The perceptions of faculty in developing a learning community within online courses at Jesuit universities

Joseph D. Ecklund

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The Perceptions of Faculty in Developing a Learning Community
Within Online Courses at Jesuit Universities

by

Joseph D. Ecklund

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Higher Education

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May 2011
American Jesuit colleges and universities, long a bastion of traditional classroom-based education, have recently begun to embrace the online course delivery method. There exists a lack of research on the learning communities that develop within these online courses taught at Jesuit institutions. This study examines how these learning communities develop, how they compare to the development of learning communities within the physical classroom, and the connection that they have to Jesuit pedagogy and educational tradition, all through the perspective of faculty who teach these courses. Ten faculty members from nine different Jesuit universities around the United States were selected to participate in this phenomenological study, and were asked a series of eight interview questions over the phone about their perceptions of the online learning community, the differences they see in the traditional and online methods of course delivery, and the influence of the Jesuit educational mission and tradition on the learning community. The professional experience of the participants is diverse, but at the time of the interview, each of the participants had experience teaching in both the virtual and physical classrooms within the previous 18 months.
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Chapter One

Overview of the Study

Introduction

Advances in technology have significantly changed the postsecondary educational landscape over the course of the last quarter century and these changes have impacted students at all levels of the educational hierarchy. The personal computer, the explosion of the internet, and wireless technology are all developments that have built upon previous innovations and have revolutionized the way that information is shared. Although these changes have literally touched all aspects of colleges and universities, many of these advances have assisted faculty in improving pedagogy within higher education, specifically those innovations in academic course and content delivery.

Distance learning – or utilizing technology to provide instruction when the teacher and student are physically separated – is just one example of how higher education has been revolutionized, as an increasing number of students receive content and in many cases, actual degrees online. According to the National Center for Education Statistics report on distance learning, during the 2006/2007 academic year, 66% of all post-secondary institutions offered distance learning courses (data include hybrid/blended courses, or courses that have a face-to-face classroom element). Additionally, there were over nine million enrollments (defined as course registrations) in distance learning courses during that academic year according to the report. Allen and Seaman (2007) report that online enrollments (excludes blended/hybrid courses) had increased to 3.5 million students in the fall of 2006, with a growth rate of 9.7% (compared to 1.5% for all of higher education). In their update on the fall of 2007, the
authors report that online enrollments increased to 3.9 million students, with a 12.9% growth rate from the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2008). What began as correspondence courses and degrees by mail has evolved into an increasing component of the higher education academic infrastructure, largely a result of technological innovation.

The use of text messaging as a predominate method of communication by students, social network sites like Myspace.com and Facebook.com, the faculty use of internet blogs and journals, and the instant communication provided by Twitter are all examples of how technology has permeated the culture of the college and impacted university life. Bates (2000) warns that because students are so comfortable with this medium as they enter college and their expectations of the personal benefit gained from their use of technology are so high, institutions that choose to become immersed in the most recent technologies actually do so at their own risk. Universities that fail to deliver upon this promise built by student expectations likely means the loss of that student.

There is a danger in becoming too dependent on technology, as there remains tremendous value in a learning community established in a traditional face-to-face discussion classroom. In his discussion of the future of undergraduate education relative to technology, Farrington (1999) acknowledges that the ivy covered campus with faculty and students conversing about politics and literature and science in the square may be more romantic imagery than reality, but he does remind readers that the human mind is not a computer microchip and requires engagement, interaction, and discipline. Bruce (2004) reinforces this perspective in writing:

> Despite what we may assert about learning beyond the walls of the school and about lifelong learning, it is difficult to avoid the equation of learning
with school, and therefore the equation of learning with sitting at a desk, looking at a blackboard attached to the front wall of the classroom. The center of learning is identified with the classroom, and it seems heretical to challenge the centrality of the school building. Such a challenge is rightly interpreted to imply challenges to other aspects of formal learning: the textbook, the assessment system, and even the teacher. (p. 20)

The historical development of distance learning has not necessarily been driven by a desire to build upon these traditional educational values of community. In fact, this educational methodology has been cited as a solution to the imminent overcrowding of college campuses and classrooms (Sizoo, Malhotra, & Bearson, 2003) and shows a preference of suitability for adult education (Katz, 2002). Distance learning originally was not intended for students who live within the boundaries of the campus map and who do not have to balance the demands of a commute and finding a parking space.

Almost without exception, the development of distance learning has centered on the desire for institutions to provide educational opportunity to those students who either cannot or choose not to visit the campus. Duffy and Kirkley (2004), in their summary description of why distance learning is considered to be the next wave of education, use the language of “extending the reach of education to those who cannot come to campus” and “providing new models for lifelong learning” (p. 4). Moore and Kearsley (2005) describe 11 overarching educational needs that are met with distance learning programs; eight of these reasons are more applicable to the off-campus population. These include increasing access, updating a specific skill set, balancing inequities among age groups, aiding in the balance between work, family, and education, and adding an international
dimension. Finally, in their history of distance learning, Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2009) conclude with a clear description of the reasons for the founding of distance learning programs, paramount among them:

- a realization that adults with jobs, family responsibilities, and social commitments form a large group of prospective part-time university students;
- a wish to serve individuals and society by offering opportunities to adults, among them disadvantaged groups;
- and the need found in many professions for further training at an advanced level. (p. 40)

This interpretation— that the non-resident student is the primary beneficiary of a distance learning program— is reinforced when looking at distance learning from an economic perspective as well. The power of market forces in higher education and the demand for a more open learning environment lead to an understanding among institutions that tuition revenue is increased by offering these opportunities. The traditional view of a knowledge community is slowly being transformed into an emerging view of a knowledge industry (Duderstadt, 1999).

It may appear that distance learning has developed from a foundation of convenience and accessibility and is in direct contrast to the traditional classroom-based educational environment, but there is a critical importance placed on the development of a learning community within online courses. Distance learning courses have evolved from the occasional adjunct offering stemming from an on-campus program to a true and complete alternative to the traditional educational experience; the focus on the development of a learning community has been vital in this transformation (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2004).
Key to overcoming the correspondence model is moving the student from isolated learner to a member of a learning community. Thus, there is a need to understand what community means in these environments so that we can promote them, and support individuals in adding to the critical mass of interaction necessary for their formation and maintenance.

(Haythornthwaite et al., 2004, p. 35)

Paris (2000) reinforces this in theorizing that the role of the professor is greatly diminished in online education if that professor does not take advantage of the opportunities to use the technologies in an assistive way to keep students engaged in active learning.

**Statement of the Problem**

The increase of students taking online classes has been dramatic in recent years. Pallof and Pratt (2003) reinforce the trend identified earlier from the NCES (2003) and the Allen and Seaman (2007, 2008) studies in estimating that over 50% of undergraduate students have taken online courses. Students in a traditional college environment (recently graduated from high school, living in campus housing, etc…) obviously constitute a large percentage of this undergraduate population. Faculty at these predominantly residential college campuses are faced with the dilemma of taking advantage of the technology that is available (and increasingly convenient for students) in course delivery, while still maintaining a traditional campus community that has been promised and expected with this type of institution.
More specifically, faculty who teach online courses at traditional, liberal arts colleges and universities are expected to build a learning community within these online courses, and this experience may be starkly different than that of teaching face-to-face in a physical classroom. One very specific subset of traditional, liberal arts institutions are the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States. Although each institution exists on its own with its individual mission and purpose, these schools affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church are rooted in a common Jesuit educational philosophy and connected through a variety of ways (core curriculums that include philosophy and theology, commitment to service and justice, predominately residential). Students taking online courses at Jesuit institutions likely do not comprise the population that online education was designed for, but have an expectation of a learning community within these courses similar to that found in their physical classroom experiences. This study examined this problem from the perspective of the professors and focused on their experiences in building learning communities among students taking online courses.

**Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of faculty in their development of a learning community within online courses at Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States. This was accomplished through an examination of the professors’ own practices and attitudes about teaching online, particularly related to traditions, expectations, and values espoused by the institutions’ mission statements. Chapter Two of this dissertation consists of a review of current literature showing that although there are a number of research studies exploring distance
learning and the faculty role in online education, little research has been published that examines the faculty members’ success in community development within online courses at campuses that do not emphasize distance learning. The research is especially lacking when adding the variable of a Jesuit environment. This study, focusing on the narrative perspective of the professors themselves, fills a gap in the current research.

This research is important and timely for three specific reasons:

1. Distance learning has become an integral aspect of the higher education landscape and all projections point to a growing influence.

2. Colleges and universities will likely be forced to redirect their efforts in how they serve students, particularly those who take distance learning classes and live on campus.

3. Jesuit colleges and universities are all addressing the question of how to incorporate online education into an educational system that is deeply rooted in their Jesuit tradition and experience.

There is much to discover about the impact of technology in general, and distance learning specifically, on the traditional undergraduate. Duderstadt (1999) weighs in on this topic and even helps frame the purpose of this research:

Will the world of undergraduate residential education that most of us recall so fondly disappear, transformed into a virtual experience on a glowing screen? One certainly hopes not, but surely the new technologies can be used to make residential undergraduate education more effective. Doing so will take a great deal of experimentation, the goal of which
should be to improve what can be made better, leave alone what is working fine, and have the good sense to know the difference. (p.74)

As the discussion of how to incorporate technology into the experience of the traditional residential undergraduate continues, Duderstadt’s comment – “leave alone what is working fine” – is especially apropos. There exists a danger in not recognizing the important role that a traditional, likely residential environment plays in the experience of a traditional-aged undergraduate student and this researched identified “what is working fine,” at least from the perspective of the faculty. Conversely, institutions would be foolhardy not to take advantage of all resources available to improve and advance the method of delivering knowledge to their students.

Scarlett (2004) offers a perspective that reinforces the need to study this problem. He quotes Stan Ikenberry, former president of the American Council on Education in writing “it would make no sense to bring people together in a physical setting and not have interpersonal communication; that’s the whole reason for having a campus in the first place” (p. 142). It is this sense of a community that is critical to the college experience and it is important to examine the faculty role in building this community.

**Research Questions**

To further examine this problem and explore the issues, the design of this qualitative, narrative-based, phenomenological study was framed around four main research questions:
Research Question One:

How did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities build a learning community among the students taking an online course?

Research Question Two:

How did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities modify their teaching when teaching online compared with teaching in a traditional classroom environment?

Research Question Three:

What did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities identify as the advantages and disadvantages for themselves of this course delivery method?

Research Question Four:

In what ways did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities feel that online education either supports or detracts from the stated mission and philosophy of Jesuit education?

Method

Although the methodology is thoroughly outlined and explained in Chapter Three, the study followed a phenomenological format. Creswell (2007) defines “the type of problem best suited for phenomenological research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon” (p. 60). The development of a learning community within an online course meets the definition of a phenomenon.
Faculty who have taught undergraduate or graduate students in an online format were recruited from among 23 of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities, each of which is a member of the Jesuit Distance Education Network (JesuitNET). Each of these institution’s representative to the JesuitNET was asked to identify a faculty member from their campus who met the following criteria:

1. Professors must either have been actively teaching one or more distance learning course(s) in the spring, 2010 term, or had taught one or more during the previous 18 months (beginning with August, 2008).

2. Professors must either have been actively teaching one or more face-to-face courses housed in a physical classroom in the spring, 2010 term, or had taught one or more during the previous 18 months (beginning with August, 2008).

3. Professors were either full or part-time, but must have been employed directly by the institution who reported ultimately to academic department chair or dean (as opposed to a university administrator).

Thirteen individuals were nominated, and each of these professors was invited by the researcher to join the research group. The 10 individuals who replied affirmatively that they were willing and able were selected to participate in the study. This group represented regional, institutional, and professional diversity.

The interview was the primary method for data collection, as all of the participants were asked to respond to a number of open-ended questions, which were e-mailed to the participants in advance of the formal interview.
Definitions

There are specific terms and concepts that need further definition, as they relate to this study. These are explained in the following section.

Distance Learning Course:

A course that is taught in a different physical location from where the students acquire the knowledge and incorporates the use of electronic media to facilitate two-way communication.

First-Year:

A student who completes 0-23 credit hours.

Hybrid Course:

A course that has both class sessions where students and the instructor meet in a face-to-face classroom, and class sessions where students and the instructor utilize elements of distance learning.

Residential Student:

A college student who lives in housing located within the physical boundaries of campus and managed by the institution’s office of residential life.

Traditional Aged:

Students in the 17-20 years-old age range.

Traditional Course:

A course that is taught in a physical classroom, where the students and the instructor share the same physical space.
Assumptions

The researcher made the following assumptions with regard to this study. First, it was assumed that all participants chose to teach a distance learning course of their own free will, knowing the unique nature of the course. Second, it was assumed that the participants understood basic methods and utilized best practices in their online instruction. Third, it was assumed that the participants had a basic understanding of the values espoused at a Jesuit, Catholic institution. Fourth, it was assumed that all participants were truthful and honest in their reflections and responses. Finally, it was assumed that the campus representatives to JesuitNet used discretion when forwarding the names of possible participants and identified candidates who they felt would make good representatives to the study.

Limitations

Limitations are the shortcomings or influences that cannot be controlled by a researcher and restrictions inherent to the type of methodology used. They are important insofar as they identify what will be excluded from the research. The focus of the research on the 28 Jesuit colleges was a limitation in and of itself, as this reflects a very small percentage of the institutions that offer online education. Another limitation of the study was that the focus of the research was on community building and did not specifically factor in any other variables of the course, such as academic content. The study was also limited in that the selection of the participants was dependent upon the campus representatives to JesuitNet, and this prevented the researcher from choosing anyone that he wanted to interview. Another limitation was the lack of diversity in the
online courses taught nationally by the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities and the inconsistency of how the courses were structured from one campus to the next. The researcher was unable to control the participant’s attitude and motivation toward the course itself, as each instructor taught online for their own, individual reasons that differed from other instructors. There was no attempt to find instructors from the same course or academic discipline, and instructors also had different levels of commitment and enthusiasm for either their universities or academic departments, which were unable to be controlled.

Disclosures

With any research study, it is important for the researcher to disclose any relevant information that may point to a potential bias or conflict of interest. The researcher in this study has 17 years of professional administrative experience working within student affairs at four different universities, and has lived in residential housing for four years as an undergraduate student and six years as post-graduate student – all at a Jesuit school. Fourteen of these years have also been spent working within residential life departments at three different universities, with a focus on the traditional aged student population and experience. The researcher currently works with academic support, new student transitioning, and retention at Creighton University – one of the 28 Jesuit schools – and has done so since the fall of 2007. He also teaches a two-credit college skills class for first-year students and serves as an academic advisor to second-year students.

Although the researcher has neither completed nor taught an undergraduate online course, he has completed one course in a doctoral program that was completely online (5
years prior to when the research study took place) and one course that was a hybrid course, meeting half the semester in the classroom and half the semester online (4 years prior to when the research took place). As a faculty member at his current institution, the researcher does take advantage of the web-enabled course management system.
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Introduction

This research was neither intended to record the complete history of distance learning, nor serve as a comprehensive summary of the complexity of academic learning communities. In fact, the challenge of this research was to describe the intersection of these two distinct areas of higher education. Supporting this goal is an understanding of how the historical development of distance learning has evolved over time to meet the needs of college students. Additionally, this chapter will review the prominent writings relating to classroom learning communities and reinforce the need for an investigation about how these are connected.

As a matter of introduction, the significant impact of technology on college campuses can be seen through a survey of related facts from institutions around America. Indiana University reported in 2006 that 96% of students arrived on their campus with at least one personal computer. Seventeen hundred first-year students at Duke University were provided iPods to be used as learning tools in the fall of 2004. The University of South Dakota required students in many classes to utilize PDAs, just as they would be required to purchase textbooks and other classroom materials. St. John’s University and Seton Hall University are two examples of the many schools that either provide or lease a laptop to incoming students (Crews, Brown, Bray, & Pringle, 2007).

As a measure of this, there also exists a trend toward wireless networking across college campuses, with some data reporting that in 2006, 51% of all college classrooms had wireless access, compared to 43% in 2005 and 31% in 2004. Another notable fact is
that 80% of the common space at the University of Texas at Austin had been connected for wireless access by the spring of 2005 (Crews et al. 2007). Crews further indicates that although wireless availability and access is critical for any institution’s strategic technology plan, students specifically living in the residence halls prefer the wired connection in their rooms because of increased reliability and faster speed. Although these statistics may not relate directly to distance learning, they demonstrate that technology and computing continue to permeate all aspects of campus life which in turn, do help facilitate the development, accessibility, and acceptance of distance learning.

**Historical Development of Distance Learning**

The historical development of distance learning dates back to 1840, when an Englishman “offered tuition by post in shorthand to students” (Keegan, 1993, p. 62). Distance learning in the United States began in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of correspondence courses and university extension offices at institutions as highly regarded as the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin, Baylor University, and the University of California – Berkley (Berg, 2002). These soon led to the second phase of the development of distance learning – educational instruction and training films. According to Berg, World Wars I and II had a definitive role in this transition, because, although some films for academic and classroom use were being produced in the early 1900s, the demand by the military for military training films gave rise and legitimacy to the entire industry. For a brief period in the history of American higher education (between the world wars), radio instruction became popular as well. Instructors from colleges not only simply read their lectures over the airwaves,
institutions also created specialized programming in very limited areas. Short-lived, radio instruction quickly began to decline, primarily as a result of increased federal regulation and the advent of commercial radio networks (Berg, 2002). As with correspondence courses, both of these media were designed to provide instruction in a non-traditional educational environment (defined as teacher and student in the same classroom).

The 1958 National Defense Education Act, Title VII not only ushered in a new era of involvement by the federal government into distance learning within higher education, it also began to lay the groundwork for America’s current system of distance learning. The Act called for the development of instructional television and encouraged academic content to be presented through the media (Berg, 2002). Berg also highlights the difference between educational television and instructional television that developed as a result of the NDEA: “educational television usually refers to programs that have a broad cultural purpose, such as Sesame Street, while ‘instructional television’ is generally used to describe videotaped whole courses” (p. 13). Instructional television is the term more closely associated with the growth and development of distance learning.

As with educational training films and radio broadcasts, instructional television did not have a terribly long shelf-life in the pedagogical history of American higher education. It is true that public television and community college cable access channels still exist today, but there was a de-emphasis on instructional television in the 1980s and 1990s, and a corresponding rise in the focus on true multimedia education. One of the global professional organizations charged with providing direction on distance education actually changed their name in 1982 to reflect this trend: the International Council for
Correspondence Education became the International Council for Distance Education (Harry, Magnus, & Keegan, 1993). Kent and McNerney (as cited in Berg, 2002), identify two reasons for this transition. The first of the reasons – a lack of quality programming within instructional television – can certainly be a factor in any educational offering and in itself, does not provide valuable lessons into the development of distance learning. The second reason cited – “a teacher-less approach to the medium” – certainly does, however. The ability for two-way communication is a critical key to any educational endeavor. “Pedagogical flexibility, teacher control, and accessibility” are the very characteristics of traditional classroom teaching that were not found in the correspondence course, educational films, radio broadcasts, or instructional television which in turn helped expedite the transformation to asynchronous distance learning.

In an examination of the reasons for the rapid development of distance learning, Schmidt (2000) cites six distinct causes. The cost of college rising faster than inflation is cited as the first reason, as institutions are looking for ways to deliver content in a less expensive fashion than the brick and mortar campus additions and renovations (with its substantial maintenance costs and investment on required amenities). The surge of projected enrollment and the lack of physical space from where to serve these students is another factor, followed by the changing demands of the students themselves. There is a new reality that more students need to work, care for dependent children or siblings, and/or are required to live off-campus. Schmidt identifies the rapid development of new knowledge and the need to quickly convert this information into courses as another cause of this technological revolution. The fifth reason offered is the shift in demand on the faculty of most colleges and universities to perform research at the expense of real
teaching. When classes are increasingly taught by graduate teaching assistants and personal interaction with faculty is limited, Schmidt argues, gone is the need to physically be on campus. The final reason cited is the overall influence that technology has had in society as a whole, from the constantly increasing exposure that children have to computers and technology throughout the K-12 educational system, to the enormous attraction of the World Wide Web and its exponential expansion.

**Distance Learning Defined**

One of the critical tasks of this literature review is to clearly define the term “distance learning.” (For the purposes of this study, the two terms “distance learning” and “distance education” are understood to be interchangeable.) In a very generalizable way, Schlosser and Simonson (2006) define distance education as “institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (p. 1). For the purposes of this study, distance education as “institution-based” is the program that is supported by and located within the confines of an accredited college or university, with accreditation as the key factor. “Formal education” refers to enrollment in courses that directly contribute to the achievement of a post-secondary degree. A “separate learning group” is defined by the enrollment of students in courses that do not meet on a routine basis within the confines of a physical classroom. In many situations, the distance learners may never physically meet each other in face-to-face encounters, although this is not a requirement, as friends and colleagues may be virtual classmates in one course while sitting side-by-side in another. Finally, “interactive telecommunications
systems” implies that the instructional medium must be two-way and electronically-based.

Although Schlosser and Simonson’s definition has been accepted and adopted by a wide audience within the distance education field, including the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Simonson et al. (2009) provide a concise summary of the definitions and characteristics proposed by other researchers and institutions. Rudolf Manfred Delling’s definition focuses on the student and his or her learning and clarifies that the instructional method need only include one aspect of a technical medium. Conversely, Hilary Perraton’s definition centers on the instructor and the importance that he or she be removed by time and/or space. The Office of Educational Research and Improvement with the US Department of Education suggests that direct interaction between the learner and student exist and that this interaction may even occasionally be face-to-face. Finally, Grenville and Rumble’s definition includes the language of a “contract,” an implicit or explicit agreement between the teacher and student that clarifies the role of each within the learning process.

Each of the definitions described offer an additional unique perspective into the world of distance education. Simonson et al. (2009) cite a 1987 article by Garrison and Shale in which they provide not a definition, but three primary characteristics of distance education.

1. Distance education implies that the majority of education communication between (among) teacher and student(s) occur non-contiguously
2. Distance education must involve two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process

3. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication. (p. 35)

These characteristics, reinforcing and consistent with the original Schlosser and Simonson definition, serve as the foundation of the distance learning that was examined in this study.

**The Development of Community in a Distance Learning Course**

The single greatest aspect of the student’s experience in taking an online course is the development of a community among the students enrolled in that course (Palloff & Pratt, 2007a; Van Dusen, 1997; Lorenzetti, 2007; Salmon, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Although clearly supported in the research, this concept should not be surprising as the development of a learning community is a bedrock foundation at any stage of education, articulated as early as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in their landmark writings on the philosophy of education (Curren, 2007).

In defining “community” relative to online learners, Palloff and Pratt (2003) cite existing definitions from two researchers. Howard Rheingold (1993) focuses on the frequency of individuals interacting with other people within a virtual framework and who share an increasing common knowledge base. Jenny Preece (2000) describes the online community as containing “people, purpose, policies, and computer systems,” all equally important variables. From these descriptions, Palloff and Pratt identify five key
variables in defining an online learning community (and they place emphasis on the importance of an online learning community as opposed to simply an online community, which may constitute listserves and shared web pages):

1. Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
2. Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student to students rather than student to instructor
3. Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning
4. Sharing of resources among students
5. Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the work of others. (p. 17)

In a later book, Palloff and Pratt (2007a) revise their definition of online communities by clarifying the components that constitute an online learning community. Paramount in this is social presence, defined as a real and palpable presence of both the instructor and the students. Establishing guidelines, defining a purpose, and sharing goals are all examples of the interaction and collaboration that are necessary for an online community to form. This ultimately contributes to defining how each member of the community will choose to express themselves.

The community of inquiry model first espoused by Garrison, Archer, and Anderson in 2000 offers support for the significance of community development within online education. The model is founded upon three distinct elements essential in online classes: a social presence; a cognitive presence; and a teaching presence (Garrison &
Arbaugh, 2007). Although the model itself is focused on the effectiveness of learning that occurs in the online classrooms, there is substantial support for the development of community within these courses. “Higher education has consistently viewed community as essential to support collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning” (p. 158).

The establishment of social presence occurs in three distinct phases, beginning with “open communication”, leading to “powerful academic exchanges”, and evolving into a “feeling of camaraderie” (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 160). Garrison and Arbaugh, in their review of the seven-year old community of inquiry framework are clear in their discussion that much more research is required on the exact nature of how the development of social presence takes place, and how it interacts with the teaching and cognitive presence. Throughout the discussion, though, the importance of community is made clear. Arbaugh et al. (2008) reinforce this in defining social presence as “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (p. 134).

In his study designed to examine the validity of the Classroom Community Scale – an instrument that attempts to measure the sense of community that develops in a classroom, Rovai (2002) reinforces this importance of community in online classrooms and identifies five characteristics that define it:

1. Communities can exist independently from physical locations (classrooms, campuses) and geography.
2. There is a strong commitment to commonly-held goals and a shared definition of the rules for the community.

3. There is both a shared history and a gathering place (which can be virtual) for the community.

4. There is an understanding of the boundaries that define membership.

5. There exists intellectual and personal or social interactions that lead to the achievement of established learning goals and outcomes.

These characteristics, which have been culled from previous research on the development of online learning communities, suggest that there may not be much difference between the online and in class learning community.

Interestingly, the characteristics do not discuss the role of the faculty within this development, though Rovai (2002) does lend support to the need for this study:

Proper attention must be given to community building in distance education programs because it is a sense of community that attracts and retains learners.

Educators who perceive the value of community must conceptualize how a sense of community can be nurtured in distance learning environments (p. 199).

Stan Ikenberry’s previously cited quote “it would make no sense to bring people together in a physical setting and not have interpersonal communication…That’s the reason for having a campus in the first place” (as cited in Scarlett, 2004, p. 142) bears repeating in this discussion. Although at first glance, this statement may argue the significance of the experience of taking classes in a physical classroom, it also reinforces the importance of the development of an online learning community, with the key factor being the activities that result from an intentional focus on the interpersonal
communication within that online experience. In fact, Brown and Duguid argue that technologies are emerging without an intentionality of building a social component and that this may actually be harmful to the user, or student (as cited in Salmon, 2003, p. 32). Salmon emphasizes that a key to the online learning community is that students trust each other; this is critical to the development and socialization of the class. One specific example Salmon cites is when a student takes an online class for the first time. Since the medium is so new (at least in terms of academia) and impersonal (at least visually and verbally), a lack of structured community building and resulting absence of trust among classmates may result in negative feelings toward the experience and have a major impact on that student’s overall satisfaction.

An ideal learning environment certainly varies with each individual learner, but there do exist some standards that have been supported by research. In his description, Smallen identifies two fundamental characteristics: “student engagement – consistent opportunities for students to actively engage subject matter, and interaction – consistent opportunities for students to interact with other students and the instructor to test their own ideas and learn from the ideas of others” (as cited in Van Dusen, 1997, p. 15). This conceptual framework has a significant impact when applied toward an online learning community. Students have countless opportunities to engage the subject matter in an online course and it makes little difference whether that happens synchronously or asynchronously. The key is the second characteristic – the student interaction. This is the foundation of the community and it is particularly important that this be managed carefully in an online community.
Van Dusen (1997) reinforces the importance of community building within a classroom environment, explaining that it is not exclusive to online or physical environments: “From simply confirming facts to negotiating the meaning of difficult concepts and their interrelationships, social interaction is an important pedagogical tool in both traditional and virtual classroom instruction” (p. 40). He further delineates that it may be assumed that the traditional classroom environment has greater social interactions because of the face-to-face contact, the expectations of working together in close proximity, and the increased opportunity to see other classmates on campus outside the walls of the classroom. However, when one takes into account the type of instruction typically delivered in a traditional classroom – the lecture – an argument may be made that online classrooms are actually more interactive.

It is also important to explain the significance of societal changes within communities and the impact these have on this discussion. Transcendent families, disconnected families, and changes in neighborhood configuration and traditions have shifted the cultural expectations young people have about communities. The emphasis is now on the person – and shared values and identities – rather than on the place (Palloff and Pratt, 2007a). This allows for the development of an online community to be much more of a natural process for students than in previous generations.

There also exists a relationship to social norming. It is human nature for students in a physical classroom to make assumptions about other students based on a multitude of factors involving the senses: how they look, what they wear, the dialect of their voice, where they sit, how often they raise their hand and offer an opinion are all examples of this dynamic. As a result of this paradigm, many students either intentionally or
subconsciously adhere to the social norm – what they perceive to be the standard behavior for that community. Palloff and Pratt (2007a) argue that this does not exist in an online learning community and that assumptions about other students are not made. Although this warrants further research (the timeliness of a fellow classmate’s online posts and the personal content of what was self-disclosed are two examples of where assumptions can be made), there would appear to be less social norming in an online learning community.

It is nearly impossible to become involved in any campus community or activity without interacting with other students and Astin (1993) draws this link in writing: “Once again, we find a persuasive pattern of positive benefits associated with frequent student-student interaction. Among other things, these findings support the continuing efforts of student affairs professionals to find ways to engage students in extracurricular activities and other programs that encourage student-student interaction” (p. 386). This interaction is a foundation of the college experience for students, and in fact, when compared and contrasted with the effects of faculty, curriculum, and institutional type on a student’s growth and development during college, it is clear that a peer group is the single greatest influence on a student’s growth and development (Astin, 1993).

The importance of community and the impact of the resulting student-student and student-faculty contact are also discussed by Tinto (1993). In his description of the variables that lead to student retention, he draws a clear link between the social and intellectual aspects of campus life and the student learning that happens as an extension of that with a positive correlation between the activities. This is especially significant
when one takes into account the increased opportunities for interaction with faculty outside of the classroom environment that results from students getting involved.

The role of the environment on the development of a community has been studied as well and is important to highlight here. Kinzie and Kuh (2007) write that:

Students are more likely to flourish in small settings where they are known and valued as individuals than in settings in which they feel anonymous. The natural and built physical environments of the campus shape behavior by permitting certain kinds of activities while limiting or making impossible other kinds. (p. 28)

They further explain the significance of the location of academic facilities in relation to student support buildings and how this inherently spurs interaction among students and between students and faculty and are critical components in the development of a community that leads to an increased feeling or sense of place for the student. When there is an intentionally-designed path for student interaction, there will be an increased feeling of connectivity on behalf of the student.

In describing conditions that exist on college campuses excelling in effective educational practice and student engagement, the authors of the Inventory for Student Engagement and Success reinforce this perspective (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Their study cites specific physical characteristics that create engaging spaces for learning, as determined by their “best practices” model. More importantly, they describe these areas as:

Human scale leaning environment: through buildings, signs, and the landscape of the campus, the physical environment communicates
messages that influence students’ feelings of well-being, belonging, and identity. The psychological environment includes the availability of personal space, sources of support and challenge, an absence of anonymity, and the presence of multiple communities of students. (p. 106)

Although there is not specific mention of physical classroom spaces or the variable of online classes, the authors do articulate the importance of a physical location relative to the campus and the impact this base has on the connectedness of students. This likely is not as significant for the student who is enrolled in a completely online program, but suggests that the environment does have an impact on those students who may be taking some courses online and some in a classroom.

Tinto (1993) furthers this discussion of community on a college campus, but approaches it from a slightly different perspective. He reiterates that a membership in a community is critical for a student to feel successful at college: “But it is true that they (students) have to locate at least one community in which to find membership and the support membership provides” (p. 105). Tinto emphasizes, however, that college communities are “temporary places of residences” and that the connection to these communities is inherently short-lived and transient. This perspective would seem to indicate that while membership in a community is important, it may not matter much if that community is rooted in historic academic buildings or in a virtual classroom – as long as that community exists.
The Jesuit Educational Philosophy

As a specific component of this study and continuing the discussion on community, it is important to describe the unique nature and philosophy of the Jesuit educational community. The Jesuits have established and directed schools worldwide for over 450 years. There are 28 Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States and although all are governed by individual boards and administrations, all Jesuit institutions are ultimately accountable to the Jesuit Superior General in Rome, an individual who serves a role like that of a president or chief executive officer of an organization. Superior Generals typically serve terms lasting longer than a decade and set the spiritual, philosophical, and administrative direction for the Society. The Jesuits, as a religious order within the Roman Catholic Church, work within a provincial structure, where each Jesuit priest is assigned to a specific regional province. Each of these provinces sustains a variety of entities, from missions and parishes to K-12 schools and colleges and universities. Although the Provincial – the Jesuit priest assigned to direct the actions of the Jesuits and run the business of the province – does not have immediate authority over a specific Jesuit college, there is a close collaboration between the province and the institution, and influence is directed both ways.

Although there is not a prescribed blueprint for Jesuit institutions of higher education, there are foundational principles that have evolved and remained since the first Jesuit school was established in 1548 in Messina (present-day Sicily) (O’Malley, 2008). These include an education for those who will have profound influence on the civil and religious affairs of their time; a focus on humanism that results in addressing significant questions of a philosophical and moral nature; and a connectedness and flow of specific
subjects studied, beginning with theology (The Boston College Jesuit Community, 2008). One of the most recently espoused principles is also one that is very relevant to this research study:

Jesuit education was a network that transcended boundaries of language, culture, and nationhood, one that was intercultural and global in perspective. This is arguably an essential but fragile element of Jesuit education, which could be lost as institutions are tempted to find their own way amid competing pressures to survive and achieve distinctive identities suited to their individual missions. (p. 42)

Buckley (1998) summarizes the philosophy of education espoused by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, which still serves as a foundational principle of Jesuit colleges and universities: “A university accomplishes universally the improvement in learning and living that is the function of education” (p. 61). Emphasis is placed on teaching rather than research and the focus of what is learned must be on educating students to improve the human condition as a matter of practicality. There is a spiritual element inherent in this philosophy as well, and Buckley writes that Jesuit higher education originates from a way of living within the experience of grace, which ultimately serves as a pathway to God.

_Ex Corde Ecclesiae_, issued in 1990 by Pope John Paul II, serves as an official guideline on Catholic higher education worldwide (Peck & Stick, 2008). This Apostolic Constitution, although written universally for Catholic institutions and not specifically Jesuits, nonetheless reinforces and supports the characteristics and principles of Jesuit higher education. _Ex Corde Ecclesiae_ calls for Catholic universities to demonstrate a
“continuing reflection in the light of the Catholic faith upon the growing treasury of human knowledge, to which it seeks to contribute by its own research” and an “institutional commitment to the service of the people of God” (Peck & Stick, p. 4).

Chubbuck (2007) provides additional insight on a Jesuit philosophy on higher education through a discussion of Ignatian pedagogy. Although this concept was developed specifically to clarify, guide, and direct the efforts of Jesuit secondary schools, the language does support what is known about Jesuit higher education. The pedagogy calls for student learning within a Jesuit school environment to be structured around five characteristics and how they interact with each other. These concepts – context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation – are drawn directly from the spiritual formation of the Jesuits’ founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and lead to the following outcomes of a Jesuit education:

Attention to the formation of the whole person; an affirmation of the world, dialogue across cultures; a lifelong openness to growth and reflectivity, a willingness to analyze institutional structures; an education that is value-oriented; and the formation of women and men for others who will adopt an action-oriented solidarity with the poor. (Chubbock, p. 242)

Relative to higher education and as a matter of practicality, Dickel and Ishii-Jordan (2008) identify seven specific characteristics that define a Jesuit education today. Referred to as “charisms,” these values are found throughout Jesuit campuses and are realized in everything from mission statements and strategic plans to programs of study and student services. “Education for the whole person” is the first charism and refers to a focus on the student in and out of the classroom, with an emphasis on the learning that
occurs throughout the students’ experience. “Cura personalis” and “magis,” the second and third charisms, are Latin terms meaning “care for the person” and “seeking the more,” respectively. “Men and women for and with others” and “service of faith,” values that speak directly to the educational effort of improving the human condition, are the fourth and fifth charisms. Although not especially unique to Jesuit education, “leadership” is nonetheless identified as the sixth charism and finally, “contemplation in action,” the ability to tie self-reflection and discernment to one’s educational experiences, is the seventh value cited. Universally adopted and espoused by Jesuit colleges and universities, these characteristics frame a philosophy of education that is consistent with the writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the early Jesuits and the practices of Jesuit colleges and universities throughout history.

Although not exhaustive, information and perspective has been presented on the impact of technology and distance learning on Jesuit colleges and universities. Busacco and Grigorescu (2005) quote Rick Malloy, S.J., a Jesuit priest who gave a keynote address at a video conference entitled “St. Ignatius in Cyberspace” as reaffirming that access to education is both a fundamental value of the Jesuit educational experience and one of the solutions to international problems such as poverty, discrimination, and war. “Online and distance education are perhaps the most powerful means of providing resources and making education accessible for all. Technology in higher education may contribute to the elimination of human suffering by making education accessible” (p. 7).

There are two specific reasons why Jesuit colleges and universities are forced to embrace distance learning. From a pure supply and demand perspective, technology must be integrated with the curriculum and academic program if a Jesuit institution is to
survive in the increasingly competitive post-secondary market of higher education. The second reason centers on the student and his or her learning style, which is clearly linked to technology, and his or her role in the larger society that is becoming increasingly dependent upon technology (Busacco & Grigorescu, 2005). This expectation is tempered by the concern that “technology may erode the Jesuit philosophy of educating the whole person intellectually, socially, morally, and spiritually” (Busacco & Grigorescu, p. 9).

In a special issue of Conversations – the magazine for Jesuit higher education – devoted to online learning, Evans questions whether liberal arts courses lose value when taught online. Traditional liberal arts courses, especially theology and philosophy are the mainstay of any Jesuit campus and one of the primary outcomes of these courses of study is the formation of character. Evans, a philosophy professor at a Jesuit college, argues that the role of the faculty member in the physical classroom and the presence he or she has is critical to the effective study of the liberal arts. This is embodied in the concern shown for understanding the questions surrounding the content area (and the honesty in answering or not answering these questions), and the concern shown for the student (or lack thereof) while teaching and facilitating learning. “In the actual presence of others, one feels the blankness of one’s ignorance when one cannot answer. Feeling such blankness is an opportunity to know that one does not know” (Evans, 2005, p. 16). Evans concludes this argument by suggesting the lack of non-verbal communication confirms that these feelings cannot occur online.

Timothy Casey, in a speech delivered at a conference on the future of Jesuit higher education in 1999 suggests that technology’s influence in Jesuit colleges and universities presents a problem, particularly as it relates to language and the relation to
thought and reality within a philosophical perspective. “The real danger of modern technology is that we will slowly reconfigure our self-image along technological lines, allowing technology to seep into our ways of knowing, speaking, and acting” (Casey, 2000, p. 126). Delivered a decade ago, this concern strikes at the heart of a liberal arts Jesuit education and is becoming magnified with the rise of distance education. It also provides support and rationale for this research study.

At the same conference, Smolarski delivered an opposing viewpoint articulating that growth in science and technology, although not without its dangers and potential hazards, is an example of the Jesuit principle of Magis, or seeking the greater good. The scientific path to new knowledge is a way of better understanding God’s world and God’s creation (Smolarski, 2000). This feeling is supported by Soukup (2000), who suggests that technology is an unavoidable fact of life on college campuses that demands an embrace.

Jesuit higher education, with its own well-articulated values based on the Gospel, Ignatian spirituality, and the humanistic tradition, should certainly examine communication media and technology critically. But critically need not mean negatively. Jesuit higher education, perhaps more than other educational traditions, recognizes that communication media and technology, like any culture, bear the imprint of God’s creative spirit. (p. 137)

The Role of Faculty in Learning Community Development

Although it has been indentified that a strong learning community is one of the keys to a successful classroom experience for students, either virtually or face-to-face,
and that peer-peer interaction is critical for the development of this learning community, this review of the current literature has not addressed the specific role faculty play in this. Certainly, it can be implied or assumed that a professor is the primary individual within the classroom environment charged with building this community, but there is research that explains and outlines the definitive nature of this role.

In the introduction of this topic, it is helpful to frame the conversation from the perspective of the faculty member and the choices he or she makes in teaching the online course. Burbules (2004) describes this dichotomy in discussing how online teachers must balance the virtual with the routine or direct:

These teaching choices pose a number of dilemmas: how to make a classroom inclusive while recognizing that every choice effectively excludes someone; how far it is possible or desirable to expand access, given scarce resources; how educationally beneficial or educationally compromising the lack of face-to-face engagement can be; how far to go in accommodating the convenience and scheduling of students, viewed as clients or customers, without becoming overly commercialized and entrepreneurial. (p. 15)

Although there is a difference in teaching online versus teaching in a physical classroom, the fundamental need to develop a community of learners remains consistent regardless of the method.

It is important to return to the earlier discussion of the community of inquiry model when examining the role of the faculty in building an online learning community. Teaching presence is one of the three critical interactions that comprise successful online
experiences and together with social presence and cognitive presence, are significant determinants of student satisfaction, perception of learning, and sense of community (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Although the idea of community permeates throughout the three dimensions of teaching presence – direct instruction, instructional design and organization, and facilitating discourse – the role of the faculty member is most clearly seen when facilitating discourse.

Therefore, facilitating discourse requires the instructor to review and comment upon student responses, raise questions and make observations to move discussions in a desired direction, keep discussion moving efficiently, draw out inactive students, and limit the activities of dominating posters when they become detrimental to the group. (p. 163)

These are all activities that are foundational in developing a classroom community.

Interestingly, Palloff and Pratt (2007b) offer a different perspective on the teaching presence dimension of the community of inquiry model. They suggest that because of the nature of online discussions and the required postings of class participants, the burden and responsibility of facilitating discussion (and by extension, building community) falls to the students themselves in many cases. This is especially true when collaborative learning processes are used online. Similarly, both the student and professor may feel a certain degree of insecurity in the online classroom (Lukar, 2000). The teacher may question whether his or her role is to truly assist the student or simply serve as a conduit of information, and the student questions whether they are learning independently of the professor. These views further support the need for this research study.
Duderstadt (1999) takes this argument even further into the future in posing the scenario:

If a student could actually obtain the classroom experience provided by some of the most renowned teachers in the world, why would they want to take classes from the local professor? In such a commodity market, rather than developing content and transmitting it in a classroom environment, a faculty member might instead have to manage a learning community in which students have to use an educational commodity. This would require a shift from the skills of intellectual analysis and classroom participation to those of motivation, consultation, and inspiration. (p. 15)

Although he envisions a world within higher education that is far removed from what is currently happening and a very different teaching role for faculty, he does not lose sight of the importance of the learning community and the faculty’s role in managing this.

Finkelstein, Frances, Jewett, and Scholz (2000) pose a contradictory scenario in describing one of the fundamental differences between distance learning and classroom instruction. The design, production, and maintenance of course materials may likely be accomplished by a team of individuals who are not necessarily the faculty members that correspond with and assess the students during the actual class. This perspective suggests since the faculty member may have significant administrative and technical assistance in building the online learning community, he or she may not have much influence in this development at all. The authors do not de-emphasize the importance of the community,
however, in citing a major conclusion from the Institute of Higher Education Policy’s study on distance learning: “technology has not replaced the human factor in higher education” (p. 150).

**Summary**

This chapter identified multiple definitions of distance learning and suggested several characteristics exist that are critical to a full understanding of this practice. The value and importance of a learning community – especially one in an online classroom – was presented and discussed, along with the specific role that faculty play in the development of this community. Finally, the chapter provided a summary of the philosophy of Jesuit education and offered elements that are foundational to this tradition.

A thorough review of the literature purports that a gap exists in the understanding of how these three distinct concepts relate to each other. This study attempted to fill this gap by examining this phenomenon through the specific experiences of the faculty in the classroom.
Chapter Three

Methodology

Introduction

As indicated in Chapter One, the goal of this study was to examine the role that faculty play in building community in online courses. The general purpose of this study was exploratory; an examination of the experiences and actions of a professoriate as they discover and practice a new learning phenomenon. The focus was on the professors’ experiences in the online learning community and what specific steps they had taken to help develop this. Borg and Gall (1989) recommend qualitative research methodology as appropriate in situations where a researcher is attempting to document what participants may be experiencing at a specific point in time. This approach was appropriate for this study, as there were no experimental variables to manipulate and no control group to research; the research centered on the experiences of and the discussions with the faculty chosen. Furthermore, this study was anchored in a social constructivist worldview. This perspective assumed that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8).

As the study involved participants exclusively working at private, Jesuit, Roman Catholic affiliated institutions, it is important to acknowledge that this variable added a significant dimension to the research. This will be more thoroughly explained when discussing the results of the study, but as it relates to the methodology, the participants explained how their experiences were integrated and discussed their interpretation of the meanings behind them. This is the crux of qualitative research, as Patton (1985) describes it as:
An effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as a part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what is going for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in a particular setting – and in the analysis be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting. (p. 1)

Joseph Maxwell (2005) reinforces this view of qualitative research and frames the purpose of such in three questions, all relevant in supporting this research study. The first question focuses on the meaning of the activities and the events to the people included in these; this research certainly examined the meaning behind the experience of professors teaching online courses and attempting to build community. The second question revolves around the physical and social context and the influence this has on the activities and the events; as seen in the literature review, the physical and social context is a critical piece to the development of any learning community and certainly is important when discussing an online one. The final question posed by Maxwell when discussing qualitative research is how it relates to the process by which these events and activities – and their outcomes – occurred; this clearly supports this research study, as a professor’s role in building an online community is one that is ongoing and they were asked to share their experiences relative to this.

One of the key reasons Creswell (2007) cites in describing why researchers would use a qualitative approach when choosing the methodology of a study centers around the
importance of human interaction. Research problems do exist that simply cannot be solved with statistical analysis, particularly when the focus of the question is on the human experience. The research problem in this study is one such problem. The faculty who are building community online found themselves in a situation that is emerging, and yet complex with regards to this human interaction. It was important, therefore, for the researcher to fully engage in conversation with the faculty about this experience.

Although there do exist multiple options for research design within qualitative research, the methodology chosen for this study was a phenomenological approach. Creswell (2003) describes phenomenological research as a method where “the researcher identifies the ‘essence’ of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in the study” (p. 15). The phenomenon in this case was the experience of building an online learning community. Ashworth (2008) reinforces this view when identifying one’s experience within a particular reality as a critical aspect of the phenomenological approach. Again, the focus was on the faculty member and his or her experience and the particular reality was that of teaching a distance learning course at a Jesuit campus. The major advantage of the phenomenological approach over other qualitative methodologies was the ability of the researcher to connect the human experience (of the faculty member) with an organic and notable occurrence (distance education), and examine how each one influences the other.

In his summary survey, Groenewald (2004) writes that:

The operative word in phenomenological research is ‘describe’. The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework but remaining true to the facts.
Phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of the people involved. (p. 5)

Gergen and Gergen (2000) reinforce this perspective in their work on the transformation of qualitative inquiry by citing phenomenology as an example of a methodology that supports the empiricist notion of truly understanding human behavior, from the perspective of the person. Specifically, they indicate that phenomenology is one of the “qualitative methods more faithful to the social world than quantitative ones” and that “individual human experiences are important” (p. 1027).

Phenomenology as a research methodology has deep roots in psychology and philosophy. Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician living early in the twentieth century, is widely credited with establishing the philosophical foundation on which phenomenology is based (Creswell, 2007; Groenewald, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, and Wertz, 2005). Groenewald even suggests that the fundamental principle of phenomenology – exploring the structure of consciousness in human experiences – is a result of the destruction that Husserl saw and experienced in Germany during the First World War. He had a desire to provide a level of conscious certainty in response to a “disintegrating civilization. To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the content of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated as pure phenomena and the only absolute data from where to begin” (p. 4).

Although still used extensively throughout medicine and psychology, the use of phenomenology as a research methodology has broadened to the fields of sociology and education as well, especially during the latter half of the twentieth century (Creswell,
Gubrium and Holstein (2000) reinforce this in suggesting that Alfred Schultz’s development of “social phenomenology” redirected the traditional philosophical interpretation rooted in Husserl toward a more contemporary view in which everyday people are observed living their everyday lives. The focus is on the experience of the individual and the reality of his or her world. This perspective supports the use of a phenomenological approach in studying the faculty role in building a community while teaching an online course.

**Research Questions**

Although introduced in Chapter One, it is important to identify the research questions within the specific context of the methodology of the study. The study focused on four main research questions.

**Research Question One:** How did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities build a learning community among the students taking an online course?

**Research Question Two:** How did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities modify their teaching when teaching online compared with teaching in a traditional classroom environment?

**Research Question Three:** What did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities identify as the advantages and disadvantages for themselves of this course delivery method?
Research Question Four: In what ways did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities feel that online education either supports or detracts from the stated mission and philosophy of Jesuit education?

Setting

Creswell (2007) defines phenomenon as “the central concept being examined by the phenomenologist. It is the concept being experienced by the subjects in a study” (p. 236). The phenomenon studied in this research was the faculty’s role in the community development within online classes in a Jesuit college setting, as experienced from the perspective of the faculty member. The primary reasons for choosing the American Jesuit institution as the central point of this phenomenon are its history of providing undergraduate residential education to traditional-aged students, the commonality of their missions, and the ongoing development of distance learning courses and programs throughout this network of institutions.

Jesuit faculty opinions further support researching this phenomenon at Jesuit institutions. In conversations held throughout the fall of 2008 with six different faculty members from Creighton University who have taught distance learning courses on Creighton’s campus, each supported the offering of distance learning classes to students during the summer months, but not one would support these courses being offered to first and second year students during the fall or spring semester. The possibility of losing the small-campus, traditional academic feel of the institutional culture was consistently cited by the faculty as the reason for discouraging this course offering.
Study Approval and Ethical Considerations

Recognizing the ethical considerations inherent in qualitative research, approval for this study was sought from the University of Toledo Social, Behavioral, and Educational Institutional Review Board. Approval of the study, including the invite letter to participants, the structured interview guide, and the informed consent form was granted on March 10, 2009. In confirming the individual interview appointments, the researcher sent the participants the structured interview guide and the informed consent form; the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. The signed informed consent forms are stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s Creighton University office. Confidentiality of the participants was ensured through the following means: 1) the names of the study participants were only available to the principal investigator/faculty advisor, the student investigator (researcher), and the transcriber; 2) the interview transcripts were assigned a code and the names of the participants were changed during the data analysis; and 3) all information about the participants and interview data are stored on the researcher’s Creighton University issued computer hard-drive and password protected.

Participant Selection

The Jesuit Distance Education Network (JesuitNET), working in affiliation with the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, is a collaboration of Jesuit institutions of higher education charged with supporting and cataloguing the development of online courses for both traditional and non-traditional students. Each of the 28 American Jesuit colleges and universities are encouraged to identify a representative to
serve as a member of the JesuitNET Advisory Board; these representatives range from directors to vice presidents in terms of positions on their campuses and from academic programs to educational/informational technology with regard to their areas of responsibility.

Dr. Richard Vigilante, Executive Director of JesuitNET, identified his organization as the entity that catalogues about two-thirds of the estimated 450 online courses that are offered in Jesuit schools throughout America; this catalogue is updated each semester (personal communication, September 30, 2009). JesuitNET also sponsors an annual conference and is in regular communication with the institutional representatives on the Advisory Board. More importantly, JesuitNET has published and offers the Competency Assessment in Distributed Education (CADE) standard. This online course development program supports faculty and curriculum development, guides faculty toward taking full advantage of technological methods in their classes, and ultimately assesses student learning within the online course (retrieved from JesuitNET website). Over 500 faculty members from Jesuit institutions have taken the CADE workshop since its inception three years ago (R. Vigilante, personal communication, September 30, 2009).

In reiterating his support for this research study, Dr. Vigilante suggested that there is a strong desire among Jesuit institutions to continue to enhance this aspect of their curricular development. It is a main topic of strategic planning and is often discussed as a possible solution to budget woes. He also cautioned however, that many of the Jesuit institutions still see their place in the higher education enterprise as centered on a
traditional academic environment focused on the humanities (personal communication, September 30, 2009).

Working in collaboration with JesuitNet, each of the 23 campus representatives who were serving on the Advisory Board (as of March, 2010) was sent an electronic letter (see Appendix A) in the Spring of 2010 explaining the proposed research study and asking for a nomination of two faculty members from their institution who met the following study criteria:

1. Professors must either have been actively teaching one or more distance learning course(s) in the spring, 2010 term, or had taught one or more during the previous 18 months (beginning with August, 2008).
2. Professors must either have been actively teaching one or more face-to-face courses housed in a physical classroom in the spring, 2010 term, or had taught one or more during the previous 18 months (beginning with August, 2008).
3. Professors were either full or part time, but must have been employed directly by the institution who reported ultimately to academic department chair or dean (as opposed to a university administrator).

These three criteria were the only guidelines given to the campus representatives regarding participant nomination.

After the original e-mail was sent, a follow-up second and third e-mail, identical in content to the first communication, was sent to any campus representative who had not replied to the original e-mail. Of the 15 campus representatives who replied, 13 indicated that they would provide recommendations of eligible faculty (two campus representatives shared they currently were not offering online courses). A potential participant size of 13
individuals – representing institutional and professional diversity – was within the parameters of the proposed study, so the researcher decided to send all 13 of the eligible faculty members an invitation to participate (see Appendix B).

From the 13 invitations sent, 10 faculty members ultimately agreed to participate in the study and they represented the following nine Jesuit schools from around the country: Loyola University Chicago in Illinois; Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia; Loyola University Maryland; Regis University in Colorado; Marquette University in Wisconsin; University of Scranton in Pennsylvania; Creighton University in Nebraska; Gonzaga University in Washington; and Canisius College in New York. The size of this sample, along with the sample’s homogeneity was sufficient and normal for phenomenological research (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

**Data Collection**

Upon confirmation of participation, the researcher scheduled a one-hour interview appointment with each study participant and electronically sent a structured interview guide (see Appendix C) to allow them to prepare a response if they chose. Interviews are commonplace in qualitative research (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2005; Stake, 1995) and the interview questions selected were specifically chosen for this study to allow each participant to ultimately address and expound on the research questions. The first eight questions were demographic, seeking information about the participant and the distance learning course; the other nine questions were more qualitative, seeking the participants’ thoughts and opinions about teaching online, learning communities, student engagement, and the Jesuit nature of the course(s). All interviews were conducted over a
speakerphone with the researcher in his closed-door office at Creighton University, and they ranged in length from 20 minutes to 53 minutes. The interviews were recorded using digital media and transcribed to a MS Word document. The researcher completed four of the transcriptions and paid an independent transcriptionist to complete the other six. To ensure that the transcriptions were completed in a consistent style, the independent transcriptionist reviewed the four initial transcripts (and related recordings) completed by the researcher. All interviews took place between March and July, 2010. The participants were also asked to provide a syllabus for the online course(s) they were referencing in responding to the interview questions.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Qualitative research typically generates massive amounts of data that needs to be read, analyzed, and codified. Bryman and Burgess (1994) indicate the complexity of this when they write “it is clear that our contributors regard analysis as a ‘problem’ because of the nature of qualitative data, which are invariably described as voluminous, unstructured, and unwieldy” (p. 216). The data gathered from these 10 interviews certainly fit that description. Creswell (2009) identifies six specific steps in the data analysis process of qualitative data; these served as a framework for the researcher to complete this stage of the process.

Step 1 – “Organize and prepare the data for analysis.” The researcher completed this step through careful recording of each of the interviews, indexing each recording, and having each one transcribed into a MS Word document.
Step 2 – “Read through all of the data.” This step is important, as it allows for a cursory review of the information and provides a general sense of the ideas and themes presented. The researcher read all of the transcripts, making notes about possible codes and themes in the margins.

Step 3 – “Begin detailed analysis with a coding process.” This begins to bring meaning to the information, and this researcher accomplished this through a re-reading of the transcripts in which he identified an initial list of 37 codes.

Step 4 – “Use the coding process to generate themes for analysis.” After reviewing the transcripts and the initial codes, the researcher categorized the data into preliminary themes and related them to the specific interview questions.

Step 5 – “Advance how the themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative.” In reaffirming that the data addressed the research questions, the researcher used this step to draw initial meaning from the themes, and drafted a summary narrative of the responses that support these themes.

Step 6 – “Make an interpretation.” This analysis of the coded words, themes, and patterns resulted in determination and conceptual explanations of the phenomenon – building community in an online classroom.

Coding

“Coding is not merely to label all the parts of documents about a topic, but rather to bring them together so they can be reviewed, and your thinking about the topic developed” (Richards, 2005, p. 86). The process of coding is analogous to the categorization and filing of information in everyday life, where everything is sorted based
on a specific topic (Richards). Rossman and Rallis (2003) define coding as “the formal representation of analytic thinking” (p. 285), but caution that it is a much more complex task than simple filing or bookkeeping. In their description of coding, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) define codes as analyzable units that are created both from and with the data. Regardless of the exact definition of coding, it is clear that the process is a critical step between the collection and the analysis of data and requires a formal structure from which to follow.

Richards (2005) identifies three unique ways to code qualitative data. “Descriptive” coding focuses on the basic information relative to the data – attributes and demographic variables, for example. “Topic” coding involves the identification of text and data according to various categories, themes, and subjects and does not involve interpretation. This form of data dissemination places the data where it belongs. “Analytical” coding is the final step in this process and the one that is the most time consuming. It includes an interpretation of the data and an affirmation of the theories proposed. “Well-handled, analytical coding is a prime way of creating conceptual categories and gathering the data needed to explore them. Coding is a first step to opening up meaning” (p. 94).

In this study, the researcher debated between using specifically designed software to assist in the coding process and using the manual approach to coding. The benefits of utilizing software are well-documented throughout the literature of qualitative research design, and there are certainly a multitude of programs available to provide computer-assisted coding. Upon further investigation and research, the researcher determined that manually coding the data was the most efficient and effective method for this research.
In consultation, Dr. Kim Galt, Creighton University’s Associate Dean for Research, explained that the size of the sample, the depth of the research, and the longitudinal nature of a study are all factors that support the decision to manually code (personal communication, July 1, 2009). Manual coding as a viable option supporting data analysis is also supported by Richards (2005), Coffey and Atkinson (1996), Rossman and Rallis (2003), and Bogdan and Biklen (1996), who specifically suggest that “the arguments about [the use of specially designed computer software programs] center around whether the time you spend learning how to do it is equal to the time you save” (p. 183).

Furthermore, Creswell (2009) summarizes a variety of techniques and strategies to code qualitative data and although outlines the advantages and options available with computers, he still provides validity to manual coding. “Some researchers have found it useful to hand code qualitative transcripts or information, sometimes using color code schemes and to cut and paste text segments onto note cards” (p. 188). Kvale (2009) takes this one step further and suggests caution when using or relying on computer-assisted coding. “There is thus a danger that the ready availability of computer programs for coding can have the effect that coding becomes a preferred shortcut to analysis” (p. 199).

In coding the qualitative data collected in this project, the researcher followed the basic framework presented by Richards (2005). Step one focused on identifying the material that was of interest to the researcher and summarizing the descriptive nature of the information. Step two created the categories in which the data was collected and step three completed the process of filing the relevant data into the appropriate categories. Bogdan and Biklen (1996) further reinforce this approach in summarizing the steps
necessary for manual coding specifically. They first suggest a thorough reading of the data in its entirety and uninterrupted, playing close attention for the words and phrases that provide significance and fit together. Specific coding categories result from these words and phrases: “this special vocabulary may signify aspects of the setting important to explore. If the phrases will not make coding categories in themselves, take specific words and try to fit them together under some generic code” (p. 176).

Validation

Following the interviews and the coding process, each of the participants were sent an electronic copy of both their transcript and a summary of the themes with supporting statements attributable to them. This not only served as a method of triangulation, it also accounted for internal validity and member checking, and ensured that the researcher had accurately recorded the content of the interview (Stake, 1995). Seven of the 10 participants responded, all of whom offered minor corrections and clarifications.

Summary

The researcher chose the methodological approach of a qualitative study because of the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding the building of a learning community in an online classroom at a Jesuit institution. The interview process provided perspective for the researcher on this issue and aided in furthering this understanding. The inductive coding process allowed the researcher to examine the data organically, identifying words and phrases that supported themes and ideas while
remaining connected to the comments shared by other participants. Throughout the steps of data collection and analysis, the data remained rich and malleable, which is one of the accepted advantages of working with qualitative data. Chapter Three has described the process by which data was gathered and Chapter Four will provide a summary of themes and other findings.
Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

As indicated in Chapter Two, one of the opportunities for this research was to describe the intersection of two comprehensive and distinct areas of higher education – distance learning and academic learning communities – within the narrow lens of the faculty member at Jesuit colleges and universities. The quoted purpose of this research was “to describe the experiences of faculty in their development of a learning community within online courses at Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States.”

In an effort to remain focused on this phenomenon and true to this purpose, the researcher used the four research questions as the foundation of the analysis:

Research Question One: How did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities build a learning community among the students taking an online course? This chapter will identify the various strategies that instructors of online courses found effective in building learning communities within these classes.

Research Question Two: How did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities modify their teaching when teaching online compared with teaching in a traditional classroom environment? The data will show that instructors who taught courses in the physical classroom did not significantly alter their teaching style when they were teaching in an online environment.

Research Question Three: What did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities identify as the advantages and disadvantages for themselves of this course delivery method? Outside of factors of personal convenience, instructors of
online courses did not identify significant advantages or disadvantages of the online course delivery method. The data will show that the real advantages of online learning lie with the student.

Research Question Four: In what ways did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities feel that online education either supports or detracts from the stated mission and philosophy of Jesuit education? This chapter will identify the ways that online education expands the ability of Jesuit colleges and universities to fulfill their stated mission, and will suggest that this course delivery method does not detract from the traditional philosophy of Jesuit education.

The data in this research study is rich with examples and anecdotes that support the perspective shared by the participants that a learning community in an online classroom develops in a similar fashion as one in a traditional physical classroom. The research findings supporting this statement will be presented in this chapter through the discussion of 12 themes and subthemes that were discovered through the data analysis process.

**Participant Overview**

It is important to provide some background on each of the participants. The description of the essence of human experience as it relates to a phenomenon is one of the descriptors of a phenomenological study and this cannot be effectively accomplished without a deeper understanding of the teaching experiences of the participants. Their comments, drawn from their life experiences, comprise entirely the data used in this
study and as a result, knowledge about who they are was central to the analysis of this data.

Twenty-three campus representatives to JesuitNET were asked for nominations of faculty members to participate in this study and 13 representatives provided names and contact information. The 10 participants profiled below were the individuals who responded affirmatively to the invitation from the researcher to join the study.

Table 4.1

*Overview of Participant Information and Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years Teaching (total)</th>
<th>Years Teaching (Jesuit)</th>
<th>Academic Department</th>
<th>Academic Rank</th>
<th>Level of Course</th>
<th>Role in Course Development</th>
<th>CADE Workshop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>NUR/PHIL</td>
<td>Assc. Prof</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>THEO</td>
<td>Prof</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>MGMT</td>
<td>Assc. Prof</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>REL</td>
<td>Assc. Prof</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>MGMT</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>THEO</td>
<td>Assc. Prof</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>EDU</td>
<td>Ass’t. Prof</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>HIST</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>PHIL</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>COMM</td>
<td>Ass’t. Prof</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is standard practice in qualitative research, each of the participants have been randomly assigned fictitious names. The participants represented a diverse range of experience in teaching on college campuses, teaching online courses, and working in Jesuit educational environments. There was an equal split between those participants
teaching graduate level, and those teaching undergraduates; a multitude of the courses referenced were related to the field of organizational management and development, though some were as traditional to Jesuit education as philosophy, theology, and history; and although many of the participants had a strong and active role in the development of the referenced courses, a few were simply assigned a course and a syllabus to teach. This diversity among the participants not only added richness to the described human interactions, as Creswell (2007) indicates is important in qualitative research, it also supported the notion that the themes extracted in this study actually described the phenomenon of building an online learning community on Jesuit campuses.

**Participant Profiles**

**Alice.** Alice, an associate professor, had over 20 years of college teaching experience, the last nine working at her current Jesuit campus. She had been actively involved in the development of online courses at her institution and was serving as her department’s faculty development officer for online education. Alice was one of the few participants who had taken the JesuitNET CADE workshop. She had a master’s degree in nursing, but a doctorate in philosophy and taught courses relating to the intersection of these two fields. At the time of the interview she was teaching three courses with one of them being an online undergraduate course (the one referenced for this study).

**Brian.** Brian was a professor with 20 years of college teaching experience, all at the same Jesuit institution. He taught in both the theology and classical/near-eastern studies departments, and had taught undergraduate and graduate students online and in
physical classrooms. The course he referenced for this study was a Masters of Ministry course that he developed.

**Cindy.** Cindy had been teaching at her current Jesuit school for 23 years, which is the same amount of time that she had been teaching at the college level. An associate professor in the information systems and operations management department, Cindy was teaching four graduate-level classes at the time of the interview. Of this course load, the class she referenced for this study was the only one that she was teaching online, and she had developed the course completely on her own.

**Diane.** Diane was an associate professor in a college of professional studies teaching two online religion courses at her current institution. Although she had some flexibility with course expectations and served on the development team for revisions to the courses, she did not create either of the online courses she was teaching and worked from a standard, course-consistent syllabus. She had taught at the college level for 15 years, all at the same Jesuit school, and was not teaching any courses in a physical classroom at the time of the interview.

**Eric.** Eric had taught at his current Jesuit school – the only place he had taught at the college level – for 21 years. He was an adjunct faculty for the school of management in the college of professional studies, teaching an online investments class in addition to a concurrently occurring class in a physical classroom. Eric, who originally developed the foundation of the investments course 12 years ago, also served his institution in both monitoring the online teaching of other management faculty and assisting in the development of new online courses.
Frank. Frank was an associate professor and chair of the pastoral counseling department, which only offered graduate-level courses. He had taught at the college level for 16 years, the last 14 at his current Jesuit institution. Frank had participated in the JesuitNET CADE workshop, yet had only taught one online course among a typical load of two courses a semester. His department, however, was aggressively looking to expand online education and had actually sent 14 instructors to the CADE workshop within the year previous to when the interview took place. Based on his training from the CADE workshop and with technical assistance from a library developmental team, Frank developed the course referenced for this study.

Gina. An assistant professor of education, Gina had taught at the college level for eight years, with the last six being at her current Jesuit institution. Gina had been teaching in both a physical and online classroom environment throughout those six years. At the time of the interview, Gina was teaching three physical classroom courses and one online course and the course referenced for this study was a graduate-level course that Gina developed five years ago. Her institution did utilize the services of an outside consulting company to assist with the technical development of the online course.

Hank. Hank had been teaching at the college level for 14 years, the last six being at his current Jesuit campus. He was an adjunct lecturer in the history department and taught undergraduates both online and in a physical classroom setting. He was hired six years ago to develop two online classes on western civilization, and had taught them on an alternating basis in each of the last six summers. Hank also shared that he taught online for another institution as well.
Irene. Irene was a full professor of philosophy who had taught at the college level for 28 years, the last 23 of which had been on her current Jesuit campus. At the time of the interview, she was teaching two classes in a physical classroom and one online course for undergraduate students. She was completely responsible for the development of the course.

Julian. Julian taught at the graduate-level in a communication and leadership program. The assistant professor had been teaching at the college level for three years, two of which have been at his current Jesuit institution. His course load at the time of the interview consisted of three online courses, yet he also had experience teaching courses in a physical classroom setting through his current department. The course referenced for the study was a “pre-packaged course” that Julian had no responsibility in developing or opportunity to revise.

Instructor Syllabi

During the interviews, each of the participants was asked to reference an online course that they were currently teaching or had taught in the 18 months prior to the time of the interview, and provide a copy of the syllabus to the researcher. Although the course itself was not the primary focus of the research, its inclusion in the interview protocol and the influence it had on the instructors’ style of teaching was cause to examine the course structure and requirements. Table 4.2 provides a summary of those aspects of the courses that were significant to this study, as taken directly from the syllabi.
Table 4.2

Online Courses Referenced by Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Level of Course</th>
<th>Course #/Name</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Required Postings</th>
<th>Discussion of Online Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Ethics for Health Care</td>
<td>16 Weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>3 weekly (1 original, 2 responses to others)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Introduction to Old Testament</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>2 daily discussion forum postings; 1 weekly blog; 1 weekly reaction to others’ blog</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Database Marketing Strategy</td>
<td>11 weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>2 weekly (no further description)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>World Religions</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>3 weekly (1 original, 2 responses to others)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Fundamentals of Investments</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>2 weekly (1 original, 1 response to others)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Spiritual and Psychological Dimensions of Suffering</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
<td>Hybrid (3 physical classes)</td>
<td>2 weekly (1 original, 1 response to others)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Educational Research and Statistics</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>Weekly log-in, yet 9 postings (3 original; 6 responses to others) throughout semester</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Modern Western Civilization</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>2 weekly (1 original, 1 response to others)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Introduction to Ethics</td>
<td>15 Weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>Weekly synchronous chat; 7 other asynchronous discussions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Dynamics of Communication Technology</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>All online</td>
<td>2 per thread (1 original; 1 response to others)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although there was a range in the length of the courses, the model of an accelerated 8-week term and a full-16 week semester was consistent with traditional university course offerings. Gina was the only participant who referenced the short length of an 8-week course as one of multiple contributing factors that prevented the development of a learning community. Also relative to course design, Frank’s course was the only of the 10 that utilized the hybrid model, with a physical class meeting in three of the 12 weeks. He shared in the discussion of the development of a learning community that “because it was a hybrid, it did help that I could see them”, but then reinforced that the online postings only enhanced this community and contributed to a deeper level of sharing with more intimate postings.

Three of the 10 syllabi provided content that expressly discussed the uniqueness of the online learning community. Irene discussed this in her class expectations on page 5 of an 18-page syllabus; Brian mentioned this in the “Interactive Participation” section on page 17 of a 22 page syllabus; Cindy indicated that she hoped to build a supportive learning community in the addendum section, page 11 of a 12-page syllabus. None of these instructors indicated that time was set aside at the beginning of the course to review the syllabus or discuss this expectation. Throughout the interviews, they also did not attribute the development of any learning community to what was written in the syllabus.

Finally, the syllabi showed consistency among the instructors with regard to the required postings, particularly in relation to the requirement that both original postings and responses to the postings of other students be completed weekly in most cases. Brian required a daily posting to the discussion board, while Gina’s requirements were spread out throughout the 8-week term of the course, though she did require a weekly log-in.
Identification of Themes

In this study, the researcher actually began the analysis process during the interviews, as he made notes of common themes and consistent messages shared while answering the interview questions. As the transcripts were read, the researcher identified hundreds of specific words and phrases that addressed a common idea or seemed to have relevance for the research questions. These, along with a corresponding transcript line number were hand written separately on paper that allowed for the process of visual mapping to take place (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Example of Visual Mapping of Meaning Units
These words and phrases were also highlighted on an electronic copy of the transcript. These annotated summaries and highlighted transcripts were reviewed again and preliminary codes were identified. This process was repeated for each of the ten transcripts with the researcher looking for commonality among the transcripts with regard to the meaning units. After initially being placed on the list, codes were retained during the final review if at least three of the 10 participants provided meaning units that supported the existence of the code. This analysis resulted in the final selection of 33 codes (see List 4.1).

List 4.1 – Codes

1. Instructor Feelings (toward online courses)
2. Instructor Role (in online class)
3. Instructor Motivation (for teaching online)
4. Course Creation (Instructor Role)
5. Course Creation (Benefit to Students)
6. Instructors’ Learning Curve (high end)
7. Outcomes of Online Learning
8. Significance of Online Education
9. Instructor as a Teacher
10. Satisfaction for Instructor as it Relates to Instructor
11. Dissatisfaction for Instructor as it Relates to Instructor
12. Satisfaction for Instructor as it Relates to Others
13. Dissatisfaction for Instructor as it Relates to Others
14. Relationship Between Instructor and Students
15. Characteristics of Online Students (personal)
16. Characteristics of Online Students (demographic)
17. Student Learning Outcomes
18. Student Experiences and Expectations
19. Quality of Student Responses
20. Significance of the Online Postings
21. Barriers to Online Communication / Community Development
22. Physical Class Activity
23. Online Class Activity
24. Student Developmental Outcomes
25. Definition of Community
26. Descriptors of Community
27. Factors in the Development of Community
The researcher reviewed each of the transcripts again, and transferred the handwritten codes to a MS Word document, with the meaning units from the participants supporting each code identified by a transcript reference and line number, a moniker used to assist with categorizing and cataloguing (see List 4.2).

**List 4.2 – Example of Code with Referenced Meaning Units**

**Code: Satisfaction for Instructor as it Relates to Instructor**
- flexibility (D-54; H-93; C-90; B-70; J-88; J-90; J-92; J-93)
- flexibility of the work (J-88; J-90; J-92; J-93)
- convenience (H-94)
- freedom (A-128)
- learning from the students (E-43; E-59)
- enjoyment of working with adult students (D-94)
- communication with the students (G-80)
- knows the personality of every student (C-79)
- the joy of getting to know people (A-147)
- course is done...no need to prepare (A-148)
- working with computers (I-156)

The coded data was read through once again, with a specific focus on identifying how each of the codes addresses the research questions. This resulted in the identification of 12 themes or subthemes.

Each of these themes and subthemes was given a color-coded highlight and the specific meaning units within each of the codes were then color-coded to identify how they related to the appropriate themes and subthemes. The data were moved to a new document that summarized the research question with the connected theme or subtheme.
and supporting data and meaning units. Throughout this process, the researcher referred back to the original transcripts and modified the words and phrases selected for inclusion as needed. This was consistent with methodology as previously described by Crewell (2009), Richards (2005), and Bogdan and Biklen (1996).

**Overview of the Findings**

These themes, explained and supported in detail below, are the foundation for the findings of this research and offer perspective on each of the research questions. Relative to the development of a learning community in online classes, the research suggested that although a greater depth of sharing was perceived in online classes compared with classes taught in a physical classroom, the specific factors that contributed to the development of a learning community were found throughout both methods of course delivery. Additionally, stronger learning communities were found within the online courses designed with more structure and more detailed course expectations. The research also confirmed that the development of a learning community in an online course was a goal worthy of attainment, but also suggested that the presence of this community was not essential for student learning to occur in an online course.

The themes also address the environment of the online classroom and the teaching that supports this. The research indicated that, unique to the online course delivery method, the student was the driving force directing the conversation and dialogue within the online class. Although expectations and an outline were presented by the instructor, the activity within the course followed the path created by the student. The participants in the study also suggested that there was less of a personal connection between instructor
and the online student when compared with the relationship between teacher and student in a physical classroom. With regard to instructional methodology, the research found that teachers employ the same basic methods and strategies when in an online environment or in a physical classroom. The participants also suggested the main advantages to the online methodology were externally focused, primarily benefiting the student, whereas the disadvantages were centered on the administrative challenges faced by the instructor.

The final three themes comment on the connection of the research findings to the Jesuit tradition and specific mission of the schools represented. The participants indicated that online education did not detract from this mission and in fact supported and helped develop this mission further. The student learning that occurred in these online classes was enhanced because of this relationship to the Jesuit tradition and through the design and purpose of these courses it was found that online education on Jesuit campuses had a positive impact on improving humanity.

**Description of Themes and Extracted Meanings**

As the researcher finished the process of connecting meaning units to the specific themes and began the task of relating the themes to the research questions, it was important to clarify the standard to which themes remained legitimate. In order for a theme to remain included in the study, at least one meaning unit from at least four participants must have been identified as supporting that particular theme, though it is important to identify that the majority of the themes were supported by many more
references. Establishing these criteria for reduction was a step consistent with the data analysis process outlined by Richards (2005).

The researcher has also followed the recommendation of Richards (2005) in presenting support from the data for each of the themes. Richards suggests close discretion and balance in capturing the richness of the data and advises against the use of long quotation after long quotation. The direct quotations and citations that follow the description of each theme were integrated “as part of the argument, not the flood of the argument” and “pruned to express just what matters” (p. 197). The researcher paid close attention to ensure that the selected quotes enhanced the explanation of the themes.

**Theme 1 – The development of a community in an online class is desirable, but not a critical component for learning to take place.** This first theme is significant, as it establishes that the development of a learning community, while important, was not significantly connected to the actual process of learning in an online class. Nine of the 10 participants shared specific meaning units that supported this theme, with eight offering multiple references. Hank mentioned that he was “not concerned with the development of a learning community” and thought that “learning takes place on an individual level.” Alice’s feeling was that the importance of a learning community was secondary to the mastery of content while Brian seemed to summarize the perspective of most of the participants:

Well, I think a lot…too much is made of community, to be honest. So, I would hesitate to put too much baggage into that concept. I guess partly because I tend to be much more individualistic in my learning. I tend not to emphasize community as much as possible. I would emphasize the fact of…I think students
learn best when they share their knowledge with each other. So, I would put
community in terms of simply, that the context in which students are free to share
their knowledge and to learn socially.

Cindy added the importance of community building for the social nature of the
class, but deemphasized the importance of community building related to learning as
well:

I would say that for enjoyment of the class, community building is really
important. So that’s when you get to know the students, the students get to know
you, they get to know each other. They feel like they belong to something and are
having some sort of shared experience. I don’t think community building is
important for learning the material.

These comments from the participants reinforce that the process of learning, although
aided by the development of a community, remains largely an individualistic effort on
behalf of the student.

**Subtheme A – The factors leading to the development of a learning community in an online class are not unique to online courses.** Directly related to the theme that community development is desirable in an online class but not a critical component of the learning process is the belief that the factors leading to this development are similar in both online and physical classroom courses. This subtheme also provides a direct answer to research question one; the participants suggested that faculty build learning communities in online classes the same way that they build them in physical classrooms. All 10 of the participants offered support for this subtheme, with everyone but Hank providing multiple references.
Irene introduced this subtheme with the comment that “if it’s good teaching, students learn,” and suggested that every day, there were some students who learned and some who didn’t, and that this was the same in the physical classroom as well as the online classroom. Julian’s comment was particularly supportive of this subtheme:

I tend to see a core group, a group of students who are very active in online discussion, and then, this group is usually maybe a third of the class. And then another third…just, how would you say this, they just do the minimal discussion and participation they are expected. And the third group, they could be introverted individuals but they don’t participate, almost at all. And so I tend to see these three groups develop in each course that I teach. But, it could be just the same as the, the dynamics that take place in the traditional face-to-face classrooms…So I guess that it’s the same deal.

When asked specifically about the factors in the development of the online learning community, all of the participants cited elements that also exist in the development of physical classroom learning communities. These elements included the sharing of personal experiences; the importance of the interpersonal introduction between the students and between the students and instructor; an engagement with the course content and expectations; and the expectation that students share their opinions through the discussion groups. These elements may need to be implemented with a bit more focus or from a different perspective in an online environment, but they were fundamentally the same factors.

In her interview, Gina identified four specific factors that help develop community: “So, there seems to be a sharing of resources, a give and take, an answering
of questions, and overall a support network within that cohort of students in the course.”

The concept of a support network was reinforced by Cindy when she identified “a feeling of belonging; a shared experience” as key factors in the development of the community.

Irene also supported this theme in articulating the importance of the most basic element of community development, the introductory activity:

> So what I’ve done, I start with a welcome message and all these little things that are meant to get them to introduce themselves to one another. I get them to put their answers in one of the discussion boxes or the digital box. There are a number of exercises like that I run them through. It’s after that that we start into the course. I don’t know…they may or may not be turned on by my power point presentation, but the goal of all this is to get them to warm up to one another, getting to know one another.

All of these statements serve as a foundation of any learning community (as supported by literature review in Chapter Two) and are not specific to either the physical or the online class.

**Theme 2 – Online courses often facilitate greater depth in sharing, which leads to community development.** Theme 2 is significant in that it summarizes an outcome that is a direct result of the format of online education. Because of the nature of the medium, “students cannot remain anonymous” according to Julian, and Diane noted that “students publish everything they say.” Hank related the contributions of students to time, saying that “pedagogically, students can think and formulate a response” and that there was less “hogging” of the conversation in an online class than in a physical class.

Alice seemed to agree with this perspective when she noted an awareness that “students
share differently online that in person.” Six of the 10 participants offered meaning units that supported this theme.

Beyond the uniqueness of the structure – and likely as a direct result of it – it was suggested that students shared more intimately and with greater richness in an online environment than in a physical classroom. Diane shared a perspective on this:

Because I think it’s interesting and unique, there is an odd sense of intimacy in an online class. Or maybe, it’s just the subjects I teach. But, people are…open, you know, it’s surprising what they’ll put up there. They are thoughtful and open and of course, you know, in a sense you’re vulnerable when you do that. But, so there is a real, you know, commitment to being open and real with each other. Frank reinforced this thought:

And these, by the way, were pretty intimate sharings, given the nature of the topic. The richness that I found, surprisingly, in some ways that they – their postings would be very in-depth and because it was far more thought out than it would be, say in a classroom response. Here, there was some very rich and profound sharing that created a contagiousness of other students sharing at a considerable depth; more so than you would have in a, perhaps in a regular class. This higher level of sharing in an online classroom also seems to have contributed to more dynamic educational discussions and discourse. Diane pointed out that “there is thoughtfulness to the conversation” and Julian shared a perspective that students not only engaged at a much deeper level than allowed in a physical classroom, but it was also “easier to engage with controversial topics that are avoided in a physical classroom.” He also emphasized that since students do not have to face the instructor, “they have the
freedom of composing an idea and discussion argument,” which led into the development of a learning community.

Not only did this depth in sharing lead to a stronger learning community, it also led to greater personal growth for the students themselves. This began with so much of the sharing coming from the students’ life experiences, as Alice highlighted:

My goal for the course is that they develop…it’s not content in the sense of facts and historic cases and theories. My goal for the course is for them to be…to learn decision making and develop decision making capacity.

This was reinforced by Frank’s comments that students are “shaping and forming one another,” and Diane’s perspective that an online learning community “calls for some really thoughtful communications from students and probably a higher writing and communication level than you would have in a casual classroom exchange.” She also cited a greater sense of “civility and responsiveness” in an online classroom than a physical one.

**Theme 3 – Instructor is secondary to the students in controlling the discussion and activity in the online class.** This theme appears to be a direct contradiction to the conventional wisdom of what happens in a physical classroom, where the instructor controls the class activity. Eric’s quote that “in the classroom…I’m the community and [the students] are joining me” reinforced this idea. Allowing the students this level of control in an online classroom was a widely held perspective of the study participants, supported with multiple references by all but one of the participants, and appeared to be one of the ways that faculty build learning communities.
As with the idea that online education facilitates greater sharing within the learning community, this theme is also directly linked to the specificity of online education as a teaching medium. The study participants offered comments and statements indicating that they felt constrained in relation to directing some of the class activity. Alice shared that she “does not feel too involved in the class” and that she’s “a guide on the side,” while Irene commented that she “just toggles back and forth between the groups” and that the class did not want her interfering with their conversations. An important clarification must be made that this was not necessarily without design by the instructor; both Alice and Irene suggested that they preferred the conversation to be driven by the students.

One of the clearest examples of an instructor-led teaching style that has deep historical roots in the physical classroom is the Socratic Method. In her description of the instructor’s role in the online class, Alice supported this notion of the student having control while addressing the Socratic Method:

It’s the hardest thing in the world to give up the notion of that immediate interaction of having an outline, but walking in ad lib and bantering if you will in the Socratic style with the date, with the content, with the student, with yourself, with the other students. And you have to give that up if you’re gonna teach online. You have to understand that what you are doing online is developing…you have the criteria…it’s like a book; you have the content already laid out and you would have that in your notes and you would have hoped to cover it. But online, you will cover that. And that you have to trust the student to incorporate it into their minds. You’re not the Socratic midwife bringing the
ideas out of them. They do that for each other so you have to be willing to step back.

Interestingly, both Diane and Alice discussed the concept of the instructor “stopping” the conversation, which serves as another indication that the student is in control of the class activity. Diane shared that she was very careful as to how frequently she entered a discussion forum because often “when the instructor steps in, the conversation stops”. Alice was even more careful: “But I don’t ever enter into their discussion forum because I’m a stopper.”

The focus of the comments relating to this theme thus far has been on the instructor and his or her intentionality in not controlling the conversation and class activity, but five of the participants in this study also clearly identified the student as wanting that responsibility. Cindy added a learning perspective on this conversation when she said, “but you have to be able to learn on your own. So part of the benefit of online classes is that you are helping the students learn how to learn without you, with a teacher, without a class.” The ownership for the learning community and the learning itself sits squarely with the students. Further evidence of support for this theme was found when Brian shared that he “would emphasize the fact of, I think students learn best when they share their knowledge with each other.” Finally, Hank reinforced this perspective:

What I would be concerned with, as I said, is the ability to get students to…just to foster some degree of conversation between students, so that they are not simply talking to me, but that they are responding to each other’s thought. The value in that is that they can see multiple perspectives, and that it moves them a
little bit away from the idea that the teacher is the person with all the right answers.

Theme 4 – Online classrooms that have strong structure and requirements tend to be indicative of stronger learning communities. One of the attractions to online education is the flexibility in both course delivery and the accompanying requirements and expectations. Although it is difficult to compare 10 different online courses from 10 different instructors scattered across the country who were teaching both graduate and undergraduate students, the researcher was able to ascertain from the participants’ experiences that those online courses with stronger structure and requirements were indicative of stronger learning communities, especially as this theme was supported by all 10 of the participants, nine of whom offered multiple references.

Underlying this theme is the audience for whom online education is typically intended, and the demographic make-up of the students referenced by the participants in this study. Throughout the interviews, the students were described as “adult”; “working full-time with families;” “coming from all over the country;” “from all over the world;” “working two-three jobs;” “working professionals;” demographically different than students in campus course;” and “a little older.” In describing deeper personal characteristics of the students, Alice shared that “they come to the course with the intent of doing well, of forming the class, of being successful,” and Frank described his students through the richness of their backgrounds and life experiences. Students described as such were more likely to have higher expectations of their educational experience than the traditional undergraduate student taking five classes and living on campus.
With relation to the actual class activity, two of the participants articulated that when the instructor took responsibility for outlining the expectations, organizing the groups, and providing a structure, the students remained more engaged in the learning. Gina supported the perspective that this helps to facilitate community interaction when she shared:

It seems that we have students who have the opportunity to interact with each other online in the course through discussion boards, and other activities that we encourage the students to engage in through our course requirements that really help to facilitate that type of community interaction.

During the interviews, all of the participants shared the particular expectations of when and how often students were required to post to the various discussion boards and community chat rooms, as summarized in Table 4.2. In responding to the question on the requirements of posting within the class, Frank introduced the concept of rhythm and how this played a significant role in the structure and organization of the class:

Two things: one is to set up a rhythm for the students of the postings, the readings, the reflections, as well as my own rhythm, and that was a learning experience. So that I have to give it time to both present something, but then respond to something. And they have to learn that rhythm too, so that it’s just not cramming the night before a class and doing a paper, and then showing up in the class. Here, they and I both had to develop a rhythm for the success of the course, and I, uh, know this was new something new for all of us. But it was a different kind of rhythmic engagement than your normal courses and I think we achieve that.
In building this “rhythmic engagement,” Frank was trying to set a structure and establish expectations that ultimately led to the development of a learning community. “[The learning community] was enhanced when there would be this wavelength, if you will, of bringing them together through the postings.” Three other participants indicated they were intentional about making personalized comments to each student and shared examples that highlighted some of the experiences instructors had in providing structure and meaning to the course that ultimately resulted in a strengthening of that learning community. In addition to the requirements that called for students responding directly to the postings of other students, these examples also included a requirement to post a specifically directed personal introduction at the beginning of the course, and an intentional effort to keep the students online for a longer period of time.

The foundation of this theme remains the frequency and the interaction among students that occurs in the discussion boards and chat rooms, however. Diane shared her requirement that students read each other’s posts and respond to those students with questions. Julian described how he created a “Lounge,” a formal forum within the discussion board that “increases the sense of community and then belonging”. Brian shared that students “have to interact with each other” and “have to respond to other students’ blogs; we develop conversation in that direction.” In Gina’s class, she enforced the requirement to post to the message board, but did not require participation in the chat rooms. In the description of her experience with the chat rooms, Gina reinforced this theme in sharing that the success of the chat room really depended on the questions that the students had; when students did not have questions – and were not required to participate in the chat room by the instructor, then no one attended.
Theme 5 – Other than preferences, there is not a significant difference in the teaching between an online classroom and a physical classroom. Although some of the comments presented supporting previous themes suggest this idea, there was enough data from the participants in the study to warrant a separate theme suggesting no significant difference in the teaching of an online course and a campus course. Of the 10 participants in the study, six offered meaning units (five of them multiple times) that supported this theme. There were structural and administrative differences between the methods of instruction, but in keeping with the purpose of this study, the researcher has focused on the factors leading to a learning community and not on the organizational dissimilarities between the methods. As Irene indicated, (and quoted earlier) “good teaching is good teaching” and “if it’s good teaching, students learn.”

Cindy framed the philosophy of the online student when she said that “students want to get out of the online course as much as they would by coming to class.” Irene shared her perspective that “online instruction can become very close to like teaching [in the physical classroom]” and attempts to “simulate the classroom as much as possible.” In taking a different approach, and supporting this theme by blurring the line between the online courses and those on campus, Brian shared that he’s “not always sure if the physical experience is that much of a priority.” It would gather to reason then, that if the expectation of students and the goal of the instructor was for the online class to be similar to the physical class (or vice versa), then the instructional approach would be similar as well. Gina also found that community building online was developed much like it was in a regular classroom.
Throughout the interviews, the participants shared aspects of the online class experience that mirrored the physical class experience. Brian actually suggested a more enjoyable class experience online:

I enjoy the kind of one on one conversation that I have with individual students, much more so than I do in a classroom setting. From a student’s perspective, I enjoy it because I think I’m able to engage the students more directly, require them to more actively learn than they are able to in a traditional class setting.

This was echoed by Julian, who shared:

The [online] discussion takes a form that is, I think, pretty similar to what we have in face to face classrooms. It’s more spontaneous, it’s organic, and another student uses their own personal/professional experiences to back up their claims and a lot of times they introduce additional sources of information to back up their argument. That’s pretty similar to what we have in regular classrooms.

One of the more visual descriptions that came out of the data relating to this theme came from Irene, who suggested that students even talked about the instructor via message boards and chat rooms, yet they didn’t realize that the instructor has access to see everything.

Subtheme B – There is less of a personal connection between instructor and student in the online classroom. As with themes 2 and 3, this theme relates to the practicality of the actual medium of online education. Through their comments, six of the 10 participants in the study felt that although there was less of a personal connection with the students in online classes, this did not have a significant impact on student learning or instructor satisfaction.
From the perspective of the instructor, both Cindy and Brian shared that they missed talking face-to-face with students, with Brian adding that “I miss [the audio kind of feedback] occasionally, but I don’t think that I’m dissatisfied. It doesn’t keep me from wanting to teach online.” Irene “misses the interaction that you have in the [physical] classroom.” Alice shared the anxiety she feels as an instructor:

Uh, I will wake up some days and say “what’s going on in my class? I don’t know what’s happening…I sure hope they’re OK…I’m too busy today to get online”. I’ll just check…I’ll just check the question box to make sure nobody’s floundering”. The sense that…so the thing that’s hard for me, is that you really don’t see…you don’t have a moment by moment kind of sense of what’s happening. You don’t see them 3 times a week…

In answering the question about social presence, Gina supported this theme in sharing that “you know, students might bypass me in the process of making those social connections and sort of developing friendships or whatnot offline.”

Three study participants also shared their thoughts on the student perspective related to this theme. Julian suggested that a disconnect existed in his online class, “a lot of the students express that they don’t feel they’re as connected to other classmates. Or with the instructor – me – and so I sometimes feel the same way.” In the same conversation, he also shared that it’s “difficult to see [an intellectual curiosity and scholarly interest] develop among online students.” In sharing her perspective that her students focused on the grade more than the learning process, Gina lent support to this theme as well:
I think some of that is due to some anxiety, the fact that they can’t, don’t see the professor, they feel they may not be as connected with the professor as an on campus student because I think an element is missing.

Finally, Cindy shared a very simple and practical difference between online and campus courses, “When I’m teaching in a classroom, I will connect with some of the students who will visit during the break and before and after class.”

**Theme 6 – Advantages instructors see in online learning revolve around the student.** This finding, supported with references made by eight of the 10 participants, is significant in that it seems to reinforce and support the very purpose of online education, and suggests that this medium is an important and successful method of delivering education in today’s society. The participants in the study identified flexibility, convenience, and freedom as positive aspects of teaching online; this was anticipated. What was not anticipated by the researcher, however, was how the truly personal benefits of teaching online were secondary to the student and how he or she benefited from online education.

In describing her program as “mission driven,” Alice reached people throughout her state who were unable to access any higher education. Irene talked about “the need for an evening program” and an “outreach into the community,” while Brian mentioned that his course filled a need for students outside of the city that his institution is located in. Irene also mentioned undergraduate students and their need for flexibility with their class schedules as an advantage.

Diane mentioned that she simply “enjoys working with adult students” and Julian cited the diversity of the students multiple times as advantages to online education.
Diane also described online courses as a “wonderful medium for introverted students who do much, much better [than in a campus course]” and connected to this, Gina suggested that with some students and instructors, this medium actually facilitated a greater connection:

I also like the fact that some people say it actually discourages communication between the prof and the student but I seem to feel the other way. I feel, if profs are checking their email every 48 hours and whatnot, students actually have more access to a prof…um…quicker access to a prof than they would if they were just meeting once a week on campus. So, I enjoy that kind of interaction with students and being responsive.

Seeing the growth of the individual student and how involved they were in the course was an advantage that Alice mentioned multiple times as well.

Two of the study participants shared interesting perspectives on the learning outcomes of online education and how they were advantageous to the student. Diane suggested that the postings students were required to make not only helped a student improve his or her writing skills, but they also helped to develop civility. Irene articulated the importance of the technological aspect of online learning:

So I keep telling them that they are the pathfinders, that they are helping me; they’re helping future students as we all learn how to do this. They realize when they go out and they get jobs, they’re gonna have to do some of this stuff anyhow. Irene’s comment about students having to be familiar with the technology because of future careers was one of the strongest statements made about the advantage of the online educational experience for students.
Theme 7 – Disadvantages instructors see in online learning revolve around administrative issues. As with theme 5, there is potential danger in discussing administrative issues related to online courses, as each of the institutions represented in this study had different structures in place to design, implement, and support online courses. Each of the participants also had varying degrees of experience and responsibility in the administration of their course. Nonetheless, it is significant to this researcher that the only real disadvantages mentioned with some regularity by the participants were related to structural or administrative issues, and this was cited by four of the 10 participants in the study.

One of the issues raised by Gina centered on the rapid development of online programs and a concern that the competition for students among universities may be having an impact on the quality of the education. She reinforced this message in sharing a belief that “more focus is on the grading process and assignments and procedural requirements online than is on the overall value of learning.”

Other participants were more succinct and directed in their perceived disadvantages. Frank shared that his frustration lied with external links and trying to learn the specifics of the Blackboard system, and Eric expressed dissatisfaction with the specific software package chosen. In discussing her frustration with using the technology in trying to teach computer work, Cindy shared that “it just takes a whole lot more time to explain to people how to do anything in Excel when you’re not right there with them.”

Theme 8 – Online learning supports and enhances the Jesuit mission and identity of the institution. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Jesuit nature of the institutions studied is a significant factor in this research. Although Dr. Vigilante clearly
articulated the importance of distance learning within the Jesuit higher education network, previously cited research and perspective cautioned that this link may not have had a positive correlation. This issue was primarily addressed in the interview through question nine of the structured interview guide: “In what ways does this distance learning course support or detract from the educational mission of the institution and the Jesuit philosophy of education (as interpreted by the institution)?” Hank was the only study participant who did not offer an opinion on this question; as an adjunct he simply did not have any experience with or connection to the Jesuit tradition at his institution. The other nine study participants all spoke of a positive connection between online education and the Jesuit tradition, with six of the nine sharing meaning units that supported this specific theme.

In echoing some of the previous themes, Brian answered question nine with “I would see it as being not significantly different from my in class experience. So, I see it as functioning in the same way - positively.” He reinforced that in his online courses, all of the Jesuit tradition and pedagogy “can be engaged.” Irene supported this perspective as well:

I don’t see any ways in which it does detract from the mission. I don’t know if anybody has come up with anything, but I know the only people who would say that it detracts from the mission would be the people who really think that online courses are dehumanizing and that’s not true at all. I think they fit in quite well with the mission.

Diane shared a related perspective, explaining that the “basic premise of a value-centered education” was “extending the opportunity for effective teaching, learning and personal
development,” and this was accomplished in the online classroom. Alice’s comment was related to the institution as a whole, sharing that her institution was founded to reach citizens “hither and yon over the mountains,” and that “online learning is a critical component in developing this mission of the University.”

**Subtheme C – Student learning is enhanced through a connection to the Jesuit tradition.** Although student learning outcomes within online education have been discussed relative to previous themes, it is significant to note that the data analysis discovered a connection between these student learning outcomes and the Jesuit tradition, and this was cited by six of the nine participants.

Frank leaned heavily on the historical tradition of Jesuit education when he cited a “450-year history of connecting a common philosophy of education” and the fact that the Jesuits have “ways of connecting in educative ways that no other system has; [Jesuit institutions] are just learning to do it in a systematic way.” Eric related this more directly to the student when he shared that his courses made students think, specifically of more questions: “and that’s the way I explain Jesuit education to people. I don’t have to give you the answers; I have to make you think.” He connected this specifically to online education in articulating the importance of providing this opportunity and sharing this philosophy with the adult student – his primary audience.

Three other participants shared that the opportunity to experience diversity was a significant factor in online education, and was related to the Jesuit mission. Diane reinforced her belief that Jesuit online education “extends the opportunity” to “a range of people who otherwise would never ever be able to access this kind of education.” She cited students in Iraq, in a submarine in the Pacific Ocean, and in Indonesia as examples
of this initiative. Cindy clarified that her students were “connecting with people from all over the world,” and were tied to the Jesuit tradition because they were becoming part of the global community, not just living an isolated life for themselves. Finally, Julian shared that he intentionally connected an appreciation of the diversity of each student with an emphasis on social justice, which is another hallmark of Jesuit education.

Alice provided a summary of this connection that, although shared from the perspective of her institution, was an appropriate foundation of this theme:

And so online learning is the way in which we project our learning opportunities. We maintain the Jesuit philosophy of education through excellence and the expectation that they use their content but they also, the Jesuits, interface with the real world and a sense of understanding spiritualities and respect for persons. Online learning and the courses require that kind of respect and kind of embracing excellence and the notion that we speak and act from knowledge content, hard earned knowledge content shared by myself and authors and each other, and there is a mutual respect of learning from each other that is uniquely – not uniquely Jesuit – but that enhances the Jesuit mission.

**Subtheme D – Online learning on Jesuit campuses contributes to the betterment of society.** A final subtheme extracted from the data is the notion that online learning on Jesuit campuses makes a contribution to society. This was referenced by six of the 10 participants and is another idea that has some overlap with previously identified themes. Julian talked about “educating men and women for others with a strong presence on social justice and sense of inclusion,” and Alice, Eric, and Irene all spoke specifically of the importance of service to the greater community as part of the educational
experience in their classes. Irene shared her belief in the role that the Jesuit network should play in both reaching out to the community and connecting the “first world and the third world” through online education:

You could put together a course on some common theme or something and have them going back and forth on it. I can see it fitting into the educational mission. Also, the idea that it would be nice if we would get our act together and we could have some kind of social justice outreach program for adults in the community, adult learners in the community…[Online courses] they enables the Jesuit mission to be carried beyond the walls of [the institution] outside into the larger world.

Summary

The interviews conducted for this research study were rich with data that addressed the purpose of the study – describe the experiences of faculty in their development of a learning community within online courses at Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States – and offered answers to the research questions. The 12 themes and subthemes extracted from the data reinforce that faculty build learning communities in online courses in much the same way they do in physical classroom courses and a connection to the Jesuit mission and tradition enhances this effort rather that detracts from it.
Chapter Five

Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Introduction

As articulated in Chapter One, the purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of faculty in their development of a learning community within online courses at Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States. This phenomenon was examined through a qualitative research study in which 10 instructors, representing nine different Jesuit schools, were interviewed. The study participants were scattered around the country and had varying levels of experience teaching both in the classroom and in an online environment. Each interview followed a standard protocol, where after series of demographic questions, each participant was asked nine questions addressing the personal experiences of teaching online, the development of both a learning community and social presence in an online classroom, and the nature of Jesuit education as it related to online learning. “Phenomenological research uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of an essence description” (Creswell, 2009, p. 184); this resulting data was rich with detail and provided insight and perspective on the four research questions:

1. How did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities build a learning community among the students taking an online course?

2. How did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities modify their teaching when teaching online compared with teaching in a traditional classroom environment?
3. What did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities identify as the advantages and disadvantages for themselves of this course delivery method?

4. In what ways did faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities feel that online education either supports or detracts from the stated mission and philosophy of Jesuit education?

Chapter Four detailed the findings of the data, extracted through an inductive coding process that contracted 33 codes and hundreds of meaning units into eight major themes and four subthemes. This is consistent with Creswell’s (2009) recommendation: “The traditional approach of coding in the social sciences is to allow the codes to emerge during the data analysis” (p. 184). Chapter Five will not only discuss the importance of these themes as they relate to the research questions, but will connect the findings back to the literature as shared in Chapter Two and offer recommendations for practice and further research.

Methods Used to Develop Online Learning Communities

One of the goals of this study was to investigate the practical methods that instructors utilized to build learning communities while teaching online. The methods used in the traditional classroom to build community – students responding and making comments about other’s comments; students having some type of personal connection with each other; teams of students working together; and engagement to each other and the material – were the same methods to build community in the online classroom. These
also included the five key variables that were referenced in Palloff and Pratt’s (2003) definition of a learning community cited in Chapter Two:

1. Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
2. Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student to students rather than student to instructor
3. Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning
4. Sharing of resources among students
5. Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the work of others. (p. 17)

The data were rich with examples from the instructors on specific activities they implemented and expectations they had for their online classes that included elements of this definition. All 10 of the instructors interviewed made reference to the idea of “active interaction involving…personal communication.” What the researcher found even more significant were the multiple references to “active interaction involving…course content.” Irene’s use of role plays; the references to shared knowledge by both Brian and Alice; Diane’s reference to the “thoughtfulness of the conversation;” Eric’s observation of the “depth in postings beyond just ‘I agree; I disagree’;” and Hank’s belief that “pedagogically, students can think and formulate a response” were all examples of this active interaction with course content. Another illustration of this perspective was Julian’s statement that he finds “it really amazing that the online platform is making it
almost a little easier to engage with controversial topics that we tend to avoid in the traditional classroom environment.”

The one aspect of Paloff and Pratt’s (2003) definition that the researcher did not find evidence of in the data was the third element: “socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning.” As demonstrated with Theme 3, there was significant discussion in the interviews about the student to student conversations and about dialogue in the online classroom; this had the intent of “achieving agreement.” The evidence of the development of socially constructed meaning through the learning community was inconclusive, however. Hank shared his observation that it was “more difficult to get a mature conversation than in the physical classroom,” while Julian felt that it was “sometimes difficult to see intellectual curiosity and scholarly input developing among online students.”

**Social Presence in the Online Classroom**

Question Six of the Structured Interview Guide asked the following question: How would you describe the social presence that has developed in your online classroom and what factors led to its development? Although none of the 12 themes or subthemes specifically focused on social presence, the perspectives shared by the study participants on this topic offer comment on previously-cited research. As discussed in Chapter Two, social presence is one of the three elements in Garrison, Archer, and Anderson’s (2000) community of inquiry model for developing community in online education. Arbaugh et al. (2008) define social presence as “the ability of participants to identify with the
community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (p. 134). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) identify the establishment of social presence as occurring in three distinct phases, beginning with “open communication,” leading to “powerful academic exchanges,” and evolving into a “feeling of camaraderie” (p. 160). Although the data from this study identified examples from each of the three phases, the instructors did not see themselves as having a significant role in the development of social presence or even being aware of its existence. Diane suggested that social presence in her class was “minimal” while Gina added that social presence was “non-existent”, though both individuals emphasized the importance of learning in other comments unrelated to social presence or community development. More research is necessary on whether this was attributable to the instructors’ lack of knowledge about the concept of social presence, or to the instructors’ emphasis on the content and the development of the learning community. Throughout the interviews, the question about social presence was the only one that each and every participant asked for clarification.

Another perspective related to social presence was the importance instructors placed on the face-to-face interactions of – or prior connections among – students as variables in the development of social presence. A majority of those interviewed cited students who may have taken classes together previously or who interacted with each other on the campus as more likely to develop a social presence. This is important to the research because it reinforces Garrison and Arbaugh’s (2007) opinion that much more research is required on the exact nature of how the development of social presence takes place.
Online and Physical Classroom Teaching Methodology

The research study was designed to ascertain the ways that instructors teaching an online class changed their teaching style when moving from the physical classroom. Although the method of delivery was profoundly different and there were administrative and technical differences related to content instruction, the research identified that the core teaching that happened in a classroom was not fundamentally different between the online and physical version of that classroom. The primary focus remained on the development of a learning community.

This also supports the previously mentioned community of inquiry model in which Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) identify three dimensions of teaching presence: direct instruction; instructional design and organization; and facilitating discourse. Within the data, there was evidence that the instructional design and organization dimension caused some dissatisfaction among instructors. Four of the participants cited concerns that they did not have control over changing the content of the online course once it was loaded into the system, and three of the instructors shared that they had to teach the same curriculum for multiple semesters before a departmental revision was made. Even those situations, however, were not dissimilar from the adjunct instructor teaching a packaged course in a physical classroom, or the tenured faculty member teaching the standard introductory survey or laboratory class according to the department-created syllabus.

The data showed examples in which the instructor tried to replicate the experience from a physical classroom to an online classroom and vice-versa. If an instructor placed importance on the students having a visual image of who they were speaking with online,
he required the students to post a photo. Another instructor saw that students were requesting online assistance throughout all hours of the day, so she established formal office hours for when she would available. Finally, three different instructors shared how important it was for them to be entertainers, regardless of the location of the classroom. Irene’s statement that “good teaching is good teaching” is especially apropos in summarizing the overall perspective of the study participants that there was no significant difference between teaching online and teaching in a physical classroom.

**Online Learning as Supporting the Student Experience**

An examination of the instructor’s attitudes toward teaching online – through the lens of advantages and disadvantages – was important to this study because that data provided supporting evidence of the instructors’ ability to build learning communities in an online classroom. It was significant that the advantages cited by the participants supported the student experience, and by extension, contributed to the development of a learning community.

Although the participants in the study all shared perspectives that supported Schmidt’s (2000) six reasons for the rapid development of distance learning (as cited in Chapter Two), the advantages they cited were much more directly linked to the lived student experience and the student’s acquisition of knowledge than the primarily logistical reasons that Schmidt cites. The participants articulated that they as instructors had the opportunity to get to know their students in a different way. The perspective of students sharing deeper, more personal facts about themselves because of the anonymity of the online environment has been chronicled and contributed to this relationship, as did
the make-up of the typical population that online education serves (adult, fully employed, non-local), and their refined interest in pursuing a higher education degree.

It is also significant that instructors who did not have control over the course maintenance or content selection saw this factor as a disadvantage in their teaching. This was consistent with Finkelstein, Frances, Jewett, and Scholz (2000), who observed that the design, production, and maintenance of course materials may likely be accomplished by a team of individuals who are not necessarily the faculty members that correspond with and assess the students during the actual class. Interestingly, the participants in the study who were most critical about their own lack of control in the maintenance of the class were also the ones who played a key role in the creation of the online course.

The fact that technology was cited as a disadvantage by multiple participants reinforced the concern that online education is tied to an ever-changing platform subject to innovation and typical economic cycles. Although this is not necessarily a negative reality, there are inherent risks and challenges: programs are updated with new versions of software, yet institutions are unable to upgrade because they do not have the funding; vendors are bought by other companies (or un-established venture capitalists) and entire software programs are eliminated; the specific staff member who supported the program (either from an on-campus entity or a private company) is no longer employed. There is not a comparable set of challenges for the logistics in a physical classroom.

The Jesuit Factor in Online Education

The literature review from Chapter Two suggested a philosophical concern that Jesuit institutions, as traditional, residential, and liberal arts institutions may not be ideal
for online education. On the contrary, as the finding from the research study reinforced Buckley’s (1998) summation of the philosophy of education espoused by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, which still serves as a foundational principle of Jesuit colleges and universities: “A university accomplishes universally the improvement in learning and living that is the function of education” (p. 61). The participants universally felt that online education on Jesuit campuses supports the mission, enhances student learning, and contributes to the betterment of society as a whole.

Relative to the stated mission and philosophy of Jesuit education, there was a tremendous diversity of course and program offerings among these institutions, and in spite of this, there was remarkable commonality in how the instructors saw the Jesuit mission in their online experiences. This commonality could be related to the 450-year old Jesuit tradition – as articulated by one of the study participants, or could be a direct benefit of an already established worldwide network of institutions and services – as shared by other participants. What is certain from the research is that this commonality of perspective was not the result of institutional training, as the majority of participants, when asked about the specific employee development they received on the Jesuit tradition, replied with very limited examples.

The factors that support the theme of online education fulfilling the Jesuit mission significantly outweigh any factors that may suggest online education detracts from the mission. In fact, there was only one discussion throughout all of the interviews that centered on online education as a negative effect from the mission and her conclusion was based on a comparison of the Jesuit nature of a physical classroom; online students
simply did not have the same level of exposure to or expectation to embrace the tradition as the students in a campus-based course did.

The ability of online education to connect people not in the same physical location and how this marries perfectly with the Jesuit tradition, as supported by the prior literature and explained by the study participants is the most significant outcome of the research addressing the fourth research question. The Boston College Jesuit Community (2008) shared that “Jesuit education was a network that transcended boundaries of language, culture, and nationhood, one that was intercultural and global in perspective” (p. 42) and this feeling was reinforced throughout the data. The “interface with the real world,” the development of a “respect for all persons,” and the “extension of the opportunity for effective teaching, learning, and personal development” are all rich examples of statements made that support this idea.

Frank reinforced this sense of online education supporting the Jesuit mission when he offered a perspective on connection that transcends the boundary between the two themes:

That feeling of connection…well…you know…if you will, I’d like to build on that because I believe that the key operative word here is connection. There’s the technological word of connecting, being wired properly and that leads into online education. I was just speaking with one of my doctoral students who did her dissertation on online gaming and the impact of that world of students texting and being wired up and connecting…connecting and what are the healthy ways, but what are the unhealthy ways of being addicted in a connected way. And that leads itself I think into the Jesuit education… we’re promoting international
connections. For example, we’re developing the possibility of creating a doctorate of ministry online – of connecting, uh, the cultures of Jesuit universities… that’s not possible in your traditional learning forms.

The example of a Jesuit institution helping students understand what it means to be connected in healthy and unhealthy ways through a modeling of the programs it offers is just a small indication of the influence Jesuit institutions that embrace online learning could potentially have.

**Recommendations for Future Practice**

This research study has provided evidence that learning communities exist in online courses taught at Jesuit schools. Inherent in the research and found in the evidence are recommendations for institutions and practitioners to improve or adapt their online offerings, specifically as it relates to building learning communities.

Stronger encouragement and incentive should be made in supporting instructors’ participation in the JesuitNET CADE program. Although seven of the 10 instructors interviewed for this study had heard of this program, only Alice and Frank had actually attended the CADE workshop. In reviewing the transcript notes, these were two of the participants that offered great depth in their understanding of how the learning community is built in an online classroom, even though Frank was among the youngest in terms of online teaching experience. It is hard to argue against programs that offer additional instruction and training for faculty and there certainly exist a multitude of many different options for this education and professional development. This research offers some evidence that the CADE workshop works – or at least has a positive impact –
and should be attractive primarily because of the Jesuit institutional connection (made stronger through the affiliation with the JesuitNET organization).

Institutions should also formalize a method or procedure for instructors to have a greater voice in the revision of the online courses that they teach. Although a majority of the participants in this study played an active role in the development and creation of their courses, much of the frustration shared by these instructors was the result of their inability to change the content or the format of the class either during the semester or even from term to term. In some instances, this arrangement is a foundational element to the design of the particular academic program and lies well beyond the scope of the instructor. That said, the institution should find a way to solicit the suggestions of those practitioners in the field and implement the recommendation they may have in building the learning community.

Another recommendation that the researcher would suggest for instructors is to utilize current technology in an effort to facilitate greater face-to-face interaction. With the prevalence of affordable and easy to use video conferencing and video chat rooms, the barriers to face-to-face communication at a distance are shrinking. The participants in this study were clear in their opinion that this lack of face-to-face communication did not negatively impact the development of the learning community; however, the majority of participants did suggest that the learning community could be enhanced. Some of the instructors shared their expectations that their students were required to post a photo of some sort to help members of the class know each other. Other instructors suggested that a stronger relationship with their students develops if they can have some type of physical
connection. Current software and technology would help further this development without jeopardizing the purpose and intent of distance learning.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

One of the key responsibilities and real opportunities resulting from a research study of this magnitude is for the researcher to address new issues that have been raised and offer perspective on new questions that require answers. The purpose of this research was to focus exclusively on the experience of the faculty member and although they were willing to share their perspective on what they thought the student experienced, the researcher did not meet with any students taking online courses at Jesuit institutions. A recommendation for further research is to meet with students from the same institutions that were used for this study, and assess their understanding of the development of the online learning community. This would certainly validate the opinions and perspective of the faculty members and provide direction for future enhancement of distance learning programs.

Another recommendation for further research that directly involves students taking online classes is to assess their feeling on the Jesuit nature of their online class. As indicated in Chapter Two, the majority of a typical undergraduate student’s experience at a Jesuit college or university will consist of classes held in a physical room, so taking an online class remains an anomaly. Since the relationship to Jesuit mission was such an important variable to this study – and the participants suggested that online education supports the mission – it would be an interesting question to see if students taking the class feel the same way.
As discussed earlier in this chapter, the participants in the study had a difficult time addressing the concept of social presence. As this is such a key aspect of the community of inquiry model and a key component to any learning community, another recommendation would be to focus a future study exclusively on the development of social presence within an online classroom. Many of the participants in this study answered the interview question on social presence with comments related to what they had experienced in a physical classroom and with the opinion that students must ideally know each other from either other courses or the physical campus community in order to fully develop true social presence. A qualitative instrument that asks students taking an online class together to both assess the level of social presence they feel in the class and identify the ways that they may know each other from previous interactions would be an interesting and valuable measurement on a key variable in the development of a learning community.

During the interviews, two of the participants discussed the social networking skills that students taking online courses bring to the online classroom, and how this plays a role in the development of a learning community. Although this specific theme was beyond the realm of this research study, the fact that it was mentioned by two of the instructors coupled with the saturation of social media on college campuses today suggest a possible link to the development (or hindrance?) of learning communities and that this certainly could be a topic worthy of a future study. Brian even made a very direct reference to this link: “social networking is part of the learning environment; learning communities are facilitated easier online because of the social networking that students already bring.” The ability of students – some as early as middle school – to create and
manage a community of friends through Facebook and Myspace, for example, indicates a comfort level and skill with social media and social networking that can be easily transferred to the academic learning environment on a college campus.

The final recommendation for further research suggested by the data analysis of this study involves the instructor’s level of confidence in their ability to build an online learning community. Although this specific study focused on the experience of teaching online and the methods used to build the learning community, four of the participants did comment about their high level of confidence in teaching online, and how this had a positive impact on their ability to build a learning community. This suggests the importance of further research investigating the link between the instructors’ belief that they are well suited and trained to teach online and the quality of their learning communities. This potential topic could also be connected to participation in the JesuitNET CADE Workshop that has been referenced multiple times in this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of faculty in their development of a learning community within online courses at Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States. Although the participants represented nine different institutions scattered across the United States and were diverse in their experiences of teaching online, they shared similar perspectives on the four research questions that this study attempted to address, resulting in eight themes and four subthemes. These themes have been presented, outlined, and supported throughout this paper, and provide a contribution to the current literature on learning communities within
online classes at Jesuit institutions, while suggesting the need for additional research and topic exploration.

It appears that learning communities develop, regardless of the instruction medium, and that the faculty member has a strong influence on the direction of this development. There also remains a value and an importance in the creation of a learning community for interpersonal development and face-to-face communication. The analysis of the data in this study clearly suggests however, that face-to-face communication must not necessarily equate with a physical presence among students. Finally, there does not appear to be a significant difference between the creation of an online learning community and one that develops in a physical classroom. This is a positive sign for higher education, as the core function of any college or university classroom revolves around teaching and learning. Related to this perspective is the finding that online learning does not appear to negate the influence of the Jesuit mission and tradition; on the contrary, online learning appears to support and even enhance this experience.
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Appendix A

Electronic Letter of Request to the JesuitNET Advisory Board (sample)

E-Mail Header: Request for Nominations

Dear [JesuitNET Campus Representative],

My name is Joe Ecklund and I am the Director of the Office of Student Success at Creighton University. I am also a candidate in the Ph. D program at the University of Toledo and I am writing to ask for your assistance in identifying faculty who may be able to participate in a research study that will be held over the next 2-3 months.

I am working on a dissertation entitled *The Role of Faculty in the Development of a Learning Community Within Online Courses at Jesuit Universities*. The purpose of this research is to explore and describe the experience of faculty who teach students in distance learning courses at Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States.

As the campus representative to the JesuitNET Advisory Board, I am asking you to nominate two faculty members from your institution who may be able to participate in this study. I am asking that they meet the following qualifications:

4. Professors must either be actively teaching one or more distance learning course(s) in the spring, 2010 term, or have taught one or more during the previous 18 months (beginning with August, 2008).
5. Professors must either be actively teaching one or more face-to-face courses housed in a physical classroom in the spring, 2010 term, or have taught one or more during the previous 18 months (beginning with August, 2008).
6. Professors may be either full or part time, but must be employed directly by the institution and report ultimately to academic department chair or dean (as opposed to a university administrator).

From your nomination, I will then invite the faculty members to participate in this qualitative, phenomenological study, which will consist of a 60 minute interview to be held at the convenience of the faculty member over the course of the next 2-3 months. I am ultimately hoping for a sample group of 10-15 professors from Jesuit schools around the country.

Please send the names of the faculty members directly to my attention at josephecklund@creighton.edu. Feel free to contact me at 402.280.5531 if you have any questions.

Thank you in advance for your help!

Joe

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Joseph Ecklund
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Creighton University
Center for Student Success & Retention
Harper Center, 4066
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success.creighton.edu
Appendix B

Electronic Letter of Invitation to Join the Research Group

E-Mail Header: Participation in Doctoral Research Study?

Dear [Nominated Faculty],

My name is Joe Ecklund and I am the Director of the Office of Student Success at Creighton University. I am also a candidate in the Ph.D. program at the University of Toledo and I am writing to ask for your assistance in my doctoral research project, entitled “The Role of Faculty in the Development of a Learning Community Within Online Courses at Jesuit Universities.”

The purpose of this research is to explore and describe the phenomenon of the experience of faculty who teach students in distance learning courses at Jesuit colleges and universities throughout the United States. This qualitative, narrative-based, phenomenological study is framed around four main research questions:

1. How do faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities build a learning community among the students taking an online course?
2. How do faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities modify their teaching when teaching online compared with teaching in a traditional classroom environment?
3. What do faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities identify as the advantages and disadvantages for themselves of this course delivery method?
4. In what ways do faculty who teach online courses in Jesuit colleges and universities feel that online education either supports or detracts from the stated mission and philosophy of Jesuit education?

Your participation is crucial in developing useful knowledge for both scholarly activities and professional practice.

Your name and contact information was given to me by Regina Bennett, your campus representative to the JesuitNet Advisory Board. I am asking you to participate in a phone interview that will be scheduled at your convenience and should last approximately 60 minutes. Your participation in this project is voluntary. The responses you provide will be kept confidential, and you will not be identified in the research findings.

As a participant, you have the right to ask any questions about the study and how the data will be further used. Feel free to direct any formal inquiries to myself at 402.280.5531 (josephecklund@creighton.edu) or Dr. David Meabon, study advisor, at 419.530.2666 (david.meabon@utoledo.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered or to report any concerns about this study, you may contact the University of Toledo Institutional Review Board at 419-280-xxxx.

To accept this offer of participation, simply reply to this e-mail (josephecklund@creighton.edu) or call me at 402.280.5531. I will follow-up this written invitation with a phone call as well to see if you have any questions. Thank you in advance for your help!

Sincerely,

Joseph Ecklund
Director, Office of Student Success
Doctoral Candidate, University of Toledo
Appendix C

Structured Interview Guide

The Role of Faculty in Developing a Learning Community Within Online Courses at Jesuit Universities

(A dissertation proposal submitted by Joseph Ecklund as partial fulfillment of the requirements for The Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education, University of Toledo)

Structured Interview Guide

The following will serve as background information.

1. How long have you worked at your present college or university?
2. How long have you been teaching at the college level?
3. What academic department are you employed in?
4. What is your current academic rank?
5. What is your current course load – and which of these (if any) are distance learning classes?
6. Do you have other university responsibilities outside of teaching?
7. Are you familiar with JesuitNet and have you participated in one of the CADE workshops?
8. Please provide a syllabus for the online course that you are either teaching or have taught in the last 18 months.

Based primarily on the online course you are either teaching or have taught in the last 18 months, and the current courses you teach now in a physical classroom:

1. Why are you teaching this distance learning course?
2. What specific responsibility did you have in the creation and development of the online course content?
3. What do you enjoy about the experience of teaching online?
4. What aspects of teaching online are you dissatisfied with?
5. Within the context of an online learning environment:
   a. Define the term “community”
   b. Describe the community building process
   c. Rate the importance of community building.
6. How would you describe the social presence that has developed in your online classroom and what factors led to its development?
7. In what ways do learning communities develop differently in online courses than in physical classroom courses?
8. What kind of interaction or engagement among the students is required for this distance learning course and what role do you play in facilitating this?
9. In what ways does this distance learning course support or detract from the educational mission of the institution and the Jesuit philosophy of education (as interpreted by the institution)?