sitting under the lanai by her pool to do her coursework. She was surprised by the amount of work expected of her and felt that she accomplished something as she completed the *Educating Students with Autism* course. She appreciated Dr. Foster’s mastery learning approach and the opportunities provided to her by the course. She gained a more comprehensive knowledge of autism spectrum disorders. She learned useful strategies such as using social stories and schedules. She looked forward to

a time when she when she would work primarily with students with autism and low incidence disabilities in the future.

Brittney. At the time of this study Brittney, was a novice teacher working on her Masters Degree in special education. She became a teacher through a nontraditional route. She began her career as Speech Pathologist working in schools. She was recruited by a principal who encouraged her to complete the county's Alternative Certification Program (ACP) and become a special education teacher. Brittney took the *Educating Students with Autism* course a few months after she had a serious car accident. Her "never quit" attitude and supportive parents enabled her to work toward her degree while she recovered from her injuries. Though the ACP program gave Brittney many tools to use in the classroom, she stated that it did not provide the in-depth knowledge she needed to be a successful educator of students with disabilities.

Brittney recalled a great deal about the course with Dr. Foster. She said that the course "stood out" because she learned more than she expected. She felt that Dr. Foster was one of the best online instructors she had experienced to date. Brittney's proximity to campus enabled her to participate in Dr. Foster's pre-school sessions and they developed a lasting relationship that extended beyond the semester of the course. She appreciated Dr. Foster's feedback throughout the course because it was very thorough and thought provoking. Brittney might be considered an ideal student, as she always completed her work on time, and she read and participated more than most other students (in her opinion). As a result, she expected professors to go above and beyond as well.

Caroline. Caroline, a young mother of two, worked as an elementary school teacher of students with low incidence disabilities in a self contained classroom. She took

the *Educating Students with Autism* course as the first in the sequence toward the Autism Endorsement, but soon decided that she did not want to take the additional courses to complete the endorsement. She had a positive experience in the course with Dr. Foster. Caroline really respected Dr. Foster and considered her to be a “true teacher unlike most professors”. Caroline needed to devote her time to raising her children. This was the main reason why she chose not to complete additional online courses for the endorsement. She made a decision to teach only in the area of her original certification.

Caroline’s careful consideration and thoughtful decision making enabled her to maintain the balance of family and work life that she needed. These characteristics also contributed to the development of a ‘following’ of parents who wanted to have their children in her classroom. Caroline was highly organized and thorough in everything she decided to do. Though she had one or two students with autism in her classroom, she did not want to have an ‘autism class’ and consequently be required to earn the endorsement.

Implications

Online teacher professional development is a context within which many questions can be raised about the experiences of students who sit at the computer. This study revealed some of the complexity of teaching and learning in online environments. It emphasized the challenges instructors face when working to make instruction and content relevant for teachers within the ecological context of their schools.

In special education, a field known for high rates of teacher turnover, there is an urgent imperative for policy-makers, researchers, and professional development providers to ensure that the highest quality professional development offerings are available to in-service teachers in the most cost-efficient and convenient way. This study described a

high quality professional development course and teachers' perceptions of its impact on their teacher practice. The course was developed and provided by a university in partnership with Florida's Bureau of Exceptional Student Services. For the field of special education, online course availability is often considered vital, particularly for niche subject areas such as low incidence disabilities and early childhood (Ludlow, 2003; Spooner, et al., 2000). Courses, such as this one, are particularly important to teachers who need to stay current with research on appropriate educational instruction and related services for students with disabilities.

Most adult learners in contemporary society have multiple roles and responsibilities while attending college. The participants in this study were no exception, as women, mothers, and full-time teachers; they all balanced multiple responsibilities and major life events while they were enrolled in the *Educating Students with Autism Course*. Among all of the study participants, Caroline and Alberta seemed to struggle with more significant challenges (raising very young children, attending to the medical needs of others, and natural disasters) while they participated in the course. While the participants of this study were all identified by the instructor as successfully completing the course, she reported that two did not complete or dropped the course. Thus, this study points to the need for future studies exploring the experiences of students, particularly women, who do not persist in online courses.

Muller's (2008) research on the persistence of women in post-secondary undergraduate and graduate levels online courses identified barriers such as lack of support for their multiple responsibilities, insufficient interaction with faculty, and technology-related problems. Muller also found that women persisted in the online

degree program due to personal motivations, the convenience of the online course, and engagement in a learning community within the institution. In the present study, the women who faced the most difficult challenges indicated that they persisted because of positive interactions with the instructor, engagement in a learning community, and the convenience of the course.

This study highlighted many engaging and ecologically valid instructional strategies for delivering content. Each teacher interacted with that content as they dealt with different issues related to instruction of students, changes in their professional roles, or personal challenges. The unpredictable and extremely complex nature of learning, the wide range of roles and capacities expected of special educators, and limitations in current research methodologies make it difficult to assess the impact of online pedagogical strategies (Webster-Wright, 2009; Knapczyk & Hew, 2007). Thus, this study also has implications for instructors and professional development coordinators who consider the ever-changing and variable roles of special educators in schools when designing coursework, practica, and other professional development experiences (Quigney, 2009; DeMik, 2008).

Reflections on Method. As a form of naturalistic inquiry, Portraiture allows educational researchers to incorporate the aesthetic within the “scientific” inquiry and reach out to participants to establish negotiated understandings of experiences, concepts, and critical reflection. This is done as the Portraitist attempts to understand and organically co-create a narrative of the participants’ experience. That approach allowed me to learn about and contextualize the experiences of the instructor and the in-service

teachers in a way that could not have been accomplished using only interview, focus group, or observational research methods.

Collecting data from participants at the end of the school year created some challenges. For example, conducting observations of teaching was challenging with Caroline because I visited her during the last week of school. She had already packed up her classroom for the year and was not conducting lessons because her students were constantly being pulled for assemblies and end of the year events.

In the development of the portraits, I am sure that the pressures of time influenced my discernment and writing. I made choices about how to portray the participants and what to emphasize about their experiences. These choices were based on a number of considerations, including my own experiences interacting with each of them and my interpretations of the way they talked about and represented themselves artistically.

All of the portraits were shaped by my values and understandings of what was going on. Notwithstanding my influence, the portraits were refined in response to feedback from the participants provided during the member-checking process. During the final member check, four participants who provided feedback said that they were pleased and satisfied with the portrayal.

The fifth participant, Alberta, was not satisfied with her portrait. She pointed out a few errors, expanded on points that I misunderstood, and expressed concern that her identity was not sufficiently protected. She was also concerned that I included unnecessary information about her personal and professional challenges. First, I apologized for any discomfort the portrait caused and reminded her of the voluntary nature of her participation and that she could withdraw at any point. I pointed out that the

purpose of the study was to explore contextual factors that affected students' implementation of strategies learned in the course. I assured her, however, that I would correct the errors and take additional steps to further protect her identity.

This study highlighted the importance of understanding the teacher's context and needs as a learner after participating in the online professional development course. The instructor hoped that she would play a role in the teachers' adoption of new strategies for teaching students with autism. Her purpose was to "act as a conduit" and help teachers build on the skills that they already possess. She found when the teachers used their own students' work as the basis for their assignments, they seemed to become more confident about their instruction, classroom management, and communication skills. This affirms Webster-Wright's (2009) call for the field to move away from a narrow or limited focus examining delivery and move toward creating authentic, job-embedded professional development.

In the process of conducting this study, I became aware of critiques of the methodology I used. Discussing the post-colonial and post-structuralist perspective, Lather (2008) urges critique of research that claims to speak for or essentialize others. Ladson-Billings & Donnor (2005) call for moving beyond discourses that reinforce dominant cultural models through activist research approaches. Additionally, feminist researchers share goals of investigating, unpacking, or working to counteract institutional, societal, and domestic structures that oppress women (Olesen, 2005). Feminist researchers share concerns about the need to critically evaluate the potential for research to replicate these structures and compound the problem of distorting the lived experiences of women.

Reflecting on the methodology of this study, I recognize my own need to continuously engage in critical examination of the stance I assume as a researcher, the identification of topics for inquiry, approaches I select to address research questions, and representation of findings. This study was informed by an interpretive phenomenological perspective which examines “the hows and the whats of social reality” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 484). I addressed both *the hows* and *the whats* regarding the nature and qualities of experiences of the instructor and in-service special educators in an online course in the portraits.

Further Reflections

This study taught me a lot about my epistemology. I found that learning and constructing knowledge is complex, time-consuming, socially situated, and highly political. I learned that content knowledge and pedagogical skills are extremely important, but passion and caring also play an important role when teaching teachers. Adult learners are sensitive to words and tones, as we carry baggage that informs our vision and shapes our perspectives. This is not to say that adult learners should be coddled, but that the contexts of their lives and work certainly matter.

With her extensive knowledge of the content and mastery of a variety of approaches that enhanced learning in an online environment, Dr. Foster was an excellent model for me as a future online teacher educator. In the online environment she worked hard to find ways to convey her passion and to “light fires” and present the strategies she hoped teachers would use with the students in their classrooms. She provided support, encouragement, and sound instructional practices to a group of teachers who work with challenging students and who are at high risk for burn out. Her approach to teaching was

a good example of the importance of taking the time to care for students and recognize the limitations of whatever technological tools we may use.

Ongoing professional development is viewed as a key to reforming education and improving teaching. It is particularly important for teachers of exceptional and diverse learners. Designing professional development to be delivered via online courses adds complexity and challenges. I have learned a lot about the process of narrative research and myself as a researcher. In sense this study is a portrait of me, because my voice and values resonate throughout. It has made me a more sensitive and perceptive teacher educator. I am more inclined now to focus on interrogating “what” is being accomplished through various professional development programs and initiatives in schools framed within the broader contexts of working toward change for social justice and equity for students with disabilities in schools.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Instructor Interview Protocols

Instructor Protocol #1 – First Meeting

1. Please provide a general overview of the course entitled *Educating Students with Autism*
 - a. Type of course (introductory, advanced, etc.)?
 - b. Sequence in program?
 - c. How often it is offered?
 - d. How many students were enrolled? Typically?
 - e. Technology requirements/training for students?
 - f. Proportion of time do you spend assisting with tech. issues?
 - g. Rationale for online format?
2. How often have you taught this particular course?
 - a. Were you involved in developing the course?
 - b. Were you involved in converting it to online?
3. How much experience do you have as an online instructor?
4. What is your professional background related to the content of this course?
5. What personal motivation do you have for teaching this course?
6. Could you share a metaphor about yourself as an online teacher?
7. How do you characterize your experience when teaching the course?
 - a. How much time do you have to devote to this course?
 - b. How does this compare to other courses that you teach?
 - c. Where do you usually work on this course?
 - d. What resources do you need when you are teaching the course?

- e. How do you set up your work space when teaching?
8. Why do students usually take this course?
 9. What were the explicit goals and objectives for teaching this course?
 - a. Did you have any unstated goals for students in this course? If so, what were they?
 10. How does the online format contribute or detract from the nature and purposes of this course as you see it (i.e. activities you can or cannot do, etc)?
 11. How does teaching online impact you as a teacher educator?
 12. How would you characterize students who do well in this course?
 - a. What is the pass rate, typical grade average, withdraw rate etc?
 - b. What do you know about how students set up their work/learning environment?
 13. In what ways do you expect this course to impact the practice of the teachers who enroll in it?
 - a. What do you believe the impact of this course has been on your students?
 14. Would you be willing to identify up to 6 students who have done well in this course?
 15. Are there documents from the course I could review before our next meeting?

Instructor Protocol #2 – Second Meeting

1. What is your load like when teaching online courses?
2. Do you have a teaching assistant? If so, how do you utilize the TA?
3. How do you design instruction online?
 - a. How do you present content?
 - b. How well is your content suited for online delivery?
4. How do you get to know your students?
5. How do you structure class activities to promote teacher learning?
6. What online tools do you use to meet objectives in the course?
 - a. How did you decide to use these tools?
7. Do you model teaching practices in discussion boards? If so, how?
8. What possibilities do discussion boards open up for you?
9. What challenges do discussion boards pose for you as a teacher educator?
10. Do you see changes in student responses in discussion boards over time?
11. What kinds of interactions occur between students in the discussion boards?
12. How do you see your role during the discussions?
13. How do you typically monitor and assess students an online course?
14. What kind of feedback do you get from your students?
15. What are some of the most rewarding experiences you have had teaching in an online format?
16. What were the most frustrating experiences you have had teaching online?
17. What tools do you wish you were available for online teacher educators?
18. What do you envision your online class to look like in the future?

Instructor Protocol # 3 – Third/Final Meeting

The third or final interview consisted of questions clarifying previous topics and issues that arose from the first and second meetings. Questions were posed to clarify aspects or responses from all data sources. This interview provided an opportunity for participants to share anything that the instructor believed relevant to the study that was not asked or discussed previously. The final contact with the participants also involved a member check where the participants read the final portraits.

Appendix B: Student Interview Protocols

Student Protocol #1 – First Meeting

1. Tell me the specifics of the course entitled *Educating Students with Autism*
 - a. When did you take it?
 - b. How was it offered?
 - c. How many students enrolled?
 - d. How many students dropped? Do you know why?
 - e. What was the instructional arrangement? (Instructors, TAs, etc.)
 - f. What were the stated technology expectations?
2. What experience with online courses did you have before taking this course?
 - a. Did you have any anxieties or concerns before the course started? If so, what were they?
 - b. Were they resolved or addressed? If so how?
3. What was going on in your life when you took this course?
 - a. Were you enrolled in other courses?
 - b. What professional responsibilities during that time?
 - c. What personal responsibilities did you have during that time?
 - d. Where were you living?
4. Where did you do your work for this class?
 - a. What did your space look like when you worked?
 - b. What resources did you need to help you in the course?
5. Why did you enroll in this course?
6. What were the stated goals of this course?

- a. What did you expect to get out of the course?
7. How would you describe the instructors teaching?
 - a. How did the instructor set the course up?
 - b. How and what kind of feedback did the instructor provide?
8. How would you describe your interactions with the instructor?
 - a. What expectations did you have for the instructor?
 - b. What kinds of interactions with the instructor did you have?
 - c. How often did you interact with the instructor?
 - d. What were your interactions with the instructor about?
 - e. What do you know about the instructor's interactions with others?
9. How would you describe your interactions with your classmates?
 - a. What expectations did you have for your classmates?
 - b. What kinds of interactions with the classmates did you have?
 - c. How often did you interact with your classmates??
 - d. How were the group dynamics in the course?
10. What can you tell me about how you were assessed in this course?
 - a. What types of assessments did you have?
 - b. What did you think about the assessments?
 - c. What were your grades like course?
11. What types of support were available to you?
 - a. Was there any support that you did not get but wanted?
12. What do you think it takes to be a successful student in an online course?
13. What do you think it takes to be a successful online teacher?

14. What was your overall experience like in this course?
15. Do you have any documents or products from the course that you could share with me to highlight things that you learned?

Student Protocol # 2 – Second Meeting

1. How would you characterize yourself as an online learner?
 - a. How would you rate your level of investment in this course?
 - b. How much time did you spend working on assignments for this course?
 - c. What did you learn in this course?
2. What tools did the instructor use for meeting the goals of the course?
3. How would you describe your experiences using the different tools?
4. How did your experiences or interactions in the course inform your own teaching philosophy?
5. What was your experience in online discussions like in this course?
 - a. Have your experiences influenced how you teach? If so, what changed and why?
 - b. Have your experiences influenced how you conduct discussions in your classroom? If so, what changed and why?
6. What possibilities do discussion boards open up for you as a teacher?
7. What challenges do discussion boards pose for you as a teacher?
8. What concerns do you have about online teacher professional development?
 - a. Can you provide examples from your own experience to illustrate your concerns?
9. What were some of the most rewarding experiences that you had in this online class?
10. What were some of the most challenging experiences that you had in this course?

11. What do you technological tools wish instructors would utilize in the online course?

12. What do you think online courses in the future will look like?

Student Protocol # 3: Third/Final Meeting

The third or final interview consisted of questions clarifying previous topics and issues that arose from the first and second meetings. Questions might clarify aspects or responses from all data sources. These questions provided opportunities for the student participants to share anything that they believed relevant to the study that was not asked or discussed previously. The final contact with the participants involved a member check where the participants read the final portraits.

Appendix C: Course Selection Grid

Criteria	Foundations of Special Education	Advanced Theory & Practice in MR	Educating Students with Autism
Offered through Virtual ESE program?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Required for certification in all areas of ESE?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Part of degree program or endorsement?	Yes – UG	Yes - MA	Autism Endorsement
Required for 2011 HQ certification/endorsement?	No	Yes - Severe/Profound	Yes- Autism
Offered completely online	Yes	Yes	Yes (with 20 field hours-videotaped)
Degree of discussion board usage	Integrated	Integrated	Extensive
Emphasis on theory or practice	Intro to both	Intro to both	Practice
2005 Offerings	UF-2; FSU-1	USF-1	UCF-1
2006 Offerings	FIU-1; FGCU-1	USF-1	USF-1
2007 Offerings	None	None	UCF-1
3 Year Enrollment Total	62	39	26

Appendix D: Virtual ESE Distance Learning Feedback Survey

Introductory text: This short 5 question survey is designed to gather feedback from participants who have recently completed a Virtual ESE Distance Learning Program course. Please take a few moments to provide us with some information so that we may better serve you. Your feedback is extremely valuable. Thank you for your time!

1. How did you initially hear about the Virtual ESE Distance Learning Program?
 - a. Friend or Co-Worker
 - b. School District Posting or Other Communication
 - c. University Posting or Other Communication
 - d. Virtual ESE Distance Learning Program Website
 - e. Other (please specify):
2. Based on your experience, would you consider enrolling in another course offered through the Virtual ESE Distance Learning Program? Yes/No
3. Did technology requirements/skills present a challenge to you while enrolled in the Virtual ESE Distance Learning Program?
 - a. Technology requirements/skills were a significant challenge
 - b. Technology requirements/skills were a minimal challenge
 - c. Technology requirements/skills were a not a challenge
4. Was adequate support provided for initial on-line access and Virtual ESE Distance Learning procedures? Yes/No
5. I would like to share the following comments about my Virtual ESE Distance Learning experience: (please type in the box below)

Appendix E: Sample Email Invitation for Participant

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Special Education at the University of South Florida in Tampa, FL. My dissertation research is about the experiences of students in the online class entitled: *Educating Students with Autism*. The study is not designed to evaluate the course or your performance in any way. The purpose of the study is only to learn about the nature and qualities of the experience of students in the class. Your participation is requested because you were among 10 students who were identified as being successful in the course. The results of this study will be shared with you at the end of the study. However, to maintain confidentiality, no personally identifying information will be included in the interviews, observations or other information gathered during the study.

Participation will require approximately three one-hour visits. To reduce any inconvenience, I will travel to your school to meet with you. Each visit will consist of an interview which will be taped with your permission. If possible, I would also like to observe in your classroom and discuss your perceptions of how the online course may have impacted your teaching. I will also invite you to share relevant documents, projects or other artifacts from the course. Additionally I will ask you to take pictures of the workspace you use at home for doing online coursework. For this, I will give each participant a **Sakar Kidz™ Digital Camera** which will be yours to keep for use in your classroom.

Finally, within one week of the final study interviews, I will hold a drawing in which all participants will be eligible to win a new **8GB iPod touch™** valued at three hundred dollars. If you are interested in participating, please contact me so I can provide you with further information about the study. I appreciate your thoughtful consideration of my request and I look forward to your participation in the study.

Sincerely,

Sarah R. Semon

About the Author

Sarah R. Semon received her Bachelor's of Science in Elementary Education and Specific Learning Disabilities from Florida Southern College in 1999. She began her career in education as a high school teacher and team leader of the Exceptional Student Department in a Charter School for Technology in Lakeland, Florida. While teaching at the charter school, she enrolled at The University of South Florida to pursue her Masters of Arts in Varying Exceptionalities and earned her degree in 2003. Directly after earning her master's degree, she began doctoral studies in Special Education Curriculum and Instruction at the University of South Florida.

While in the Ph.D. program at the University of South Florida, Ms. Semon has been active in teaching, service, and research scholarship. She served as a Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) on the Professional Development Partnership Without Walls grant and as a Program Planner/Analyst for the USF Regional Professional Development Partnership. She also participated in reviews of Florida's Professional Development System. She assisted with research on a U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Research and Innovation grant analyzing data from a statewide assessment test. She was a GRA in a study entitled *Becoming Teacher Educators: a study of the characteristics and preparation needs of future teacher educators*. She has a number of forthcoming articles and has presented at numerous national and state conferences, including the American Educational Research Association, The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the CEC's Teacher Education Division (TED), and American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE).