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# Online Education for Nontraditional Adult Students: Perceptions and Attitudes of Emergency Services Workers in Asynchronous Learning Environments

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ONLINE EDUCATION FOR NONTRADITIONAL ADULT STUDENTS: PERCEPTIONS  
AND ATTITUDES OF EMERGENCY SERVICES WORKERS IN  
ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

by

R. Jeffery Maxfield

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Education  
(Curriculum and Instruction)

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2008

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## ABSTRACT

Online Education for Nontraditional Adult Students: Perceptions and Attitudes of  
Emergency Services Workers in F Asynchronous Learning Environments

by

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Utah State University, 2008

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The goal of this research was to better understand the lived experiences and perceptions of nontraditional, adult college students in an asynchronous online environment. Contemporary researchers have investigated the differences between online education and the traditional, in-class learning. Most of the work has been done in quantitative methodologies, focusing on the similarities and differences in cognitive achievement. The extant literature is replete with studies and positions claiming little or no difference between the two delivery methods. However, most research is not presented in a theoretical construct; therefore, it is difficult to create a nexus between one study and the next. Investigating the different ways in which students report their experiences and perceptions in the asynchronous, online environment provides a much richer understanding of nontraditional, adult students.

This research used hermeneutic phenomenology, a qualitative methodology to explore and interpret deep human experiences. In other words, this research was conducted to better understand the lived experience of nontraditional students in an asynchronous online learning environment. This understanding was achieved through rigorous analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and journal entries of four nontraditional, adult students enrolled in an online baccalaureate degree program. The purpose of the analysis was to describe the various experiences and perceptions, then group these experiences and perceptions into a logically organized description of the lived experience of adult emergency services students in the asynchronous online environment.

Results revealed that student experience fell into two overarching themes, each with related subthemes. The two identified themes and subthemes are: (a) Theme I: Flexibility, with the subthemes of convenience, self-directedness/self-discipline, and reflectivity; (b) Theme II: Conflict of Values: A Paradox of Learning, with the subthemes of communication/socialization between students, student/instructor interaction, and the students' paradigmatic shifting and conflicted beliefs on learning. A discussion on the relationship of the study results with the constructivist learning theory is presented, as well as the relationship of the results to adult learning theories and the affective domain of learning. A discussion on the study implications regarding asynchronous online delivery and suggestions for further research conclude this work.

(206 pages)

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R. Jeffery Maxfield

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Van Manen (1990) argued that the prescribed method for human science, in contrast to natural science, involved description, interpretations, and self-reflective or critical analysis. In other words, we explain nature, but we must understand human life. This work investigated and interpreted the human experience of the nontraditional, online learner.

The goal of this study was to better understand the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of nontraditional, adult college students in an asynchronous, online environment. This understanding was achieved through rigorous analysis of in-depth, semistructured interviews and the journal entries of nontraditional, adult students enrolled in an online, Emergency Services baccalaureate degree program. The online bachelor's program was offered by "Western University" (pseudonym). The purpose of the analysis was to describe the various experiences and perceptions and then group these experiences and perceptions into a logically organized description of the lived experience of adult emergency services students in the asynchronous online environment.

Since the inception of online learning, researchers have studied and investigated the differences between online (or distance) education and the traditional, in-class learning. Most of the work has been done in quantitative methodologies, focusing on the similarities and differences in the cognitive achievement of students. The extant literature is replete with studies and positions claiming little or no difference between the two delivery methods. In fact, an entire website ([www.nosignificantdifference.org](http://www.nosignificantdifference.org)) has been

developed for the promulgation of data regarding the lack of difference between traditional and online learning. However, most of the research is not presented in a theoretical construct; therefore, it is difficult to create a nexus between one study and the next. Investigating the different ways in which the students report their experiences and perceptions in the asynchronous, online environment provides a much richer understanding of the nontraditional, adult students' experience. Using the assumptions of Knowles' andragogy and the concepts of constructivist theory asserted by Piaget, Vygotsky, and others adds to the understanding of the lived experience of the nontraditional, adult student in the asynchronous, online environment. Smith, Smith, and Boone (2000) offered this need for research at the conclusion of their study on the effectiveness of traditional instructional methods in online learning environments.

Because little research concerning distance education via an online format has been conducted there is a need to continue studies in this area. Based on the results of this study the following areas are suggested for further research: (1) Additional research into the use of traditional instructional methods used in online learning environments and not covered in this study should be investigated. Different forms of instruction such as collaborative learning and independent study are being used to present courses on the Internet. Additional research into the effectiveness of these forms of instruction would be valuable. (2) Research that looks closely at the way students accept or reject the Internet as a medium for learning should be investigated. Student satisfaction with the instruction may be a determining factor in whether or not a course will be accepted. (3) As online learning environments continue to evolve, especially with the rapid growth of technology, they need to be studied. An understanding of these environments can lead to better design of instruction and a better understanding of the learning that occurs when using online learning environments. (4) Many institutions are considering online learning environments as a sole method for the delivery of instruction, eliminating, replacing, or substituting the personal face-to-face contact provided in the traditional classroom. Research is needed to determine the longitudinal effects on learning and understanding that online learning environments will have. (5) Finally, research is needed to identify those characteristics that increase student participation in an online setting. An understanding of the effects that the instruction, the delivery, or the levels of

interactivity have on the overall success of an online learning environment would be most interesting. (p. 45)

### Introduction and Background of Study

With the creation of the Internet and increased societal emphasis on education, the adult learner has become the focus of many institutions of higher education. Berg (2005) stated,

Over the last two decades, higher education in America has witnessed an enormous shift in the demographics of students, while at the same time technology has enabled access to formal higher education. By the late 1990s, national attendance figures showed that 42 percent of the undergraduate and 59 percent of the graduate students attended part-time (UCEA, 1998). Of those part-time students, the largest segment was women thirty-five years and older. Clearly, there has been an important shift in the past twenty-five years in the profile of the average college student, which is changing the American University. In addition to putting pressure on the University for an increasingly vocational and professionally oriented curriculum, this shift is also leading to pressure for the general accommodation of the working adult student through more convenient scheduling and location of courses. (p. 3)

This premise is backed up by research commissioned by the United States Department of Education in the Report of the Web-Based Education Commission to the President and the Congress of the United States (Kerry et al., 2000, p. 4), which stated:

Large numbers of older persons, working adults, and part-time students attended college in 1999. The adult age cohort is the fastest growing segment of students in postsecondary courses. Despite rising enrollment noted above, just 16% of college students fit the traditional 18- to 22-year-old profile, attend full-time, and live on campus.

Andragogical assumption may yet prove to be of great value in distance education, particularly in light of the changing demographics of many, if not most universities and colleges. Adult students seem to have a different learning style requiring

a careful approach when using modern technology (Pelletier, 2005). This may be particularly true for the emergency services worker (police, fire, emergency medical services workers, and emergency managers). Due to the nature of their jobs, previous training, and education experiences, like most adult students, they have an expectation for immediate response and effect.

Adults need to know why they should learn something. Under the standard pedagogical model it is assumed that the student will simply learn what they are told. Adults, however, are accustomed to understanding what they do in life. They want to know the reason they will need to learn something or how it will benefit them. (Fidishun, n.d., p. 2)

Also, most of the students from this group are 25 years of age or older (the nontraditional student profile) and are accustomed to being self-directed (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001). Based on anecdotal evidence, many of the emergency services students in this nontraditional profile may be older, on average, than other groups. Also, recent demographics research (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006), showed that the majority of online students were between 30 and 35 years old. Enticing mature emergency services adults to return to school and retaining them as students may be challenging because of conflicting work schedules, family responsibilities, and possibly fear due to the length of time he or she has been away from formal educational experiences. Online delivery may just prove to be the solution.

### Statement of the Problem

The extant literature is replete with quantitative data comparing and contrasting cognition between traditional face-to-face teaching methods and Internet-based, online

delivery of curriculum. However, very little qualitative data are available with respect to the experiences and perceptions of online students, especially the nontraditional adult population. Therefore, research is needed to explore the lived experience and perceptions of these students in an asynchronous learning environment. Understanding these experiences and perceptions may allow researchers and educators to design, develop, and teach courses that facilitate higher cognitive and affective knowledge acquisition in the fast growing demographic of nontraditional adult students. This may also have impact with the global communities.

There also seems to be little data respective to the affective domain of nontraditional adult students and online education. Krathwhol, Bloom, and Masia (1964), in their extensive work on educational taxonomies, asserted the need to explore the human reaction or response to educational content. This included a range of human responses, including knowing about something, problem solving, evincing an interest in human experiences, having an attitude toward some object or concept, and/or expressing one's feelings and opinions on a variety of subjects. Research is needed to examine the roles and interactions of students and instructor that enhance and/or encourage critical thinking and construction of knowledge (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). For these reasons, and due to an apparent dearth of data in this domain regarding nontraditional adult online learning, research into the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of this portion of a population becomes not only timely, but also relevant.

The use of learning-at-distance models in higher education could be a major factor in motivating an adult student to return to school (Tsai & Chuang, 2005). Since the

disaster of September 11, 2001, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, more emphasis on a requirement of higher education for officers, chief officers, or those who aspire to rise through the ranks, is being exerted throughout the emergency-services field. The job of being a firefighter has become increasingly more professional and technologically advanced, and has evolved with extreme complexity in mitigating strategies and expectations (Childs, 2005). Unfortunately, due to odd work schedules (some of which have 24-hour shifts), attendance in traditionally delivered campus classes is at best extremely difficult, if not impossible, for many of these potential students (Klingonsmith, 2006). Therefore, using distance education, and in particular, asynchronous, online delivery may be a desirable alternative for this demographic.

However, traditional pedagogies may not be effective with this adult population. In fact, andragogy, or “adult learning,” as a means of educational delivery may be a necessity rather than an optional approach. Current learning theories and models have failed to inform or influence most instructional practice, especially that of distance and e-learning (Barclay, 2001). Finding a good method of allowing these students to immediately apply knowledge, while still being able to take responsibility for their own learning, could help create an appealing and effective delivery model. Adult students need to be moved “away from their old habits and into new patterns of learning where they become self-directed, take responsibility for their own learning, and the direction it takes” (Fidishun, n.d., p. 3).

For the nontraditional adult students, such as emergency services workers, online delivery of information, which does not include a way of integrating life experience into



the model, may not be accepted well (Berg, 2005). The initial training and education of the emergency services workers is heavily dependent on memorization of procedures and practices, followed by repetitive psychomotor skills application. The rest of their education is derived through on-the-job experience. This identifies an issue of the lack of research regarding learning styles for adult learners like emergency services workers. “Identifying whether courses and programs are responsive to the learning styles of the emergency responder student is an issue that has not been adequately addressed in either responsible training programs or educational institutions of these students” (Klingonsmith, 2006, p. 15).

Because online technology in higher education is relatively new, research is needed to find the right method and mix of introducing theoretical pedagogies and reflective/experience-based andragogies. Online course delivery using text-based, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has created the need to investigate numerous areas of concern such as (a) the impact, if any, created by a lack of face-to-face contact; (b) the quality of online instruction, and (c) the impact of student achievement and learning attitudes about online instruction (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Vallee (2007), in a phenomenographic study of graduate students, identified five areas or “categories of conception” with online learning. They are stifled learning, convenience and flexibility, changing perspective, personal growth, and changing as a person (pp. 129-149). While his study showed some implicit effects of the affective domain, this was not specifically identified by the researcher, who wrote toward cognitive aspects. Also, this study was specific to graduate students (traditional students)

in a master's degree program. Therefore, conducting a study with nontraditional adult students added to previous research and gave a better understanding of the phenomenon of online learning.

Barab, Thomas, and Merrill (2001) noted a concern for the human or social dimension of online learning environments. They addressed the fact that much is often discussed about the technical components of distance education, but less often discussed is the human or social dimension of these environments. They found that online instruction might foster a reflective and social environment (Merrill, DiSilvestro, & Young, 2003). A need exists to find a way to transform experience(s) into learning.

Adults usually bring a plethora of real-life experiences with them to the classroom, experiences that need to be recognized and integrated into the learning process (Knowles, 1984). Key points of andragogy or adult learning include consideration of the learner's experiences, the importance of the learning environment, the learner's readiness to learn, and the teacher as a facilitator (Brown, 2001). Kolb (1984) proposed a four-stage cycle: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization (theory building) and, (d) active experimentation or application.

Traditionally, research regarding online learning has been quantitative in nature. Most of this research has been targeted toward comparing student cognition in traditional, face-to-face delivery to online learning. Yet, not all research is by nature quantitative.

Krathwohl and colleagues (1964), after many exploratory meetings with college and university examiners, identified divisions within the objectives of education. They

identified them as:

1. *Cognitive*: Objectives that emphasize remembering, recalling or reproducing something that has been believed to be learned. Cognitive objectives also vary from simple recall of material to combining and synthesizing new ideas and/or material.

2. *Affective*: Objectives that emphasize a feeling, an emotion, or acceptance or rejection of material. They further identified these objectives as interests, attitudes, appreciations, values, and emotional sets or biases.

3. *Psychomotor*: Objectives that emphasize motor skills (muscular), manipulation of materials and objects, or some act that requires a neuromuscular coordination.

As stated above, most of the research regarding online learning has centered in the cognitive domain. There exist many comparative studies centering on cognitive results through examination and grades, and the similarities and/or differences between online and traditional face-to-face deliveries. Most of the research finds no significant difference between the traditional face-to-face delivery and online formats. In fact, in some research, online students were found to score higher or receive higher grades than students in traditional programs (Meyer, 2002). Yet, there are far fewer studies regarding the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes or affective domain behaviors in the literature. Most of these deal with traditional student demographics.

When contrasting the cognitive domain with the affective domain, some important distinctions become apparent. The cognitive domain concerns itself with the belief that the student should be able to do a task when requested. The affective domain seems more concerned that the student does do a task when it is appropriate, after

learning that he/she can do it (Krathwohl et al., 1964). Put into simpler terms, the cognitive domain is “can do” while the affective domain is “does do.” However, compartmentalizing these behaviors into cognition and affect is not as easy as it may appear. Rarely is the teacher or curriculum developer intending that one is independent of the other. There is a good deal of research that shows that cognition cannot be completely separated from affect. A more interesting idea is the possibility that one is the effect of the other. There may even be a deeper relationship or effect between cognitive and affective domains.

The authors of this work hold the view that under some conditions the development of cognitive behaviors may actually destroy certain desired affective behaviors and that, instead of a positive relation between growth in cognitive and affective behavior, it is conceivable that there may be an inverse relation between growth in the two domains. For example, it is quite possible that many literature courses at high school and college levels instill knowledge of the history of literature and knowledge of the details of a lower level of interest in, literary works. (Krathwohl et al., 1964, p. 20)

If this is the case, then understanding how students develop in the affective domain may be of significant importance in developing and delivering curricula for use in asynchronous, online environments.

Krathwohl and colleagues (1964) developed an interesting affective domain continuum. It is as follows: (a) the student is aware of a phenomenon, (b) the student is able to perceive it, (c) the student is willing to attend to the phenomenon, (d) the student responds to the phenomenon with a positive feeling, (e) the student goes out of his/her way to respond, (f) the student conceptualizes behaviors and feelings and organizes the conceptions into a structure, and (g) the structure grows in complexity as it becomes his/her life outlook.

If this continuum is correct, then it may be assumed that developing these affective behaviors leads to a greater sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence within the student. Research (Bonk & Wisner, 2000) has shown that students with higher self-efficacy engaged more strategic behaviors and at higher levels than low self-efficacy participants using distance/online learning environments.

Interestingly, there has been little research into the actual experience of online learning (Vallee, 2007), particularly regarding the nontraditional, adult student. This study approaches online learning from adult learning assumptions and from a constructivist viewpoint. Understanding and interpreting the lived experience of nontraditional, adult learners gives a richer and deeper understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of an important and growing demographic within higher education. Using this approach is consistent with the epistemology of hermeneutic phenomenological research methods and provides a much needed addition to the online education research effort.

### Research Question

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of nontraditional, adult emergency services students participating in an asynchronous, online college course, using the lens of constructivism. The research question for this study was: How do nontraditional, adult undergraduate students experience asynchronous, online instruction?

### Outcomes of the Study

This study provides relevant information about the attitudes, expectations, experiences, and needs of the nontraditional, adult student regarding online instruction or in other words, lived experiences of the participants. Understanding the phenomenon is important for helping online course designers, facilitators and instructors to meet the needs of the students, by developing educational models that incorporate the findings of the research data. With increased understanding, educators can expand the research and begin to design curricula, using modern technology that will more closely meet the needs of the student. This can be accomplished while maintaining the highest standards of academic quality/degree integrity and acknowledging the learning inherent in an adult student population (Brown, 2001). Therefore, understanding the lived experiences of nontraditional adult students in an asynchronous, online course adds to the discipline and enhances the learning opportunities for an important population of students and educators.

#### Operational Definition of Terms

*Asynchronous learning:* Any learning event where interaction is delayed over time. This allows the learners to participate according to their schedules and be geographically separate from the instructor. Such learning could be in the form of a correspondence course or electronic learning.

*Distance education:* An educational situation in which the instructor and students are separated by time, location, or both. Education or training courses are delivered to remote locations via synchronous or asynchronous means of instruction, including

written correspondence, text, graphics, audio- and videotape, CD-ROM, online learning, audio- and videoconferencing, interactive TV, and FAX. Distance education does not preclude the use of the traditional classroom. The definition of distance education is broader than and entails the definition of e-learning.

*E-Learning (electronic learning):* A term covering a wide set of applications and processes, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration. It includes delivery of content via Internet, intranet/extranet (LAN/WAN), audio-and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive, TV, CD-ROM, and more.

*Emergency services workers:* Adults at various levels and in various disciplines within the emergency services industry, including firefighters, emergency medical technicians, paramedics, law enforcement, and emergency managers.

*Online learning or online classes:* College classes or courses delivered via the Internet through use of learning platforms, such as Blackboard or WebCT.

*Nontraditional Adult Students (learners):* Students over the age of 25 years who may or may not have some prior higher educational experience and/or may or may not be employed in a career field.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature review for this study was conducted by researching electronic library sources, peer-reviewed education articles, dissertations, and textbooks regarding online instruction, constructivism, adult learning models, andragogy, reflective practice, metacognition, distance education, and learning theories. I determined this to be appropriate for online learning and the theoretical assumptions of constructivism, which is the theoretical lens of this proposed study.

#### Theoretical Framework

Before delving into learning theory, it is necessary to define learning. Learning is best described as, “a persisting change in human performance or performance potential. This means that learners are capable of actions they could not perform before learning occurred and this is true whether or not they actually have an opportunity to exhibit the newly acquired performance” (Driscoll, 2005, p. 9). Learning theory then can be considered to be a set of concepts of psychological variables (such as memory) linking the observable changes in performance or performance potential to what is theorized to bring about the changes (Driscoll).

Throughout history, there have been many psychological epistemologies of how learning is accomplished. Most of these have become known as the “isms” of learning. My intent is to not delve into each of these, but to identify them and then relate what is relevant to the principles of adult learning. These epistemological concepts are:



empiricism, nativism, rationalism, skepticism, realism, idealism, pragmatism, objectivism, and interpretivism (Driscoll, 2005). From these sprang five traditional theories of learning: behaviorism, cognitivism, humanism, social learning theory and constructivism (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). It is the last term, constructivism, that I believe has the best ties to adult learning. I believe this based upon my experience as a student and as a teacher. As a lifelong learner, I have found I am most effective as a student by applying new knowledge and building upon my experience and beliefs (my cognitive schema). Many of my students feel the same way. While this may be anecdotal, I feel that it has relevance for this study and may provide some much needed data regarding the learning of nontraditional adult students.

Constructivism basically holds that learning is a process of “constructing” meaning from one’s experience (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Some of the more well-known constructivists like Piaget and Vygotsky, had different perspectives, but based their works on the premise that experience had a major role in learning. Piaget is often cited and considered one of the pioneers in constructivism. His position theorized two types of constructivism: personal (cognitive) and social. Personal constructivism draws heavily upon an individual’s adaptation to his/her environment (or, more physical in nature). The social constructivist’s view posits that knowledge is constructed through conversations or activities or in other words socially sharing problems or tasks (Merriam & Caffarella). For the adult learner, the constructivist view has relevant impact.

Candy (1991, p. 275), writing from a predominantly social constructivist perspective discusses how this view translates to adult education. “Becoming knowledgeable involves acquiring the symbolic meaning structures appropriate to one’s society, and, since knowledge is socially constructed, individual members

of society may be able to add to or change the general pool of knowledge. Teaching and learning, *especially for adults*, is a process of negotiation, involving the construction and exchange of personally relevant and viable meanings.” [emphasis added] (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 262)

Throughout the 1990s, constructivist research increased drastically. Educational literature was replete with research and articles on the theory of constructivism. One of those areas, online education, has received increased attention (Vallee, 2007). Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997) focused on the cognitive process of reflection, which appears to be a major component of most online courses. In a study of students in an asynchronous course, (Zieghan 2001) results showed that the asynchronous environment was essential to critical reflections. He also found that due to the written nature of the course, students were aided in understanding the thoughts and feelings of other students. These findings fit the theoretical construct of Mezirow, allowing that it is possible to gauge the subjective experience of students (Vallee) or their ability to construct meaning from their learning experience.

I have chosen constructivism as the theoretical framework for this study. Reviewing the literature reinforces my anecdotal experience as a student and instructor regarding the construction of learning through experience and paradigmatic orientation. Constructivism also seems to be at the core of andragogical learning assumptions (Knowles, 1970). Therefore, I feel it is relevant to use constructivism as the theoretical framework for this work.

### Andragogy

According to Knowles (1973), considered by many as a leading authority on adult

education, the term “andragogy” was first coined by Alexander Kapp, a German grammar teacher, in 1833. This concept had been evolving throughout Europe for some time and was based on the teaching philosophy of Plato. Knowles further presented that Ger van Enckvort, a Dutch adult educator, espoused, “[A]dult education required special teachers, special methods, and a special philosophy” (p. 49). Knowles went on to explain,

A relatively new adult educational theory is going under the label “andragogy,” derived from the stem of the Greek work “aner,” meaning man (as distinguished from boy). This is not a new word; it was used in Germany as early as 1833 and has been used extensively during the last decade in Yugoslavia, France, and Holland (in 1970 the University of Amsterdam established a Department of Pedagogical and Andragogical Sciences). But the theory and technology it is coming to identify are new. (p. 54)

Knowles (1970) hypothesized some assumptions about andragogy differentiating it from pedagogy: (a) changes in self-concept—the assumption that as a person grows and matures his self-concept moves from one of total dependency to one of increasing self-directedness; (b) the role of experience—the assumption that as an individual matures he accumulates an expanding reservoir of experience that causes him to become an increasingly rich resource for learning, and a broad base to which to relate new learning; (c) readiness to learn—the assumption that as an individual matures, his readiness to learn is decreasingly the product of his biological development and academic pressure and is increasingly the product of the tasks required for his evolving social roles; (d) orientation to learning—the assumption that children have been conditioned to have a subject-centered orientation to learning, while adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning; and (e) motivation to learn is intrinsic rather than extrinsic.

One andragogical assumption is that as a person matures, he or she develops a

more independent self-concept, thereby becoming more self-directed (Merriam, 2003). Thirty years of research in the United States and Europe has been undertaken to verify widespread presence among adults and with developing assessment instruments to measure the extent of self-directedness. More recent theories about adult learning are based on the assumption that the adult learner is self-directed, organizing educational opportunities outside of formal setting (Brown, 2001). By employing a self-directed, independent approach to learning, students gain far more knowledge and experience than expected. The opportunity to learn independently removes the artificial boundaries that define the prescribed amount of learning that should occur. Students are very motivated and frequently go beyond required assignments (Ellis, 2002).

To have learning be self-directed may be misleading and unacceptable to some. Therefore, using the terminology of “collaborative direction” may be more appealing and acceptable. Garrison (1997) asserted that collaborative control results in more effective self-monitoring, leading to improved performance.

More recent theories about adult learning are based on the assumption that the adult learner is self-directed, organizing educational opportunities outside of formal settings. Optimal learning takes place when educational models “include the learner’s experiences, the importance of the learning environment, the learner’s readiness to learn, and the teacher as a facilitator” (Brown, 2001).

### *A Critical Look at Andragogy*

When Malcolm Knowles first introduced the concept of andragogy, many educators saw it as the panacea for adult education issues. However, there have been as

many, if not more, opponents as proponents. Much of the controversy arises due to differing opinions about the philosophy, classification, and values attached to adult education (Davenport & Davenport, 1985). Many have viewed education as a fundamental process shared by adults and children regardless of their differences. Holmes and Abbingon-Cooper (2000) discovered that other researchers found difficulty in applying the term “theory” to andragogy.

Knowles, himself (1989), may have put the debate about andragogy as a theory to rest. In his book *The Making of an Adult Educator*, he wrote that he prefers to think of andragogy “as a model of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory” (p. 112).

With regard to classification, some educators want to use the term pedagogy for both adult and child learning, but distinguish them as child pedagogy and adult pedagogy, thereby recognizing existential differences. Rachal (1983) proposed that the terms pedagogy and andragogy had inherent problems and thought they should be identified as self-directed and teacher-directed learning. He felt that these terms were more self-explanatory and not mutually exclusive to one group or clientele.

In spite of all of the debate among the proponents and opponents of andragogy, its mere introduction has been the cause of increased dialogue, research, inquiry, scholarly work, and interest in adult learning. Increased interest should be seen as a positive development. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) asserted: “Despite these rather grim predictions of andragogy’s demise, practitioners who work with adult learners continue to find Knowles’ andragogy, with its characteristics of adult learners, to be a helpful rubric

for better understanding adults as learners (pp. 278-279).

## Distance and Web-based Education

### *History and Research*

Distance education is not a new phenomenon as many may think. There have been various forms of distance learning for decades (Meyer, 2002). In the 1880s, access to institutions of higher education was limited to geographic proximity. The practice of learning by correspondence actually began in the early 1890s when Penn State University took advantage of Rural Free Delivery (Banas & Emory, 1998). Learning by correspondence and other forms of distance education have been part of many institutions since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other forms of distance education were subsequently created as technology increased. Television took on a role in delivery of education as a passive, one-way medium for presenting static information, but eventually led to the use of satellite technology for the transmission of one-way broadcasting to remote off-campus locations. Later, the use of telephone lines allowed for two-way communications while using satellite feeds. Progression to the use of microwave and/or fiber optics enhanced learning by allowing for real-time video and audio communication between faculty and students. The use of Internet voice-over protocol for synchronous delivery and the web-based asynchronous delivery are now becoming more prevalent in the distance education arena (Pelletier, 2005). While distance education is still considered by many to be nontraditional, it is certainly becoming more main stream (Banas & Emory).

With the advent of the Internet and the Worldwide Web came the growing idea

that education need not be bound by time or space. While the idea took some time to take hold, it has since created a boom (Meyer, 2002). It is not uncommon to search the offerings of many colleges and universities and find courses, if not entire degree programs offered in the online format. Many states have recognized this and provided support for distance education as a means of reaching rural residents and working adults. The Western Governors University is a good example of this movement (Meyer).

The growth of online courses has consequently attracted a new and different student base outside of the current on-campus programs (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004). It is estimated that about 83% of online students are employed and most likely would not be able to attend traditional classes (Thomas, 2001). Because of the current pace of technological advances, it is becoming more necessary for adults to upgrade their skills and marketability to remain competitive (Devi, 2002). This certainly appears to be true for the emergency services workers as well. With the increased complexity of their jobs and the skills necessary for advancement changing with the job market, as previously identified, education becomes extremely important.

Distance education programs have consequently taken on a major role in adult education (Pellitier, 2005). Some of the more recent literature has shown that the average age of the online student is 30 years of age as opposed to 24 years of age for the face-to-face student. It also suggested that online students were more serious about their education, more worried, more accepting, more conservative, more self-controlling than the typical face-to-face students (Bocchi et al., 2004).

With the increased use of the Internet for education, also came increased inquiry

to the effectiveness of online programs when compared to traditional learning.

Technology forces us to confront a set of issues that seem mutually exclusive: the “high-touch” (almost handcrafted) traditions that have long held an esteemed (if increasingly mythical) place in academic work versus a high-tech future likely laden with a rich array of IT resources. Some among us believe the high-tech-future will save higher education; others are certain it will destroy, or at least undermine, traditional experiences and relationships. In between reside the vast majority of faculty and administrators who struggle to assess the appropriate role of technology in their scholarly work, classrooms, and in institutional priorities—struggling to move the technological cup to lip. (Green, 1999)

Much of the research comparing the quality of online and traditional learning indicates no significant difference exists (Banas & Emory, 1998). These studies however, while mostly quantitative in nature, have focused on the cognitive aspects and not on the experience itself and/or the impact on the affective domain. Research into these areas is needed to add to the quantitative data to get a more holistic view of the distance education phenomenon and its potential benefits or detractions.

The military, and in particular the U.S. Army, have been very interested in distance learning for some time. In research commissioned by the U.S. Army, Bonk and Wisner (2000) asserted,

Many educational technologies are advocating the need to shift from instructor-centered to student-centered approaches (Braacewell, Breuleux, Laferriere, Benoit & Abdous, 1998; Hannafin & Land, 1997; Harasim, 1990). Learner-centered pedagogy asks what students need to learn, what their learning preferences are, and what is meaningful to them. Web-based instruction provides opportunities for learning materials, tasks, and activities to fit individual learning styles and preferences. Networks of learning information, such as digital libraries, are available to peak student interests and ideas. Such environments also provide access to more authentic learning communities than typically found in conventional educational environments. (p. 8)

Learner-centric pedagogy and Internet-based education tend to support and blend well with the concept of adult learning or andragogical assumptions. Adult learners tend



to be self-directed and want learning opportunities that allow them to use their experience (Knowles, 1970). Self-directed learners want meaningful experiences with education and respond well to practices that facilitate individual learning (Bonk & Wisner, 2000). Adult learning profiles are supported by providing meaningful experience in relevant and problem-based formats.

The role of the instructor in such an environment is to facilitate student information generation and sharing, not to control the delivery and pace of it. A key goal of team-based learning activities is to apply expertise and experience of the participants to a group problem-solving situation or research project that helps the participant accomplish something they could not achieve individually. (Bonk & Wisner, 2000, p. 10)

Unfortunately, research in distance education has been lacking. What has been done in research regarding distance education, and this is true for online instruction as well, has been comparative studies without the discussion of theoretical foundations of the field. Quasi-experimental research methods have dominated the field due to the inability to maintain control groups with integrity, usually because of pre-selected classrooms (Saba, 2000). The qualitative aspects of distance learning, for the most part have only recently been of concern to researchers.

In recent years, researchers have moved beyond experimental comparative studies and have introduced new methods, such as discourse analysis, and in-depth interview of learners. These new methods not only afford a theoretical framework to these studies, something that was lacking in atheoretical comparative studies, they also bypass many methodological and theoretical limitations of the physical science view of distance education. (Saba, 2000, p. 7)

Another area of concern to educators and researchers is the quality of online education. There appears to be a need to develop new criteria for measuring the quality of online offerings. Input measures like faculty qualifications, student-learning styles,

understanding of how the Internet works, are areas that can help define quality (Meyer, 2002). Based on the work of Massy, Meyer identified seven principles to assure quality in online learning: (a) define quality in terms of outcomes, (b) focus on the process of teaching and learning, (c) strive for curricular coherence, (d) work collaboratively to achieve mutual involvement and support, (e) base decisions on facts, whenever possible, (f) minimize controllable quality variations, and (g) make continuous quality improvement a top priority (pp. 91-92).

One thing appears to be readily apparent—the Internet and web-based educational opportunities are changing education. The changes are creating fervor in both proponents and critics regarding the impact to institutions and to academia as a whole, and if not addressed thoughtfully may create a risk of becoming reactive instead of proactive.

Distance learning is changing the educational environment. Since there are now fewer traditional students taking classes in a traditional format, the educational environment has changed significantly enough for educational institutions to at least investigate the opportunities of distance learning. Public Administration education is a component of this environment and must adapt to this change or run the risk of trying to respond retroactively rather than proactively. The outdated view of Public Administration education as a discipline delivered in classrooms by universities to M.P.A. candidates is as useless as teaching M.B.A. students to use an abacus. (Banas & Emory, 1998)

Continued research is necessary to understand the potential of the online form of distance learning and to be prepared for the near and distant future.

New methodologies are enabling observers to research into the learning process as students communicate online. The potential benefits are only just being revealed. This research illustrates that online investigations can provide the information required to support new pedagogic understandings of learning and teaching. (Browne, 2003)

Social interaction with the instructor and other students is particularly important when delivering courses via technology, such as the Internet (Ryan, Carlton, & Ali, 2004). One problem that may have surfaced with the introduction of technology is that developers have concentrated more on the medium itself and less upon the content and methodology of their instruction. The danger in the rapid introduction of electronic delivery is that the focus may be on the delivery mechanism, rather than on the quality of the learning experience (O’Keefe & McGrath, 2000). Research has generally focused on technological aspects, with relatively few academic studies or articles written on the human and social aspects of teaching and learning-at-distance. Recent research indicates that quality of learning depends on the design of instruction and that learning transfer and retention are most strongly impacted by the frequency and quality of learner-centered practice activities and instructor feedback. Therefore, the instructional design process has the biggest effect on final course/program quality—not the use of technology itself (Barclay, 2001).

Not much information is available regarding the affective characteristics of the use of the Internet and other media for distance education. Barclay (2001) stated that a limited amount of research has been performed on the more affective aspects of distance education. Barclay also suggested that research is needed to better understand human social learning issues associated with technology as well as specific skills, practices, and attitudes that asynchronous online instructors need to be successful.

Driscoll (2005) made a better case by suggesting,

An advantage of collaborative technologies that are Web-based is that they can provide problem scaffolding (Hannafin et al., 1997) in the form of virtual access

to knowledge experts and on-line support to make thinking visible. In this way, students can identify learning goals, conduct investigations, keep track of their progress, think about their ideas and those of others, and communicate with others within and outside the immediate learning community. (p. 404)

### Metacognition

One method of enhancing learning with the adult learner is to incorporate metacognitive practices into instruction. Metacognition has been simply defined as “thinking about thinking.” It is not that simple, but gives a brief view into the process of metacognition.

Cognition is the gaining of knowledge. For example, if a student is taught that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , then he or she has learned the answer to the problem and will be able to get it correct the next time. Metacognition, however, is the thought process (usually reflective) on how the cognition took place. If the student were to think about how he/she became cognizant of the answer, he/she may realize that a mental picture of two objects being added to two other objects was used, thereby learning that visualization is a metacognitive activity. Livingston (1997) reported that:

Metacognition, or the ability to control one's cognitive processes (self-regulation), has been linked to intelligence (Borkowski et al., 1987; Brown, 1987; Sternberg, 1984, 1986a, 1986b). Sternberg refers to these executive processes as "metacomponents" in his triarchic theory of intelligence (Sternberg, 1984, 1986a, 1986b). Metacomponents are executive processes that control other cognitive components as well as receive feedback from these components. According to Sternberg, metacomponents are responsible for "figuring out how to do a particular task or set of tasks, and then making sure that the task or set of tasks are done correctly" (Sternberg, 1986b, p. 24). These executive processes involve planning, evaluating and monitoring problem-solving activities. Sternberg maintains that the ability to appropriately allocate cognitive resources, such as deciding how and when a given task should be accomplished, is central to intelligence. (pp. 2-3)

By providing activities that allow the adult to think about, plan, implement and succeed, metacognitive awareness assists the student in learning. In other words, knowing how one thinks about and processes information can assist in the learning process for other problems or issues that arise. One way of incorporating metacognition into a learning experience is by having the student keep a journal of how he/she went about solving problems.

Another method for which journaling can be a great assistance is self-questioning.

Livingston (1997) posited:

Metacognitive experiences involve the use of metacognitive strategies or metacognitive regulation (Brown, 1987). Metacognitive strategies are sequential processes that one uses to control cognitive activities, and to ensure that a cognitive goal (e.g., understanding a text) has been met. These processes help to regulate and oversee learning, and consist of planning and monitoring cognitive activities, as well as checking the outcomes of those activities. For example, after reading a paragraph in a text a learner may question herself about the concepts discussed in the paragraph. Her cognitive goal is to understand the text. Self-questioning is a common metacognitive comprehension monitoring strategy. If she finds that she cannot answer her own questions, or that she does not understand the material discussed, she must then determine what needs to be done to ensure that she meets the cognitive goal of understanding the text. She may decide to go back and re-read the paragraph with the goal of being able to answer the questions she had generated. If, after re-reading through the text she can now answer the questions, she may determine that she understands the material. Thus, the metacognitive strategy of self-questioning is used to ensure that the cognitive goal of comprehension is met. (pp. 1-2)

Metacognition is applicable to the adult learner. After reflecting on his/her vast reservoir of experience, the adult learner if given the right instructions and tools, can understand his/her unique learning process. Metacognition enhances learning and gives the adult learner a tool(s) to use in further life-long learning.

Researchers and educators have been exploring reflective practice for a long time. Thinking about one's cognition can be traced back to the times of Plato and Aristotle. In more recent times there has been extensive work in reflective practice by some noted researchers.

According to Dewey (1933), the ultimate challenge is how "shall we treat subject matter...so that it will rank as material of reflective inquiry, not as ready-made pabulum to be accepted and swallowed as if it were something bought at a shop" (p. 257). In contrast to the spontaneous verbal communication of face-to-face learning contexts, the asynchronous and largely written communication of asynchronous online learning would appear to provide the conditions that encourage if not require reflections. In addition to providing time to reflect, the permanent and precise nature of written communication also allows if not requires reflections to interpret and construct meaning. (Garrison, 2003, p. 51)

British researcher and educator, Peter Jarvis, developed a theory about the process of learning through social experience and reflectivity. The premise of Jarvis' learning process model is based on the assumption that all adults have experiences; some are good, some bad. Many experiences, however, may be so rote or routine that a person gains nothing from them. The learning process then calls for an experience out of the "norm," which elicits a response at a different level than would be typically done. In other words, the experience requires some reflective action. Reflection is the heart of Jarvis' model.

Merriam and Cafferella (1999) present that Jarvis posited from an experience, there are nine different routes or responses a person can make.

1. Presumption—mechanical response or a presumption that what has previously worked will work again.
2. Nonconsideration—too preoccupied with something else to even consider the experience.
3. Rejection—a conscious choice to reject the opportunity to learn.

4. Preconscious—a person unconsciously internalizes something.
5. Practice—practice a new skill until it is learned.
6. Memorization—acquire information with which they have been presented and learn it so it can be reproduced at a later time.
7. Contemplation—thinking about what is being learned.
8. Reflective practice—similar to problem solving.
9. Experimental learning—actually experimenting on one’s environment. (p. 284)

The first three responses (presumption, nonconsideration, and rejection) are choices in which no learning takes place. In the second group of three, preconscious, practice, and memorization (which Jarvis considers nonreflective) a small amount of learning will occur. The final group of three, contemplation, reflective practice, and experimental learning are considered choices of reflective learning. Jarvis later shared how he developed an interest in reflective practice and credits the work of Donald Schön.

Reflective practice found its way into the educational vocabulary with the publication of Schön’s *Reflective Practitioner* (1983), a book that has changed the way many people think about their practice and has led to many innovations in teaching and research. At the same time, my own very early experience with long evaluative reports written by the students about their own practice was the time in my own academic career when I began to question the traditional relationship between practice and theory. This eventually led to my writing *The Practitioner Researcher* (Jarvis, 1999), in which I tried to work out something more about this relationship—but this happened only after I had begun to get students to use learning journals in their own doctoral research. (Jarvis, 2001, p. 80)

As Jarvis pointed out, Donald Schön added to, or as some would assert, created this field of study with his book, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). His notions of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are central to this effort. In fact, he related directly to teacher reflection in a presentation at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association (1997),

These explanations give the teacher the knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods, the ability of inventing new methods and, above all, not a blind adherence to ONE method but the conviction that all methods are one-sided, and that the best method would be the one that would answer best to all the possible difficulties incurred by a pupil. That is, not a method, but an art and a talent. And this is teaching in the form of reflection-in-action. It involves a surprise, a response to surprise by thought turning back on itself, thinking what we're doing as we do it, setting the problem of the situation anew, conducting an action experiment on the spot by which we seek to solve the new problems we've set, an experiment in which we test both our new way of seeing the situation, and also try to change that situation for the better. (Schön, 1997)

Schön (1983) also asserted that there is a sense of artistry in the function of a reflective practitioner,

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (p. 68)

With this assertion, Schön looked at an alternative epistemology of practice where knowledge from practice may be understood as artful doing (Usher, Bryant, Routledge, & Johnson, 1997). Basically, he believes artistry is an exercise of intelligence or a kind of knowing. In other words, we appreciate and understand our experiences; we become connoisseurs. From this we can make a concrete link to the works of Elliot Eisner.

One of Eisner's contributions to education and research is the way in which he made the case of concern for connoisseurship and criticism. "Connoisseurship is the art of appreciation. It can be displayed in any realm in which the character, import, or value of objects, situations, and performances is distributed and variable, including educational practice" (Eisner 1998, p. 63). Connoisseurship comes from the Latin word *cognoscere*, which means to know (Eisner, p. 6). Connoisseurship really means to "see" not just to



“look at.” To be able to do this implies that one must appreciate different experiences, situations and/or dimensions, as well as how or if they relate to each other.

However, good students, educators, and researchers need to be more than just connoisseurs; they need to be critics, too. The practice of connoisseurship provides subject matter for the critic. Criticism can be viewed as helping someone see the qualities of something. Eisner (1998) said, “Effective criticism functions as the midwife to perception. It helps it come into being, then later refines it and helps it to become more acute” (p. 6). While connoisseurship can be considered a private matter, criticism needs to be made public. In that way, educators and students can help each other discover truth.

One effective way of incorporating andragogical assumptions and adult learning into online education may be the use of reflective and/or reflexive projects. Willis (1993) claimed that distance education can be equally effective if the distance educator puts adequate preparation into understanding the needs of the student and adapting the instruction accordingly. Reflection is also an important consideration regarding constructivism and the online delivery, as previously discussed.

### Affective Domain

David Krathwohl, a peer and coresearcher of Benjamin Bloom, has made some notable contributions regarding affective learning to the field of educational psychology. Krathwohl is a co-author of *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goal: Handbook I* (Krathwohl et al., 1964), which introduced the widely recognized “Bloom’s Taxonomy.”

Krathwohl’s affective domain taxonomy is a highly recognized and cited source

of the affective taxonomies. The affective domain deals in the realm of behaviors and attitudes or personal acceptance of something to the point of making it a part of the person. “The taxonomy is ordered according to the principle of internalization. Internalization refers to the process whereby a person’s affect toward an object passes from a general awareness level to a point where the affect is ‘internalized’ and consistently guides or controls the person’s behavior” (Seels & Glasgow, 1990, p. 28). Affective learning is demonstrated by the behaviors or behavior modification of learners (Krathwohl et al., 1964). This is shown by demonstration of attitudes of awareness, interest, concern, attention, responsibility, the ability to listen and respond appropriately, and the ability to demonstrate characteristics of appropriate values. Hence, Krathwohl and colleagues asserted an ordered taxonomy for the affective domain,

1. Receiving—being aware of or sensitive to the existence of ideas, material, or phenomena and being willing to tolerate them.
2. Responding—committed in some small measure to the ideas, materials, or phenomena by actively responding to them.
3. Valuing—willing to be perceived by others as valuing certain ideas, materials, or phenomena.
4. Organization—relating the value to those already held and bringing it into a harmonious and internally consistent philosophy.
5. Characterization by value or value set—acting consistently in accordance with the values he or she has internalized. (p. 37)

### Technology and Curriculum

Transforming experience into learning is critical to adult education. Designers and facilitators of learning must move away from context heavy classes, guiding the learner in an environment supportive of learning and development. Learning from experience

requires both reflection and reflexivity (Brown, 2001). However, it is clear that andragogy and Malcolm Knowles have brought considerable attention to the adult education field as a separate field during the past three decades. Applied correctly, the andragogical approach to teaching and learning in the hands of a skilled facilitator can make a positive impact on the adult learner (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990).

By employing a self-directed, independent approach to learning, students gain far more knowledge and experience than expected. The opportunity to learn independently removes the artificial boundaries that define the prescribed amount of learning that should occur. Students are very motivated and frequently go beyond required assignments (Ellis, 2002).

One problem that may have surfaced with the introduction of technology is that developers have concentrated more on the medium itself and less upon the content and methodology of their instruction. The danger in the rapid introduction of electronic delivery is that the focus may be on the delivery mechanism, rather than on the quality of the learning experience (O'Keefe & McGrath, 2000). Research has generally focused on technological aspects, with relatively few academic studies or articles written on the human and social aspects of teaching and learning-at-distance. Recent research indicates that quality of learning depends on the design of instruction and that learning transfer and retention are most strongly impacted by the frequency and quality of learner-centered practice activities. Therefore, the instructional design process has the biggest effect on final course/program quality—not the use of technology itself (Barclay, 2001).

Our educational system is rapidly changing and technology is also constantly

changing. So, for this marriage to work, distance learning must be dynamic. Distance education may change, even restructure education, but the distance learner must receive a complete, satisfying and acceptable experience as a traditional learner. If distance education is to be a successful and mainstream approach, then it is imperative that distance education systems be designed to permit similar learning experiences for distant and local students (McCall, n. d.). For the above-mentioned reasons, this may be critical for emergency services students.

Reviewing the available literature has shown a dearth of meaningful data on affective impact regarding online learning for nontraditional adult students and has demonstrated a need for further research into how to make online instruction interesting, relevant, and appropriate for the nontraditional, adult student population. The field of e-learning is new and will continue to substantially grow for the next few years. A strong foundational base of knowledge that helps instructors develop and deliver successful learning experiences for all learning-at-distance participants is imperative (Barclay, 2001).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Design

The review of the literature led to the research question: How do nontraditional, adult undergraduate students experience asynchronous, online instruction? A qualitative study is most appropriate to explore this question. Qualitative research is an inquiry process that explores a human or social problem.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology used to explore and interpret deep human experiences. “[A] phenomenological study describes the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). A phenomenological study becomes hermeneutic when its method is viewed to be interpretive and not just descriptive. Since this study explored the lived experiences of nontraditional, adult emergency services students and how the experiences fit into adult learning, a hermeneutic phenomenological design seemed most appropriate.

#### History of Phenomenology

Phenomenology began in the mid 1890s from the philosophical reflections of Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher. For Husserl, phenomenology was,

...the reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. Phenomenology takes the intuitive experience of phenomena (what presents itself to us in phenomenological reflexion) as its starting point and tries to extract from it the essential features of experiences and

the essence of what we experience. When generalized to the essential features of any possible experience, this has been called "*transcendental phenomenology*". Husserl's view was based on aspects of the work of Franz Brentano and was developed further by philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand and Emmanuel Levinas (Wikipedia, 2008).

Some time before or around World War I, phenomenology spread to other countries like Japan, Russia, and Spain and moved in to the realm of psychiatry as well. A larger expansion of phenomenology happened in the 1920s, as its use spread across parts of Europe, the United States, and Australia. After World War II, phenomenology had spread throughout most of the world and was used for research in diverse disciplines like ecology, ethnicity, dance, geography, law, nursing, and medicine.

Because of its use of reflective, evidential, and descriptive methods, phenomenology is sometimes referred to as descriptive phenomenology. From this description, however, four branches have evolved as the methodology has grown. The following descriptions downloaded from the Phenomenology Center web page (2005), outline the branches and their respective descriptions:

- (1) *Realistic phenomenology* emphasizes the search for the universal essences of various sorts of matters, including human actions, motives, and selves. Within this tendency, Adolf Reinach added philosophy of law to the phenomenological agenda; Max Scheler added ethics, value theory, religion, and philosophical anthropology; Edith Stein added philosophy of the human sciences and has been recently recognized for work on gender; and Roman Ingarden added aesthetics, architecture, music, literature, and film.

Alexander Pfänder, Herbert Spiegelberg, and now Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith have been the leaders of the successive generations of this tendency, which flourished in Germany through the 1920s, but also continues today.

- (2) *Constitutive phenomenology's* founding text is Husserl's *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie I* of 1913. This work extends Husserl's scope to include philosophy of the natural sciences, which has been continued in later generations by Oskar Becker, Aron Gurwitsch, and Elisabeth Ströker, but it is chiefly devoted to reflections on phenomenological

method, above all the method of transcendental phenomenological epochê and reduction.

This procedure involves suspending acceptance of the pre-given status of conscious life as something that exists in the world and is performed in order to secure an ultimate intersubjective grounding for the world and the positive sciences of it. Use of this method places constitutive phenomenology in the modern tradition that goes back at least to Kant, and also characterizes the rest of Husserl's work.

Besides those mentioned, Alfred Schutz, J.N. Mohanty, Thomas M. Seebohm, and Robert Sokolowski have both criticized and continued constitutive phenomenology.

(3) *Existential phenomenology* is often traced back to Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* of 1927, the project of which was actually to use an analysis of human being as a means to a fundamental ontology that went beyond the regional ontologies described by Husserl. Hannah Arendt, influenced by Karl Jaspers (as was Heidegger), seems to have been the first existential phenomenologist after Heidegger. It is also arguable that existentialist phenomenology appeared in Japan with Miki Kyoshi and Kuki Shuzou's early work in the late twenties. However, this third aspect and phase in the tradition of the movement took place chiefly in France. The early Emmanuel Levinas interpreted Husserl and Heidegger together and helped introduce phenomenology into France. This period included Gabriel Marcel and was led in the 1940s and 1950s by Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

This third tendency is concerned with topics such as action, conflict, desire, finitude, oppression, and death. Arendt contributed to political theory and the problematics of ethnicity, Beauvoir raised the issue of gender and old age, Merleau-Ponty creatively continued the appropriation of Gestalt psychology in his descriptions of perception and the lived body, and Sartre focused on freedom and literature.

Existential phenomenology has recently been continued by such figures as John Compton, Michel Henry, Maurice Natanson, and Bernhard Waldenfels.

(4) *Hermeneutical phenomenology* chiefly stems from the method set forth in Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, according to which human existence is interpretative. The first manifestation of this fourth tendency is Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Platons dialektische Ethik* (1931), and it reemerged after Germany's National-Socialist period with his *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). Other leaders include Paul Ricoeur, Patrick Heelan, Don Ihde, Graeme Nicholson, Joseph J. Kockelmans, Calvin O. Schrag, Gianni Vattimo, and

Carlo Sini.

The issues addressed in hermeneutical phenomenology include simply all of those that were added to the agenda in the previous tendencies and stages. What is different is the emphasis on hermeneutics or the method of interpretation. This tendency has also included much scholarship on the history of philosophy and has had extensive influence on the human sciences.

Phenomenological studies are based in psychology and have been addressed by many writers and philosophers. However, the researcher is expected to use these as guidelines, while developing studies suited to understanding the particular experience or phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998). Husserl (1927) described the use of phenomenology as reflection on psychic life.

Through reflection, instead of grasping simply the matter straight-out—the values, goals, and instrumentalities—we grasp the corresponding subjective experiences in which we become “conscious” of them, in which (in the broadest sense) they “appear.” For this reason, they are called “phenomena,” and their most general essential character is to exist as the “consciousness-of” or “appearance-of” the specific things, thoughts (judged state of affairs, grounds, conclusions), plans, decisions, hopes, and so forth.

Phenomenology is theoretical in its orientation, but it does not make deductions from propositions that can be tested empirically. It rather demonstrates its premises through descriptive analyses. Through its practice, audiences gain an understanding of how the phenomena of human perception are experienced as part of the world (Orleans, n. d.). Using this history and descriptive explanation of the field as a process of understanding, and also because of its influence on the human sciences, I chose to do an interpretive or hermeneutical phenomenology because this study looked at the lived experiences of nontraditional adult students participating in an asynchronous, online learning environment; therefore, it was a human study and hence, a hermeneutic phenomenological study was appropriate.



## Context of Research

The context of how this study was conducted is important to understand. Without the context, a true picture of the lived experience, perceptions and attitudes of the nontraditional adult students would not be complete. The following section outlines the history and views of the researcher, a description of the online bachelor's program the students were enrolled in and a small biographical look at the students of the study.

### *Researcher*

In an effort of full disclosure, it is fitting to identify my frame of reference. As a researcher, I have great interest in this study topic for a few important reasons. First of all, I am currently a doctoral student who has had limited experiences with online courses, some of which were good, but the majority not acceptable. I am not sure if it was because of my unrealistic expectations or a lack of expertise and experience on the part of the instructor(s) and students, but I have found much of the curriculum and approach of the online courses to be lacking. This has led me to believe that the online experience may not be an appropriate or effective medium for adult education. That being said however, one of the best classes in my doctoral work was an online class; it actually opened my eyes to the possibility of online delivery as an appropriate delivery method and hence, the relevance of this study.

Next, I am an instructor (Associate Professor) for some traditional students and a large number of nontraditional adult students (mostly emergency services workers) at the university level. I consider myself to be a more traditional instructor, in that I am not

convinced that the online environment is as effective or affective as the historical face-to-face method of instruction. I have enjoyed teaching for many years and have used the classroom to facilitate the learning of others, mostly through the Socratic method of instruction. As can be expected, this process or method has heretofore been best delivered using a face-to-face method and concurrent dialog between the students and with the instructor.

However, technology and the needs of the students have necessitated looking at different and nontraditional ways of facilitating learning. I use the word facilitating, because I believe much like Malcolm Knowles, that the role of the instructor of adult learners is to facilitate their learning. In other words, my teaching philosophy is more learner centric. I do not believe that I, as the instructor, am imbued with all of the answers and/or ontological knowledge and must impart or inculcate it into the student so she/he can accept and incorporate my prescriptions. I have resented that attitude in my educational experience and feel that my students do as well. As was stated earlier, I tend to agree with the constructivist theory of learning and see my role as the instructor as the instrument of guidance or as a facilitator for the students to construct meaning from their perspectives, experience, and paradigms. Hence, I sense the need to explore changes in how the academy educates adult students.

Many of the classes offered in my university department's baccalaureate program are in asynchronous, online environments, to meet the needs of the students. I recognize this is probably going to be more prevalent in the future and is possibly the only way some of the nontraditional adult students will be able to attain education and/or degrees.

Because some of the classes are well-accepted and some are not, I am hoping, through a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the nontraditional adult students participating in online deliveries, to determine better strategies for making online classes more conducive to adult learning and to add to the research of this discipline.

Finally, I am a retired Chief Operations Officer/Assistant Chief from a large metropolitan fire department, with over 25 years experience in the emergency services. I functioned as a Firefighter, Paramedic, Training Officer, Station Officer, Battalion Commander, Bureau Chief and as the Chief Operations Officer. I have had a large education about life through the “school of hard knocks.” Throughout my career, I also sought and attained academic degrees. I obtained most of my education while working my full-time job and I am aware of the need for advanced education in the emergency services discipline, as well as the difficulties of recruiting and maintaining adult students. Therefore, based on my experience and the anecdotal experience of my students, I have come to understand that online deliveries may be the answer to some of the problems experienced in the past.

I have shared the above background to give the reader some idea of my biases. As this is a qualitative study, this is appropriate and consistent with the methodology. Yet, great care was taken to assure that a quality study was undertaken and that my biases were identified and accounted for (which is presented later in this chapter).

### *The Online Course of the Study*

The particular course used in this study was *Public Administration for the Emergency Services*. This course was a concentrated class offered in a cohort and block

format, with 15 registered students. The courses were designed so that a first block was a class of eight weeks in duration and was completed before a second block commenced. In this way, two courses were taken in the traditional 16-week semester delivery and the same students would be participating in the courses. The students of this program were strongly advised, due to the intensity of the classes, to limit their semester load to these two classes, however the students were free to enroll in other program-related courses if they so chose. Some of the students did and some did not.

The course was designed using the text as the main source of information through reading assignments. The text employed case studies to deliver the concepts and was supported by other information provided by the instructor using the online learning platform, Blackboard. In addition, the instructor posted discussion topics for which the students were required to post their own response to the questions and then respond in a conversational manner to at least one other student's posting. Each week, the students were also required to submit a five to seven page paper applying the concepts of the week's lesson to their personal situations or offer opinions backed by references in the text, as well as other credible sources. This required that the students spend large amounts of time during the week online, posting discussion board responses, and researching and writing papers.

The instructor for this course was an adjunct faculty member, who was also the fire chief of a suburban city fire department. He had over twenty years of experience in the emergency services field and had a Master of Public Administration Degree. In a brief conversation with him, I asked him about his teaching philosophy. He stated that he

felt he was not there to completely direct the experience of the students, but to act as a guide and/or facilitator learning. He did not want to interfere with the discussions of the students unless he felt they were way “off of the mark” with their comments. He also would only give feedback on the papers as to format and style and small points to think about unless they were totally missing the concept, at which time he would step in to assist in a more active role. He viewed his role as more of a mentor than instructor. He also had some interesting barriers to his instruction during the course. As part of a work assignment, he traveled to Saudi Arabia to attend a conference and was gone for about five days during the class. This made it difficult for him to communicate with the students for a brief period of time and may have had an effect on the experience of the students, which is presented in Chapter IV. He also shared with me that he was learning at instructing in the online medium and was becoming more comfortable with it. However, he also felt more comfortable with and preferred the face-to-face delivery.

### *Study Participants*

The number of participants for this study was four. The students were purposely selected based on two criteria: (a) the nontraditional adult learners (which is students over the age of 25 years who may or may not have some prior higher educational experience and/or may or may not be employed in a career field), and (b) they were enrolled in the Emergency Services Management Program.

At the commencement of this study, I contacted the instructor of the class and asked his permission to contact members of the class in order to recruit students willing to participate in the study. After getting the contact information of each student, I called

the students by telephone to introduce myself and read to them a recruiting letter to explain the purpose of the study (see Appendix A). I verbally invited them to participate. Once all willing participants were identified, I looked at their characteristics seeking a diversity of age, experience, and occupation so as to gain a broad base for the study. I wanted to make sure that all of the students were not from the same career field (e.g., all police officers or all firefighters) and I wanted to gain the perspective of differing age groups; some younger, some similar, and some older than the literature identified as the average age of nontraditional online learners (the average age of online learner, as previously presented is about 32 years of age). After selecting the candidates, I sent them a copy of the recruiting letter I had previously read to them and two copies of an informed consent form, one to keep, one to sign, and return to me (see Appendix B). Table 1 identifies the students by pseudonyms and provides some demographic information of each. A small biographical sketch of each participant follows the table. The participants have been given a pseudonym to protect their identities.

Adam was a 26-year-old firefighter for a suburban city fire department. He was married with one child and they were expecting another child in the spring. He had been

Table 1

*Study Participant Demographics*

Name	Age in years	Occupation	Length of service (in years)
Adam	26	Firefighter/EMT	6
Brian	48	Fire captain	25
Chris	35	Police detective	11
David	36	Fire captain	15

Average	36.25	N/A	11.75
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a firefighter for 6 years and had been pursuing his education for about the same amount of time. His wife did not work outside of the home.

Brian, a station captain for a metropolitan fire district, had been in the fire service for 25 years. He was married and his wife worked part-time outside of the home. He had three children living at home. Brian had been away from formal education for a substantial length of time and had recently returned to finish his Bachelor of Science degree.

Chris was a detective for a suburban city police department. He had been in law enforcement for 11 years, the first two of which were spent working at a state prison. He was married with three children, they were also expecting another child in the spring; his wife did not work outside of the home.

David was a station captain in a metropolitan fire department and had been in the fire service for 15 years. He was not currently married, but has three children. He occasionally worked part-time at another job (related to the emergency services) to enhance his income.

Each of these participants was given detailed information about the study and its purposes and signed an informed consent form. After being informed about the study, each participant was asked to keep an electronic journal of thoughts and feelings regarding his experiences of the Internet-delivered, asynchronous class. These journal files were sent to me on at least a weekly basis throughout the study and provided much data regarding their feelings and experiences. Journaling gave the students an added

opportunity to reflect upon the experience during the week, more than they probably would have without this requirement.

In addition to the journals, semistructured, open-ended interviewing was undertaken. The interviews were audio recorded and I took detailed notes during the interviews. The questions for the interviews were initially driven from the research question, but later allowed to develop based on the data being gathered. A continuous rereading of the journals was also done as data emerged, to ensure data extraction was thorough. Any follow-up questioning, if necessary, was done by email or telephone and follow-up interview questions were focused to probe emerging themes. Once the interviews had been completed, I transcribed the interviews into a Word document for the purposes of continuous data extraction.

### *Summary of Study Context*

Purposeful sampling was used for this study, based on the assumption that adult learners have specific needs and/or expectations of online learning. Subjects of this study were selected from non-traditional, adult students enrolled in an existing Emergency Services Management online course at a publicly funded college in the western United States. Participation was voluntary and each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form. I interviewed each participant, recorded, took notes of responses, and used submitted student journal entries as the basis for gathering data until saturation had been reached. It must be noted, my beliefs and values may have been difficult to keep from affecting some of the outcomes of the study. However, great care was taken to keep personal bias out of the findings through the validation techniques (bracketing, member



checks, and peer review) described in the next section of this chapter.

I believed it important to establish a mutual trust with the study participants. To achieve trust, I shared my background of working in the emergency services for 25 years and my experience of seeking and attaining education while working in the discipline. I explained that my hope was to more fully understand their experiences in an asynchronous, online course, which may assist in facilitating a higher quality and more easily accessible educational experience for current and future nontraditional adult students. Once the students heard my story and purpose, they readily and individually agreed to participate in the study.

### Verification

One of the main questions to ask when reviewing a study is, “How does one know this study is trustworthy and a clear reflection of the lived experiences of the participants?” In quantitative research trustworthiness can be confidently assured with the elimination of threats to external or internal validity. In qualitative research it is reasonably assured through (a) verification and (b) acceptable standards of quality. Verification was conducted based on accepted qualitative methods and is outlined in the following sections and standards of quality were met according to the qualitative research literature.

Verification was handled using a few of the recognized and accepted methods. First, my bias was revealed, explained and bracketed. Bracketing, sometimes known as epochê, is a phenomenological approach to suspend all judgment about what is real until

it can be founded or explained on a more certain basis (Creswell, 1998). So, once my biases had been identified, they were suspended or in other words, once I understood my biases, I was able to allow the data to develop naturally and thereby uncover the phenomena.

The initial interview, or bracketing, was conducted by one of my peers, a student in my doctoral cohort; I was the subject of the interview (a transcript of this bracketing interview is located in Appendix E). The interview was structured like those conducted with the student participants in my study; in the bracketing interview, I was asked about my experience with asynchronous, online classes. Bracketing aids researchers to temporarily suspend personal consideration of the experience, or what Husserl (considered by many to be the father of phenomenology) called “bracketing the natural attitude” (Jennings, 2004). The goal of the bracketing interview was for me, the researcher, to become aware of biases, expectations, and motivations regarding the research. After bracketing, I was made more aware of personal biases that may emerge in the subsequent analysis. Some of those biases became immediately apparent as I made comments in the interview itself, that I had just identified a bias. For example, when talking about examinations I had taken in online classes, I recognized that I have little confidence in multiple choice, true and false, and combination exams in determining learning. I stated that I felt such forms of assessment measured a student’s ability in short-term memorization, but not long-term learning. Rather than assuring that all bias be removed from later interviews, the bracketing interview has the role of focusing my awareness on personal perspectives (Jennings). Bracketing was helpful in clarifying the

interview process and subsequent analyses. Because of the bracketing interview, I was able to recognize when the possibility of interjecting my biases into the data was possible. Therefore, I was able to periodically revisit the transcript of my interview, which helped again to identify my biases and suspend them.

Second, I kept a small journal of perceptions and experiences throughout the research and data analysis. This journal was used as a source of bias control as well as a means of interpretation. Creswell (2002, p. 278) asserted that it is difficult to discern where reporting findings end and interpretation begins. One distinction of qualitative research is that all findings and interpretations are subjective assessments of the researcher. Thus, when examining the findings of a qualitative study, one should look for the personal interpretations of the researcher, which for this study was my constructivist framework or lens. I found it important to review my journal to ensure that what I was describing was the students' experiences and that my biases were not interjected into the data analysis. This journal, along with the transcript of my bracketing interview, was very helpful in maintaining the integrity of the students' experiences and assisting me in suspending mine.

Third, member checks or allowing the participants of the study to review the transcripts and data to demonstrate that what is being presented represents the intent and general perceptions of the participants was done. The checks were done to ensure that I did not misinterpret feelings or make inaccurate statements. Member checks were an ongoing process. As data were interpreted and the coding process was conducted, periodic contact with the participants via telephone or email was done to clarify the

participant's meaning regarding his interview responses and journal entries. Once the data had been analyzed and interpreted, a final member check was done to assure that member intent had been maintained. This step was the most critical for establishing credibility (Creswell, 1998, p. 203). The students of this study all responded that the findings presented in Chapter IV captured their attitudes, experiences and perceptions as presented and with just a few minor word changes, was an accurate representation.

Finally, to ensure my biases were kept out of the study as much as possible, I had a peer review the data and my findings. After reviewing the transcript from my bracketing interview, the data, and the results of the study, she concluded that my biases were successfully bracketed and that the study was done consistent within accepted standards for phenomenology research (a letter of the findings is in Appendix D).

### Data Analysis

Data analysis began as soon as the first interview was completed and was ongoing throughout the duration of the study. A constant comparative analysis was used to analyze the data. Because qualitative research is an emerging process, the purpose and the questions asked were dynamic and changed based upon the responses and feedback of the participants. Revisions occurred throughout data collection and/or analysis of this study (Creswell, 2002).

Creswell (1998) suggests that the first step in analysis of the data is for the researcher to begin with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon. This description was taken from my researcher's journal and is presented in

the first section of Chapter IV.

The next step in the analysis was to look at the actual data gathered from the students and begin the process of grouping. I found statements in the students' journals and/or the transcript of the interviews about how the participants were experiencing asynchronous, online work, developing a nonrepetitive list of statements. I then grouped these statements into meaning units. Care was taken to ensure that the original intent of each statement had not been compromised by the meaning(s) I derived. The aggregate meanings were then coded (grouped or clustered by theme). Several codes or themes were identified or differentiated. This process led to the need of further interviewing for clarification or more detailed information, and then more grouping or coding until saturation had been achieved. To validate the themes, they were compared to the original statements to ensure that something significant in the original statements had not been left out in the groupings or that the coding created something not in the original statements. These possibilities had not occurred and the process was considered verified.

Using a structural description, I sought to identify all possible meanings and perspectives to construct a description of how the phenomenon was experienced by the participants. Lastly, an overall description of the meaning of the experience or phenomenon was developed (Creswell, 1998).

To further validate the findings, the phenomenon description was presented to participants for their review. The participants reviewed the interpretation and presentation of the data. With the exception of some word editing for clarity, each student agreed that the description fairly summarized his experience and the data was considered verified.

This was the process of member checking whereby participants provided insights and deeper understanding as they reviewed the transcripts; that is, the meaning was negotiated between the participants and me as the researcher.

Next, I asked a peer to review the data and my analysis to ensure that the process was consistent and held to the integrity of the intent of the students and that my bias was kept minimal. This peer reviewed the material and felt satisfied that the study was consistent with the lived experience of the students (again, a copy of the peer's letter is available in the appendices).

After the data were analyzed, a rich descriptive narrative was written, detailing the participants' lived experiences. The narrative is located in Chapter IV of this study.

### Limitations

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of only one group of students participating in an asynchronous, online learning environment. As it was intended that the study participants provide a rich sample of perceptions and experiences, there is no way of presenting or representing all possible experiences which could be brought forth and understood. Therefore, transferability of the results of this study is left to the judgment of the reader.

Another limitation was the lack of antecedent literature specific to the attitudes and experiences of nontraditional adult online students. While some literature described the reasons for certain attitudes and perceptions (e.g., andragogy), a need for further research into causal factors of such attitudes and perceptions exists.

A third limitation was that no female students were available in this particular course, so the information lacked the perspective of a significant portion of the nontraditional adult student population. Adding this demographic may or may not have provided differing perspectives or experiences.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the interpretive study of the lived experience. In other words, phenomenology is the study of lived or existential meaning. It attempts to describe and interpret meaning with a rich depth of understanding. Van Manen (1990) stated,

Phenomenology is a *human* science (rather than a natural science) since the subject matter of phenomenological research is always the structures of meaning of the lived *human* world (in contrast, natural objects do not have experiences which are consciously and meaningfully lived through by these objects). (p. 11)

This study strives to give a fuller, richer understanding of what it means to be a nontraditional adult student in the world of asynchronous, online instruction. I have attempted to discover and present the ways in which the adult student can experience this unique environment.

This research provides a vivid look at the experiences of an asynchronous, online undergraduate course. I believed it essential to understand how this segment of a population of students experienced online learning because of the growing number of nontraditional students enrolling in degree programs and because of the newness of the online delivery systems. This understanding will enlighten administrators, faculty, course designers and curriculum specialists. Understanding the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of the online students may open the door to thousands, if not millions of potential students, who may not be able to pursue education in the traditional manner. Furthermore, since our world has become more global in perspective, understanding how



students experience the asynchronous, online learning environment may have large impacts in teaching and developing tomorrow's world leaders.

The criteria for selection of these study participants included fitting into the nontraditional adult student profile (see definition in Chapter I) and being enrolled in a current online class. Because a high number of students match this profile within the emergency services discipline, students from a Public Emergency Services Management undergraduate program at Western University were invited to participate. Four people were selected from the pool of candidates. To best gain insight into this experience, I conducted in-depth interviews and collected journal entries from four students enrolled in a Bachelor of Science in Public Emergency Services Management program at Western University. In addition to the interviews, each student was asked to keep a journal of personal feelings and experiences throughout the course and submit them to me at least on a weekly basis. Through analysis of the transcribed interviews and the text of the submitted journal entries, two essential themes of the experience of asynchronous, online education were identified. In addition a number of subthemes for each essential theme were identified and assisted in explicating the nature and meaning of the asynchronous, online experience. Two other themes, which seemed to be part of the educational experience of any adult student, but not necessarily tied to the online experience, were also identified and reported to give a more holistic view.

### Limitations

The interviews gave me a more detailed look into the experiences and perceptions

of these online students, in that I was able to observe their emotions—passion, confusion, frustration, appreciation, and so forth. Because the interviews were done in private and individually with each of the participants at separate times and locations, I felt there was no interference with peer pressure or the possible effect of the student “being on display.” I did my best to put the students at ease and to assure them that I was not seeking any specific information; I just wanted to learn of their experiences. Many times during the interviews, the students would ask me, “Is that what you are looking for?” To this, I always replied, “I am not looking for anything, I just want to know what you are experiencing and feeling. Just be honest with me in your perceptions, attitudes and experiences.” It took a little while for the students to realize that I was not there with an agenda of my own, but wanted to learn of their experiences. By consistently assuring them that there was no right or wrong answer or way of experiencing things and by being as nonjudgmental as I could be, I began to develop a level of mutual trust with the students. Mutual trust was an important step in the process and thus an important part in understanding their experiences and perceptions.

At the beginning of each interview, I gave each of the participants a description of my background and my interest in this study. I believe once they knew that I had been in the emergency services and had attained my education as a nontraditional student, they were more willing to share their experiences. Individually, they all assured me that they were willing to participate so that their experiences might help refine and improve the online classes and thereby assist in making the experiences and education of future students more fruitful. From my experience, there is certain camaraderie among

emergency services workers. I believe the desire to help those who are in or may be in the service is common among those employed in this discipline. The desire to help appeared to remain consistent for the students of this study as well.

My first interview was done in Brian's home. After contacting him and finding when and where would be most convenient for the interview, we agreed that his home would work best. At the time agreed upon, no one was home, so we were not interrupted. I took a few moments to explain again what I was doing and to assure him of my efforts to make the process as confidential as possible. I started the interview with a few prepared questions (a copy of these initial questions can be found in Appendix C). These questions were prepared for the purpose of creating some initial dialog and then allowing the dynamics of the experience and perceptions to proceed where they may. Once the interview commenced, the direction and depth of the questions were governed by his responses and experiences.

As the interview progressed, I sensed Brian becoming more comfortable and he opened up more to his feelings. I did not have to probe or ask as many questions as I did initially. As he shared some of his thoughts and feelings, I made some mental and written notes for follow-up questions. When the time was appropriate, I probed deeper into his feelings and experiences using my notes as a guide. As I asked the follow-up questions, Brian became more reflective and appeared to want to give what I assumed he considered the proper depth of thought and power of belief to his answers. I felt that he accomplished this throughout the interview.

As the conversation continued, Brian shared his love for his job. It became

apparent through conversation and his emotional responses to some of the questions, that he realized getting an education would benefit him in his career in many ways; he was appreciative of the opportunity to gain an education that had heretofore been mostly unavailable. After a time, he began to repeat some of his answers. With that, the first interview came to a close and I told him that I would be in touch soon and reinforced that I needed him to send me his journal entries weekly throughout the duration of the class, which he agreed to do.

Brian's journal entries were interesting, albeit short. What he did have to say in his journal was directly to the point, yet filled with his feelings and experiences. I did not really have to second guess what he was feeling because he said it in a direct and assertive manner. For example, one of his entries simply said, "I was thinking about this class and I believe it would be better if the instructor were more involved." While I used this for follow-up questions in the interviews, I had no problem knowing how he felt based on his previous interview.

My second interview was with Adam. When first consulting Adam, his schedule was filled and we came to the conclusion that it might be best to interview him at his work. Therefore, I traveled to his fire station one evening and we found a room at the station where we could have some privacy. The room was a small office that was in close proximity to the kitchen/dining area of the fire station where the other firefighters were gathered. Adam seemed a little on edge as though he were uncomfortable. I asked him if he was okay with the arrangements for the interview or if it would be better at a different time and place. He stated that he was worried that he might get an emergency call and

would have to leave in the middle of the interview. I reassured him that was not a problem for me, and we continued with the interview.

Once we got going with the questions, Adam relaxed considerably and began to share at a much deeper level. In fact, Adam was the most loquacious of all of the students during the interviews. I found his loquacity very helpful in that he was ready and willing to share his experiences, perceptions, and ideas regarding the online delivery. Adam also possessed a sense of humor, which he used to lessen his nervousness and thereby allowed me to be much more informal. I feel this informality was beneficial for understanding his experience and getting to the real level of his perceptions.

Adam provided me with content-rich interviews. He was very detailed with answers to the questions asked. He was also very reflective, probably the most reflective, and yet the youngest of the students. He paused many times to think about his answers before relaying them to me in all of the interviews. His body language also gave me an indication of his feelings; Adam seemed to show his conviction through body language and expression. When speaking about something he really believed, his face would take on a look of determination and I could almost sense the depth of his feelings.

Adam's journal entries were the longest as well. They provided a much deeper look into what he was experiencing because he took the time to write about the various aspects of the online course and his experience with it. By using his journal entries, I was able to analyze some of his reflections to develop questions for all of the students. What I mean by this is that his journal entries were in more detail than most of the others, yet very similar in the general observations and tone. The clarity he provided helped me

frame questions to understand the experiences all of these students.

The next interview was with David, who agreed to meet with me in my office, since he was going to be near and would find it more convenient. Because my office afforded some privacy, I sensed that David was quite at ease as we began to converse. David was very open with his feelings and was eager to help in this study. He was very appreciative of his opportunity to further his education and seemed determined to make the best of that opportunity. He had no difficulty in sharing his feelings or beliefs and for the most part was complimentary of the program.

However, as the interview progressed and the questions I asked probed his feelings, his experience began to be expressed at a deeper and not a surface-only level. As I watched him talk about the experiences he was having and his perceptions of the class, I also sensed a serious understanding and commitment to education. He too, was reflective, pausing many times to get the “right” answer to explain his position. While not as demonstrative as Adam, he showed much emotional attachment to his educational experience through his body language and verbal responses.

The fourth interview was with Chris, who wanted to meet at his office. Chris was very gracious in his first meeting with me and we went upstairs to a common area with a table for our interview. As we sat at the table, even though there was a flurry of activity around us, Chris seemed to focus in on our interview. The interesting thing about Chris was that he talked about and seemed to feel the most frustration with the program. As I probed his feelings further, his frustration was not so much with the online delivery as with the workload and other factors of his life interfering with his time. Upon further

questioning and with some of his journal entries, I began to see why this was the case for him.

Chris works for a small suburban city police department. Because of the small population base of this city, they have limited ability for hiring enough police officers, but have all of the problems of the urban departments. The department requires a large time commitment from their personnel. Chris' interviews and subsequent journal entries reinforced the time commitment through his feelings of frustration. However, this became an important point for exploring the experiences of these nontraditional students and helped guide some of the interview questions.

### Emergent Themes

As the course progressed, I continued to analyze the journal entries, which were sent to me mostly on a weekly basis. Based on the data from the initial interviews and the journal entries, I found the need to interview each of them again to gain some clarification and to probe some of the phenomena more deeply. All of the students were once again contacted and personally interviewed, with the exception of David, who was interviewed by email at his request. The subsequent interviews helped clarify some of the data and were very useful in the coding process. The data were then analyzed, coded, and grouped into common themes. Once this initial analysis had been done, further coding and grouping continued until a point of saturation occurred. From this process, the two major themes and the related subthemes emerged.

In analyzing the essential themes, these emergency services adult students were

found to have a strong value system regarding the importance of education. Each of the participants found traditional deliveries (face-to-face and scheduled class periods) not conducive to their individual situations and found that the online environment better facilitated their desire to improve themselves through education. The material and reflective activity of their experiences and perceptions spoke about their desire to learn as opposed to “just getting a degree.”

Two overarching themes, each supported with a number of sub-themes emerged about nontraditional adult students in the emergency services online program. The first theme, *Flexible Learning* exemplified the adult learning assumptions of convenience, self-directedness/self-discipline, and reflectivity. The second theme, *Conflict of Values: A Paradox of Learning*, addressed the comparison of the traditional (face-to-face) learning experience with a new (online) experience and contrasted student-to-student communication/socialization, student and instructor interaction, and paradigmatic shifting and conflicted beliefs on learning. These essential themes and subthemes reflected the lived experience of the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous learning environment and captured the spirit of these students.

The themes and associated subthemes that explicate the lived experience of the nontraditional adult student in an online environment are: (1) flexible learning; subthemes: (a) convenience, (b) self-directedness/self-discipline, (c) reflectivity; (2) conflict of values: a paradox of learning; subthemes (a) student-to-student communication/socialization, (b) student/instructor interaction, (c) paradigmatic shifting and conflicted beliefs on learning.



Because these study participants were selected from a specific class of nontraditional adult students, the term student(s) will be used in the descriptions of the findings to refer to the participants in the study. When using the name of a student is necessary, pseudonyms will be used to protect confidentiality as well as changing any other identifying information, which may jeopardize the confidentiality of the participants.

These results create a vivid picture of the experiences of the nontraditional adult students in an asynchronous, online learning environment. It appears that the experience moves from a somewhat detached and questioning perception, through a metacognitive exploration and onto an affective or life view acceptance. The experiences, based on prior learning schemes and moving toward new schemas demonstrated an apparent fit with the constructivist theory of learning, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter V. Therefore, exploring these identified descriptive themes provides a starting point for discussion and interpretation of this study.

Before presenting the major themes and subthemes, some phenomena were common to all of the participants of this study and should be identified. In analyzing this experience, I determined that these phenomena were important and a part of the lived experience of these nontraditional adult students, but not exactly tied to just the asynchronous experience. Therefore, I chose to present these phenomena before presenting the asynchronous experience. The phenomena experienced were: the value of education and life's interruptions.

### *The Value of Education*

When analyzing the interviews and journal texts, each one of these students, at one point or another, expressed his belief in the value of education. As they suggested, this belief may have been due to the fact that they had been away from school for periods of time and with the experience of life, learned that education was important to their careers and to the welfare of their families. David commented:

Because of life, and because now I think I'm more, hopefully, wiser I can look back...the first time I went to college on an athletic scholarship school was something I had to do to play sports. I messed around; I could have had a free education and I kick myself in the butt because I didn't do it. I left without anything. So now, looking at life and now seeing how important education is, I try harder. I don't feel like I'm messing around as much. I get it done. I don't procrastinate. I don't know if that's really what you're looking for but, that's what it's kind of been to me. Because I have a second chance at an education and I'm not going to mess around this time.

The students, through their responses, demonstrated that their learning schemes had shifted with their experience and maturity. The students felt that they were more focused and driven to succeed with their educational pursuits. The reasons may have been a little different, but the drive was there and identified throughout the study. For Adam, education was a personal achievement goal and he shared that his schema had shifted:

I definitely take it a lot more seriously and I am there for me and not for anyone else. And I know what my goals are and what I am ultimately trying to achieve and so my motives are more clear and I have more of a desire because of it—more of a drive.

While education was important for personal achievement, David also found an unexpected benefit when he realized the impact on his son.

This is going to sound a little crazy, but the rewarding part is actually what it has done for my children in school. My son was kind of struggling in school, not struggling but just not motivated but since I have been in school and when I am doing homework, he does homework and his grades have gone up. That's been honestly the most rewarding thing to me that it has motivated my son to do better

in school. It was something totally unexpected for me.

Chris relayed similar value perceptions.

I value my education and am appreciative that I am able to obtain an education with as little time away from my family as possible. Because education is important to me and I want to show my sons I want to get the degrees, at least through bachelors, there is just no way that I could do it in any kind of time, without that online.

As a result of the life experience of these nontraditional adult students, education seemed to take on a definite importance and provided a new schema and tool for self-motivation along with the benefit of setting an example to other family members. This motivation appears consistent with the literature and true of most nontraditional adult students returning to school after extended periods of living in the world and working in the competitive career environment. This also fits with the constructivist theory. The experiences, attitudes, paradigms, and traditions each of the students brought with him helped develop or construct new learning modalities (schemas) and values regarding his educational experience.

### *Life's Interruptions*

Career, social and family responsibilities take a toll on nontraditional adult students. These issues appear to hold true for older students attending traditional face-to-face course deliveries as well as those who enroll in the asynchronous online classes; the extant literature on adult learning has made this case. While this phenomenon is not specific to the online student, it is still an important experience that shapes the perceptions and experiences of these students. This was made apparent by the students of this study. While it was not what I felt to be exclusive to the asynchronous online student,

it was a big part of the experience and could not be ignored.

Chris offered a unique perspective on how his job creates difficulty for him as a student. His experience held true for the others as well, but he seemed to be the most passionate in vocalizing it.

It is so unknown where I'll be in five minutes. I may sit down and say well I've got a couple of hours here, I am going to knock out a paper and we could have a murder [to investigate] or something and my week is shot. There is no way I can even take time—you know—unless I want to write something at 2 o'clock in the morning. And then my work suffers.

Interference seems to be a constant problem for Chris. He later offered this in one of his journal entries:

I have a hard time getting my ideas together because each time I sit down the family life catches up to me and I get caught up doing things to keep harmony with the wife and kids. My schedule is killing me, I work from 1500 to 0100 on a good day; it often goes much longer and starts a lot earlier.

The others also explained how work or other interruptions affect their student responsibilities.

The down-side of online schooling—students' lives are already busy, so when other areas get busy (like family time, civic, religious activities, etc), time for doing class work is crunched. It's easy to procrastinate doing assignments and get behind. It's hard to stay involved with the discussion postings if you're a week or two behind the current discussion topic.

With the difficulty of adding the load of school to an already busy life, the students have to juggle study time with other responsibilities. David made this clear when he stated: "This week I was involved heavily in some department issues that took the majority of my time. I did read some during the week, but have left myself playing catch-up."

This experience seemed common among the students. Brian said:

For me it's if I don't get it done during the day when all my family is gone, I have to do it at night. And, that is just hard for me because as soon as everybody gets home it's I have to help the kids with homework. So, I really have to stop doing what I am doing and go help them and come back. Uh, like this, I just came off of a 72-hour shift and so I wasn't able to do a lot at work.

Brian added by sharing the impact of his procrastination on the student experience.

It is also easy to put off reading or getting on the computer, especially when there is no one home and no set time to be in class. Then as I have tried to read in between the interruptions when my family is home it makes me think how important time is when they are not home to get home work done so I can spend quality time with them.

Adam gave an interesting observation about distractions in his life. While work was definitely one of the distractions, the little things of interest or trivial importance seemed to creep into his time.

It is still easy to get distracted when doing online class work, by checking personal email, funny *You Tube* video clips, web surfing, listening to music, or telephone calls. If you're on-duty you may get emergency calls, at home-your wife/family members can come in and distract you, etc. I guess no class is free from distractions of staying on-task and on-topic.

Once again, Adam, who had the most detailed journal entries, gave a brief glimpse of a student's life. In his journal he was explaining time spent on an assignment and relayed a somewhat humorous, yet poignant example of life's interruptions, "Part way through, I had to take a break and fix the kitchen light at my house."

These experiences and perceptions, the value of education and life's interruptions, appear common to all adult students. Although they are not specific to the nontraditional adult student taking asynchronous, online classes, they are an important part of the experience of these students and I felt them to be important in the overall lived experience of the student. For these reasons, I did not include them in the major themes

of the study but chose to identify them as part of a holistic view of the online student experience. The major themes and sub-themes identified in the rest of the chapter were what I found to be the lived experiences of the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous, online learning environment.

### Theme I: Flexible Learning

In explaining the reasons for pursuing education through an asynchronous learning environment, the student participants were very explicit in their journals and in the interviews about the flexibility the online environment provided. This flexibility however, was not just related to schedule or ability to attend classes. Convenience was definitely one of the subthemes, but the flexibility to learn at a somewhat self-directed pace and depth was also found to be important. The increased ability to reflect and apply the learning became very apparent and important to the experience and perceptions of these students as well. The subthemes of flexibility are convenience, self-directedness/self-discipline, and reflectivity.

#### *Convenience*

When first asked about the reasons for selecting the online classes, the students were all very forthright and somewhat animated in providing their responses. I saw there was an emotional reaction in all of them, which I interpreted as excitement and gratitude as they explained their appreciation for the ability to return to school and finish their education in a format which allowed them to meet their work schedules and have as minimal an impact on their personal lives as possible.

When asked what was most appealing to them regarding the online classes, their responses were revealing. Adam shared:

Just the convenience of being able to take the classes with kind of an irregular work schedule and also it is a lot easier on me because I don't live in the city where I work. I have extra time commuting here and there and so making an extra trip two times a week to the university to go to on-campus courses would have probably been too much and would have slowed my goals down a little bit; also, because the majority of the courses that I have left to finish my degree are basically online courses. So, I am glad they are.

David felt much the same. He shared a little more appreciation for not interrupting his personal life, but was also very appreciative of the convenience.

Oh, the online program I enrolled in; it's just ease. I don't have time to be a traditional student and go to class three or four times a week, and just so that I could work it around my schedule and just hopefully get through, get my education and do it a little easier and still spend time with my family.

Brian shared that not being required to be at a specific place at a specific time and the ability to work on his own was very important.

I think it was just the—ah, my brain is dead—the ease. Maybe not ease, but the like being able to go in and basically do it on my own. I don't have to be in a specific place. With the job that I have, it is just a lot easier with convenience for me to do it online and have my own time and not having to be sitting in a classroom every week.

Adam also appreciated the flexibility allowed for class participation. He explained that convenience was wide reaching.

And, just being able to log on anytime, anywhere is just a piece of cake. I can do it at home, at work, go to the library where I don't have the, you know, toddler running around ripping everything apart. Or, you know, if we get away for the weekend, I can even jump on a computer and just kind of get caught up and stuff like that. That's, that's the main appeal for me I think.

Adam later shared more on this topic when reflecting in his journal on the benefits of online education.

The benefits—all around convenience: convenience in scheduling, do it at your own pace—theoretically you could do the classes as fast as you would like; convenience in cost, no additional money needed for fuel, parking, time off of work, wear and tear on the vehicle; convenience with location; log on virtually anywhere.

Chris was more passionate in his response and related how dynamic his job was. The ability to work around the job expectations and family life was extremely important to him.

I don't even know if it is offered in a classroom setting, but even if it was offered it would still be the convenience of not having to go to the brick and mortar building to go to the online classes. Not this one, but a lot of the online classes are—you just have the work done by the ending date, which works awesome for me with the unknown schedule. I just never know. I can look at a schedule and say this is when I am going to be working, but then in the dynamic field, ten minutes from now all hell could break loose. I don't know, so the convenience of that, the online, where I can...if I have some time, I can pick at it throughout the course. So, it's a lot of convenience with my schedule and family.

Throughout the study, at some time or another, the students all had life interruptions—things like illness, vacations/trips, longer than usual shifts, etc. The importance of the online convenience was related by the students and demonstrated their appreciation. Chris shared a frustration with the everyday problems of life and going to school. He later shared his appreciation for the online environment.

My daughter became sick this past weekend, which we are still dealing with today. The amount of care that she needed with breathing treatments and being altogether cranky and clingy really made it difficult to get time to sit down without constant interruptions. I fear that because of the interruptions it shows in my work as a lack of flowing ideas. I then feel that I am out of time to get the paper arranged to flow better to the reader instead of being composed of fragmented ideas.

It is weeks such as this that I have come to value the online course much more; because without the online convenience, I just wouldn't feel right about leaving a sick baby with my wife all the time while I am at work and then have classes a couple of nights a week. I would certainly have to drop classes in exchange for



harmony in the home. David related how his time away from home on a trip interfered with his studies: “This has been a short study week. I have been out of town from Tuesday to late Sunday night.” However, the convenience of knowing what the assignment was beforehand as well as the knowledge that he could still participate in the weekly discussion boards while out of town gave him a feeling of increased flexibility: “Last week I went out of town for most of the week so I had written my paper the previous week.” The flexibility of not having scheduled classes became an important consideration to some of them. Adam commented,

Well, I think it’s just the convenience. It comes back to that again where um, what I like most is just you don’t have to, you know, say every Wednesday and Friday nights from six to eight I have to be in this class. It’s just like you can kind of do it at your own pace.

Adam further went on to explain why the online classes are so convenient and appealing.

Our fire department schedule rotates on a regularly, irregular schedule of 24 hour shifts; a day on, a day off, until I’ve worked three shifts. After 3 shifts I am given 4 days off. I love the schedule; it allows me amazing flexibility and freedoms. However, traditional classes and a regular M-F, 8-5 schedule is a whole different world from us. So, taking traditional day-classes on campus would be a nightmare. I’d have to burn all my vacation time, abuse the sick-leave policy and organize trades and trade-backs almost every day.

The availability of education through the use of the Internet has made education more available to groups like emergency services workers. Where participation was once a great hardship for this group, online learning environments have made education available and appealing. Online delivery has opened doors, as Chris states: “I wouldn’t have able to get my Associates’ [degree]. I wouldn’t have been able to—just accomplishing that would have been impossible if there were no online classes offered.”

One very interesting thing about the convenience of the online environment was brought forward when discussing research. In this particular class, the assignments were to write papers on specific topics regarding Public Administration. Assignments required resources and references above and beyond the text. Research material, which was readily available through the Internet, was accessible while sitting at the computer and participating in the class itself, which made working on assignments very convenient and sometimes possible to accomplish in single sessions. Adam commented,

I seldom have trouble finding topics on the web to use as references. The problem is there are so many, I have to shuffle through to find out which ones I'd like to cite in my document. Processing through the information is the most time consuming. It helps me work on speed reading. I also find that when I find a piece of info I'd like to use, I think of another piece that would supplement it better (like another statistic). Once I have a specific part in mind it makes the search easier and can filter through until I find a good, reliable source.

On the internet it's almost too easy to find material in a Google search, but not all of the results are of value to me; some are irrelevant and some are actually bogus. It's more difficult to tell the difference between a reliable and not reliable source. I need to start using references other than the internet, but it's just the simplest way to get information; although if you're careful and dedicated, it can be just as quality of a source. I should look elsewhere, but most periodicals are archived on the internet, virtual encyclopedias are easy to find—and who has time to actually “go” to the library?

While Adam recognized the problem with the easy references, which may have become an issue for instructors and a problem for some students who do not take the time to find refereed references, the convenience of the internet was still appealing.

#### *Self-Directedness/Self-Discipline*

My purpose in online education is to allow me the opportunity to achieve goals, enroll in courses, accomplish the objectives, and complete the assignments at my own pace (within certain parameters and deadlines), wherever I please, as long as I have an internet connection. (Adam)

Some interesting experiences and perceptions were revealed in the interviews regarding self-directedness and self-discipline. Without the regulated structure of attending classes in the traditional manner, which includes a regular class schedule, the students found that they had to be more focused and motivated. None of them seemed to mind this, in fact, most of them found it to be a positive thing. Increased time gave them the freedom and maybe even the motivation to go beyond the minimum expectations of the class and provided a much richer learning experience. That does not mean that there was a lack of struggles, however. For instance, Adam reported,

But then it is sort of a two-edged sword, because you, because you don't have that you have to be more disciplined with yourself and personally set aside the time and commit to doing that and to doing the work. It's not regimented by so much by an instructor you can see, who's now, "okay, now you're in my class, this is class time, this is our time." So, probably the biggest struggle I have had is the struggle with self (heh, heh).

With this increase in self-discipline, the students seem to demonstrate a sense of maturity regarding their role as a student. David commented to me that he felt that, "In some ways, I view myself as 50% teacher and 50% student, because it is up to me to make it happen." Chris and Brian added,

I have done a lot of online ever since I came back in '04. And I think I have really concentrated on trying to get online courses. And so, I appreciate online. I don't think the depth suffers, you know, because it causes me—it puts more responsibility on me. And so I guess it's up to me what I learn. (Chris)

It was hard to get back into it. Um, it took me about a year to really make my mind up that this is what I have to do, that this is what has to be done in every class instead of, I mean having a family, having a career and really wanting to go back to school and having to decide how many classes I can take at a time in order to make sure I can be able to get everything else done and then make sure I have the time to do that class. (Brian)

Brian also recognized the ability to work ahead, if wanted. For a busy student, working ahead can be a plus in managing all of life's demands.

I think, again I am able to do it at my own speed. If I get behind, it's my own fault. A lot of instructors will let you turn everything in the first week if you want to and all you have to do, again, is keep up on postings on the discussions. So, you can get as far ahead as you want or stay right with the class.

I followed this up with a question to Brian regarding whether or not he felt that working ahead of the class was harmful to or enhanced his learning. His response gave insight into why he preferred the online environment.

When I first started taking online courses, many of the classes were designed so that I could look at the reading requirements and the assignments and work at my own speed. I did this so that I could be ahead of the schedule in case something else came up in my personal life. Now, I try to stay about one week ahead on the assignments, but stay more focused on staying with the class in the discussions. I like to stay about one week ahead, again, because it gives me the time to be more prepared for the discussions and allows for things that may come up.

The journal entries provided a glimpse of the students' understanding of the process of learning and the relevance of education in their lives. While some of the journal entries were scant, there was still a sense of depth in understanding of the role of self-directedness and self-motivation in the pursuit of learning and how the online environment facilitates this. I asked each of them how being in an online environment was different for them with respect to being self-directed. The answers were revealing. Although most of the principles of self-directedness and self-motivation can be applied to the traditional classes as well as the online, the students shared that they realized that this medium almost demanded that they be more self-sufficient if they wanted to gain an education. Each one of them shared how the online course made them "go the extra mile" when compared to the face-to-face classes. Adam offered the following reflection about

purposeful learning,

In taking these [online] courses, I believe that most of the benefit and education comes in the process. Completing assignments and papers only shows whether or not you can follow directions, meet a deadline, meet basic objectives, and so on. But if you really want to get something out of it all, you have to put forth a proactive effort. For example, a few weeks ago, the instructor made an assignment of writing a paper on the subject of communication. It isn't hard to actually do the paper and get a grade; but you have to ask yourself why you are pursuing the education. Is it for the piece of paper you get at the graduation, or is it so you can actually become a better communicator with people? Do you just want a letter grade or do you want to enrich your skills? It's the same with this week's topic of budget and taxing, do you just want to write a paper or do you want to get a more thorough understanding of how your city works and operates?

David added that the topic can also increase the desire to learn and cause the student to use self-directedness as a means of gaining knowledge. He shared the following in one of his journal entries: "This week's topic was leadership and I learned a lot about certain leadership traits. I have always studied styles and enjoyed looking deeper at leadership."

The students reported that not having to attend class in the traditional sense (a scheduled time in class) allowed more time to research and/or explore more deeply the assigned topics. Adam shared this about the experience:

I have tasks early on and I can dive into it and then I am given a lot more liberties of how I want to do it, when I want to do it and I think it just, I create a better learning environment, rather than having to hit little benchmarks that someone else—it's more like I am given an objective, just like a broad, I don't know, just like a broad concept of here's what we're doing, submit your work after you're done. And then I go through and learn what I'm—as much as I can and hopefully can piece it all together in some sort of a document and get a grade for it.

David reinforced the idea of self-directedness and the flexibility online classes gave him by using the time ordinarily spent in class seeking knowledge from other sources outside of the required text and assignments.

I spent the majority of the week catching up on, and getting ahead on reading. I wrote my paper on communication; I have been in a lot of classes about communication so most of this was just a nice review. I did enjoy seeing in my research that the private sector has the same issue as the fire service. I have also been doing research on the next paper which is budget. I have learned a lot about budgeting. Not only in the book, but I have been talking with my administrators and doing research on the Internet. I thought I had a good understanding of how the budget process works, but I really did not. Of all the subjects in this class I have learned the most about the budget.

David's reply was interesting and I was curious as to why this was different from the traditional class experience. When I asked him about this, he replied:

Being online somehow forces me to look for other sources. In the face-to-face class, I can ask the instructor questions and get clarification. While I can still do that via e-mail in the online class, what I find is that as I start to study and have a question, my curiosity gets piqued and I begin to research more about the topic. If I am still not clear or want to know more, I seek it from my bosses or from other administrators. I never did this before in the traditional classes. I would ask a question, the instructor would answer it, and I would just accept that without any further pursuit. The online has made, or you could even say forced me to explore at a deeper level.

Self-directedness and self-discipline seemed to be a common experience for these students. I did get a glimpse of an interesting perception that went beyond learning— intrinsic reward. Throughout the interviews, I sensed a feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment as the students shared their experiences, perceptions and feelings. This feeling was later reinforced in some of the journal entries, too.

All I need is a topic, a little direction, some time to work and a deadline and I can really go along way. I feel really good about this paper, I had fun writing it. Writing a paper is like running; it's hard work the whole way through, but the feeling you get at the end makes it all worth it. (Adam)

David shared his reward during an interview: "It's really surprised me and this is going to go back to some of the other questions but, but, it's really surprised me how much I've learned studying by myself."



*Reflectivity*

It's important for instructors to pose good, thought provoking research/essay assignments, to facilitate students to put more mental effort into the class. The more mental effort I direct, the more I learn and grow throughout the class.  
(Adam)

Because this course was designed using case studies to present material and paper writing as the means of assessment, the students were able to use reflective practices and many times at a different level. Unlike many classes where the student must remember facts, formulas, dates, etc., this class facilitated the students' learning by allowing them to reflect on how the principles can be or are applied in their lives. The discussion boards were particularly useful in this reflective activity. The students reported that conversations on the discussion board were at a deeper level than they experienced in the traditional classes due to the fact they did not have to respond immediately as in a face-to-face conversation. The discussion boards allowed or facilitated more reflectivity, and the conversations were backed by more research and/or critical thought.

I was able to get on the internet and complete my discussion board postings. This was a good week for the discussion board the topic "Open door policy" brought out some great thoughts. I think as a company officer I got a better understanding of what it means to different people and how I should conduct an open door policy. It also gave me some ideas of how to use the open door as an employee.  
(David)

If I were to have the same sort of discussion with someone through basically an email or face-to-face, I think it would be different, because I don't think I am really a good speaker and I don't think I am good with a direct confrontation-type of dealing with people. But then on the other hand, I think I would do better with the email (discussion board) because I can, I have a little bit more time to gather my thoughts, think about how I am going to say it and if I don't like it I can just go back and erase it and nobody knows the difference. Whereas as soon as you say something and it comes out of your mouth it's in space and you can't ever take it back. (Adam)



Chris liked the currency of the discussions and how they apply to his situation.

Yeah, because I think a lot of the things we did discuss are occurring. You know, I am seeing it happen in our city, as we are growing up and we have a new full-time fire department, we see all this, we are experiencing those things.

Adam shared a similar experience about reflectivity and the immediacy of application.

The deeper reflection of the student postings and the topic assignments seemed important.

While studying the topic it's important to keep an open mind about current events and see if there is anything relevant going on in the world right now; see, read and learn about what's happening and apply it to what you are studying.

As previously presented, the depth of the discussion seemed to be more useful to the students than the typical "in class" discussions that occur in the face-to-face classes. This was something that was reinforced many times in the interviews and through the journal entries.

In this format, the discussion board allows us to comment and reply to other students' postings as well. This gives us a chance to elaborate on topics and issues, while allowing us time to respond to comments, gather our thoughts, and choose our words more carefully. In a class room setting, on the other hand, there is not so much opportunity for that. In the classroom discussions happen in real-time/real-life speed. (Adam)

He later shared this: "As long as the student takes the time to read and ponder, a lot can be learned from the responses of other students on the discussion postings."

For Brian, knowing that others were putting thought into their discussion board postings was important: "I think overall, it helps because you read some of the discussions and there is a lot of thought put into them. I mean, you can tell that they've spent time doing it."

One thing that became apparent is the common appreciative experience of being

able to use the time to reflect in the online environment. Most of the students felt that maybe they were not as quick to learn or bright as some of the other students and the ability to take time to think of responses or to research and reflect before writing was very important.

Well, Google has been my best friend; I just “Google” whatever I don’t know and start reading. And then it actually peaks my curiosity to read more about the NFPA and how it translates into my life and my codes and um, um. So, I guess the whole online kind of thing forces you to dig more than the surface, more than an instructor can cover; cause they have to get through A to B in this amount of time, whereas online I can just—but I spend more time researching and looking into things than I ever would in there [traditional class]. (Chris)

I am a slow learner. And, for me to sit down and I have to sit down and just type the paper without stopping, but most of the time I have to really put a lot of thought and process into things. Even in the discussions, I sit there and I write them and I re-read them and I take things out. So, I am able to refine things a lot better for me to make them the way I want them instead of just throwing them out. (Brian)

In a follow up to this statement, I asked Brian if the fact that he is looking at his words while writing and not just hearing them, had any impact on the depth and/or thoughtfulness of his discussions. His reply was revealing.

Being able to read and edit my replies allows me to focus more on the subject. In a face-to-face class, the conversations tend to get off track and a lot of unnecessary discussion takes place. Sometimes I say things that I have not thought about very much and I often add things to the conversation that aren’t very intelligent. But, with the online discussions, I can think about, write and revise what I am going to say. I think this gives me a much better opportunity to understand the subject and the other students’ viewpoints as well.

The flexibility of the online classes seemed to allow for more time on reflective thinking. Also, the students were left, or at least felt that they were left to determine the direction and depth of their work. They were not given a lot of direction from the instructor—at least not as much as they had previously experienced in traditional classes.

This was a common feeling among the students. David offered how the online environment works for him.

I think it would be repetition or I don't know if it's even doing maybe a little bit repetition, but for some reason it seems like that research and then putting, you know, getting three or four references, reading, paraphrasing, putting it in my own words and putting it back on paper in my own thoughts. Things just seem to click for me that way. I don't really know what to call that it's just gathering all that information and having to process it and regurgitate it on paper has that seems to have worked for me.

Adam offered the following,

I think this class was good because the topics that were given to us were, they were uh, simple enough—simply enough stated that they gave us a lot of latitude with where we went with it. Yet, I think the instructor had in mind kind of what he wanted us to get out of it and knew that we would kind of discover it on our own. As we got through and you know, through the whole research process, trying to decide what I wanted to, wanted to do my papers on, on my own, I just kind of found a direction on my own and pursued it and then I'd be part way through and I would be like, "I really need to add something else right here, here's kind of the direction I want to go and then go back a find something that would kind of substantiate my, whatever statement I was pursuing. And so I liked it. I feel like I got a lot out of it and kind of was able to come to conclusions I had internally, that you know, I hadn't really focused attention on to, to try to resolve anything, just sort of miscellaneous indirect conflict. And I don't know, I think I made a lot of progress with it.

David also liked the way the online class format helped him.

Think it through, you know, you read a book sometimes and maybe you have just kind of a general platform if you will, a small platform of what they're trying to teach, but then if you go to other areas to extract the data or research what somebody else has done and has three or four references, plus the book you're reading and just process them all together. The online class really helped with this.

This particular course did not have a lot of what the students would call "busy" work. The lack of busy work was an important feature of the course design for the students, which they thought enhanced the reflective process. Chris offered that he did

not like to be directed through those types of activities: “So I like having to be able to research myself instead of being a slave to, because they can steer your whole train of thought versus me finding what I want to.”

Adam was more direct in his feelings about busy work and reflectivity.

Well, just knowing that I don't have to have the monotony of dealing with busy-work gives me a little bit better piece of mind, but ah, just kind of frees me up for other things where I can then focus my other energies on—ok, I am going to do this paper and I have to dedicate more thought to whatever the topic was or find in my research. And I actually find I probably dedicate more time, more mental focus time in the day to thinking about, “ok, what am I going to do for this,” and it's a little bit more of a conscious thing rather than have it be all separated out with “hey I have got to just hurry and whip out this busy work assignment.”

I was a little interested in this idea and followed up asking why the online class was different from the traditional class in terms of busy work. Adam shared his feelings,

In some of the traditional classes I have attended, it seemed that the instructor would give us some busy work to fill in the time we were supposed to be in class. In most of the online classes I have had there are not many worksheets or other time-filling activities. This means I have more time to pursue or research the material in the way I think is best for me and what I want to present.

One item I found particularly interesting was the students' experiences and perceptions regarding the writing process and reflectivity. Metacognition or “thinking about thinking” was evident in the interviews and journal entries. These students put a lot of time into thinking about how they learn and the processes they had to use in this online environment. For the most part it was a positive experience for all. Adam was the student who offered the most regarding the writing process and reflectivity; most of it was from journal entries, which is a reflective activity itself.

When I write I can thoroughly explore where my opinions originate from; why and what events in my life have led me to have that belief or value. In writing I can talk myself into something or talk myself out of it. I can expound my

emotions into words. When I write, it's like I'm having a close, intimate conversation with myself. Things come out in writing that probably never would have come out any other way. I never have to put on a charade or a façade; I can be perfectly frank and honest and tell it like it is. (Adam)

I was intrigued with Adam's self-talk revelation and asked him what he felt he learned through this. He replied:

Mostly, I learned that I am a good writer and that this made communication easier for me. I also learned that I may need to work on my verbal communication skills. When I write, it is easy to go deeper into my beliefs and thoughts. When I am speaking, I tend to stay more on the surface and my communication is not as thorough.

David also found the online convenience of more time and the paper writing experience of great value.

But I—actually the research and writing the papers—surprised myself how much I can learn by that. If I just read a book, I don't learn it that way. I have to read it a couple of times and really go through it and really try to pick it apart and I'm not sure I grasp it. Plus, in reading, and then doing research and writing a paper and putting that all together has been great for me.

Brian shared how he likes to take his time in creating the papers and actually researches and reflects longer than he thinks other students may. Not having to go to a scheduled class makes this time more valuable.

I like to be precise. So, I think I spend more time researching some of the papers than I need to just so I know that what I am writing is what needs to be written instead of just putting something down on paper. So I think sometimes that I spend more time researching than I do to write the paper so it takes me longer to do things.

In one particularly interesting and personal journal entry, Adam shared the process he went through to make meaning of one of the assignments. Unlike the traditional class, where he may have been able to get more direction, he was left to find some of this for himself. I felt in reading the following journal entry and later in

discussing the process with Adam that this was a moving point for him in this class.

In my paper I examined political equality in our nation. Whenever there is a discussion of equality in a nation; liberty, human/individual rights, and freedom follow close at hand. In my research I became very deeply engaged in learning about the constitution, the founding fathers, declaration of independence and other remarkable events that strengthened political equality and freedoms in our country. I had an amazing time learning about the history and sacrifices of those early American patriots who gave us the rights and liberty we enjoy. The slavery issue followed right behind and I gained new insight by reading about that era. Although I only mentioned this briefly in my paper to provide an example of political inequality, I actually spent several hours submersed in the history of it all. And again as stated above, I'm not sure I did the assignment right, but I learned and grew a lot by pursuing this topic on my own.

At one point while I was reading about the segregation that existed in many parts of the country in the early 1900s, I was reminded of a time when I had lived in Japan and I was the different one. I know what it's like to be a minority in a foreign country. You feel out of place and awkward. I'll never forget the first time a group of little kids teased us because we looked funny and were different from them. I thought this was odd for *them* to be making fun of *me* for identifying with my culture and ethnicity. We (the Americans) were the ones who were supposed to look normal, didn't they know that? They laughed that our eyes were so wide open and that we had blonde hair and blue eyes. It was all very surreal. For the first time in my life I was the minority, it was a different feeling. I got somewhat of a unique perspective from this, as the tables had turned and I was on the other side of the looking glass.

I think Brian summed it up well when referring to the online process he said:

“Yeah, I learn more and in the long run I think it makes more sense to me after to, like I say, to research the things out and realize—really come to understand why I am doing it—the meaning of it.

*Summary: Flexible Learning*

The concept of flexible learning, as provided through an asynchronous, online environment, was important to this group of nontraditional adult students. The convenience of not having to attend a scheduled and time-structured course (traditional

delivery) was appreciated and embraced. The freedom to self-direct individual learning was accepted and enjoyed by all of the students. Each knew and accepted his responsibility for education and found the flexibility of the Internet-based instruction a good medium for providing the opportunity for growth and learning. Also, the structure and activities as well as the convenience of more time by not having to attend a scheduled class facilitated the learning of the students, particularly through reflective practices. This time was appreciated and used by all students and proved to be a rewarding and educational experience for them.

#### Theme II: Conflict of Values—A Paradox of Learning

In analyzing the data, one interesting theme became apparent. Each student shared that his initial belief (mental scheme) was that learning would be facilitated more effectively in the traditional delivery method, yet due to schedule conflicts, the online course might work. As the study progressed, at one time or another, each of them expressed how much more they were learning in this asynchronous environment as compared to the traditional delivery. This awareness seemed to create a conflict with long held values or beliefs. The areas of communication/socialization between students, student/instructor interaction, and the students' paradigmatic shifting and conflicted beliefs on learning were evident and will be reported in this section.

##### *Student to Student Communication/ Socialization*

One issue that became immediately apparent when talking with the students was

the trepidation they felt regarding the social and communicative process of an online class. All of them believed that it would be better to have face-to-face communication to be able to read the nuances of body language and to be able to have immediate feedback from the other students. Initially, Brian noted,

I think, I think overall you maybe learn a bit more on a face-to-face [interaction]; just because I think facial reactions, expressions, and the instructor may be a little more in all this because just in the online, obviously, if you want to ask the instructor something, you have to go to his email and actually ask him a question instead of him kind of coming in and saying “that was a good comment,” you know or “what about this?” you know, to maybe to further up somebody else’s comments. I know there were a lot of comments that went for a long time. But still, I think you miss that a little bit, you know; you can say that during a discussion he might bring up another point that might spur another type of subject.

Adam felt some initial curiosity with the process.

But I was kind of curious to see how it was going to work, whether there would be any interaction at all with other students or if I would get any feedback from the instructor. And to be honest with you, I have kind of had, I have experienced both. I have had some instructors that will you know, write back and forth, some students that will you know be active in the discussions and then other times kind of a different sort of a way.

Chris, who was the most skeptical in the beginning, felt that he might be missing something without the face-to-face interaction.

My apprehensions for online courses were the non face-to-face. I was afraid that I wouldn’t glean as much as I could from a classroom setting from the interaction of fellow students, because I am sure that a lot of the questions I would have would be probably the same questions that might be answered a little more in the interaction.

Adam shared some similar feelings regarding the face-to-face communication not available in the online environment.

I think the big shortcoming that it has, is like actual face-to-face interaction with other professionals that are kind of heading in the same direction. And especially



like with, with public administration or fire department administration or anything like that, where it is so much of interpersonal relationships of let's sit down and talk this out. I think it's hard to get that kind of hands-on experience by doing it with a computer. But, then again in a classroom, you don't really get that as much either, but there is at least some sort of a forum where you can, where you sit down and have a discussion and you hear some, you analyze their tone of voice, you read their words and facial expressions and then quickly come up with a response or a solution or something like that. And uh, that's tough to simulate.

In some ways it's good for students to learn to correspond and communicate formally through the internet. But on the other hand, online courses don't provide the necessary personal, face-to-face social interactions and communication skills necessary for leadership development. For individuals that are striving for positions in public administration and management, personal communications skills are essential. Some of the finer nuances of communication cannot be taught from an online class—like facial expression, body language, facial features, nervousness, eye-contact, posturing. Not only interpreting non-verbal communication, but also diffusing problems and calming situations. It's also handy to be able to express yourself in non-threatening ways, and how to help a subordinate feel more comfortable and relaxed when trying to communicate with you. I think it would be nice to have coaching on some of these methods of communicating on a personal level.

Another issue brought out in the interviews and journal entries was the lack of familiarity amongst students and instructor as compared to a traditional face-to-face class. Brian made this point when he said, "I think one downfall to online classes is you do not get to see the instructor or other students; all we get is a name."

Without the ability for face-to-face communication, the course was designed to facilitate communication through the use of the discussion boards. All students were required to communicate with a minimum number of postings for full credit. Each student was required to post a response to a question the instructor posed on each topic and to have discussion board dialog with at least one other student regarding the other student's posting.

Later in the course, after these initial feelings and perceptions were shared, their

paradigm or mental schema changed. The students were actually starting to champion the discussion boards and informal communication of the asynchronous environment. While this was happening, however, there was still some uneasiness or a lack of willingness to let go of the familiar communication forms. Chris, who seemed to me to be the most intransigent against accepting online as effective as the traditional delivery, began to show conflict in his statements.

So, I think it was taught well in the form that it is, but I think I still missed a lot of interaction. But at the same time, I think a lot more people participated in the discussion board. Because you know when you take classes there is always —and it may be in this upper level courses it may be different—but my experience in other courses where you take a class there is only four or five people that ever really assert themselves and put their ideas out. And so you don't get—everyone else is just like a wallflower—just do your time and get out. But in this it seems that a lot of people felt more comfortable—the anonymity of a discussion board where all they have is a name and they don't really know you and there were a couple of discussions that I felt pretty passionate about that I may not have asserted myself [in the traditional class], especially in my position [as a police officer].

I found the concept of anonymity to be interesting and saw a conflict in this as well.

When questioned about this, the students said that they felt anonymous in that nobody could physically see them. However, they also did not feel anonymous because everyone had to post discussions because the course required it. Chris made this point when he said,

So, in one way I missed interaction, but I think we got a lot more at least online interaction from everybody. Everybody was able to put their ideas in, because you had to—I mean it was part of the grade.

Brian seemed to embrace the changes he saw in the process as compared to the beginning of the class regarding anonymity.

I think just like I said, I think in the online class you are forced to interact with

every question that the teacher wants you to interact with. And sitting in a traditional classroom, um, I have really taken a lot of traditional classes, I've taken the ones I have to and everything else is taken online, but even there, no matter if it's been math class, English class, you've got the people who will always comment. And then, like me, if he [the instructor] is not directing something right at me I sit back. I don't think I learn as much, because I am not forced to interact as much.

Adam offered an interesting insight into the dynamics of the face-to-face interaction and online communication, as backed up by the experiences of the others.

In some traditional classes discussions occur, but they are easily sidetracked and go off on tangents irrelevant to course material or objectives. With online classes, the actual posted discussions are very focused and relevant to course materials/objectives.

Brian offered his similar opinion in this way:

You get a lot more opinions from everybody in the class because everybody is required to have the answers. You get all sides, a variety of comments from someone who has never been into the service who is just kind of coming into it, to people that have been there for years and years. So you get the "I don't know about this, but this sounds great," to the "real experienced that are able to put some thought into it."

Chris also gave his opinion and assessment to the communication and socialization taking place within the class.

I like working on the discussion boards. It allows me to glean knowledge from a lot of experienced individuals who are in the class with me. I believe that it would be more beneficial if we were in a classroom setting but then I don't believe that a lot of these individuals would be in the class with me.

He also later added, "The class is going well, though and I do enjoy seeing other perspectives on things from the other students."

David had a unique perspective on why the discussion board format might be even better than a face-to-face communication.

From a learning aspect, one of the things the discussion boards I mean I just don't

think you can get that type of in-depth discussion when you sit in a classroom and when you are in the classroom you are limited to an hour or three hours or whatever your time frame is. Sometimes I mean that on that discussion board I have had discussions back and forth with an individual in the class that have lasted a full week. You know that whole week's assignment it's back and forth, my point and your point. I really like the discussion board format. I think that's been one of the biggest benefits for me.

Adam confirmed David's feeling with an interesting perspective in one of his journal entries.

I personally like to follow some of the discussions between a few of the students. Being a third party observer allows me an interesting angle at viewing both side of the discussion. Sometimes when you're in an involved discussion it's difficult to listen, we usually feel like we have to talk , talk, talk and then when we're not talking we spend that brief moment thinking about what we want to say next; so we never actually listen to the other party at all.

Adam also shared one of the true benefits of the online discussion board communication that is not really available in the traditional class—returning to the conversation after it has taken place.

It's easy to move on and not look back at the various discussion topics. However, I find it enlightening and beneficial. The comments of other students keep cycling through, even after I have made comments. Many of the other students in this course are from the Law enforcement industry and have a much different perspective on their jobs and life. I find it more effective to respond to others comments with a real life example. Apply the response to an actual, applicable life experience. I tried this with the discussion on "Open Door Policy" and felt like it added a whole new angle on the conversation.

David, in one of his journal entries, seemed to encapsulate the experiences and perceptions of the group regarding the communication of the online class.

I finished up on all my discussion boards. This has been a really good class for getting the students talking on the discussion board. There have been a lot of strong feelings come out. It really makes it interesting and increases my desire to post when it is something I feel strongly about.

The experiences of the students regarding socialization produced some interesting

phenomena. As the students were relaying their experiences and perceptions I noticed that many of them sought some social interaction and reinforcement from other people who were not students in this class. This may be the same in the face-to-face classes, but it appeared to be something brought out by the students both in the interviews and the journal entries. It appeared to me that when they needed some socialization not being provided in the course itself, (which may or may not have been available in the traditional courses) they sought other ways of having interaction. Some found it with family, some with neighbors, and some with work associates. Adam offered two examples he used during this class with family members.

I enjoy reading my papers to my family members, once I have reached the proof reading/editing/revising stage. I get input and suggestions. I think its valuable time spent and often leads to great discussion and they get a chance to open up and tell me of their in-sites. I learn from their stories.

I had a conversation with my dad about budget processes. My dad was a former mayor, former city council member and is currently the assistant chief with the fire department. He explained some of his experiences about budget planning. My dad referred me to research some information on the Utah League of Cities and Towns. When I found the ULCT web-site, I easily found training and education material for newly appointed and elected officials. This material is intended for any and all people who might find themselves in office, so the information was easy to understand and full of terms and fundamental explanations.

Chris was aware of some neighbors and also some people who had taken the class before him. He contacted them when he needed reinforcement or had questions.

Yeah, whatever I needed I sought from either the discussion board or the other book and just sought it that way. Plus there were a couple guys that had taken courses previously that I would go up to and ask, "What do you think about this?," or, I tried my ideas on them. So, I sought it on Sunday.

David, as previously mentioned, went to his supervisors and city administrators to get

some reinforcement and interaction. He said, “Not only in the book, but I have been talking with my administrators and doing research on the Internet.”

*Student/Instructor Interaction*

Interaction and communication between the instructor and the students was the one area where the students shared negative perceptions and experiences. Lack of timely instructor feedback (within a day or two for the online environment) was a big concern and was shared by the students openly. As reported in Theme I, the students experienced and enjoyed the ability to self-direct some of their education. However, there seemed to be a concern when the instructor did not respond with at least minimal feedback. I felt as they spoke with me that there was a strong desire to have their work or opinions validated by the instructor and it was not happening.

Well, the feedback I did get I liked, but I don't think it was as personable. But, I thought it was constructive and either way, it was good to know that you were recognized and somebody read your work. I wish more people could have read it, I like showing it to other people. So, in that way it was satisfying, but then at the same time it was like—I still kind of felt like the feedback was lacking and that, I don't know... It's funny, if I could just add, there's—in just learning about people when instructing they treat the students and stuff and there's like the “first impression theory,” where it's like based on your first paper and the first impression, if you did ok and they like you, then from then on you're pretty much okay. But if you missed the first day or your first assignment was kind of shoddy, then from then on you kind of just do so-so. I had wondered like if with the grades and stuff I got if it was just kind of that first thing, because my first couple of papers I felt were ok. After that I did fine, but I like, well is it just falling into that stereotype or isn't it, you know, heh, heh? (Adam)

Brian felt much the same way.

I have been thinking that it would be nice if the instructor would interact with us more on the discussion board. We have no feedback from him unless we do an e-mail to him. If we were in a classroom there would be feedback on both sides of things being talked about.

In a later journal entry he still felt much the same way and was sharing some frustration with the feedback loop.

I still think it would be nice to see some comments by the instructor at times. As I have said if we were in class he would have some feed back to what was being said. I know he can't respond to all of them.

David was also seeking validation from the instructor and not feeling as though he was receiving it.

I received good grades on all my assignments, but there was no feedback to say that things were right or wrong. In my traditional classes it has always been the feedback that helps. It is one thing to read a book, but it is much different to read a book and then validate what you have learned via the assignments or from instructor feedback.

This interested me and I followed by asking if this lack of feedback was due to the online environment. The replies were consistent among the students that it seemed that this particular class seemed to have a greater lack of participation by the instructor than previous classes they had participated in. They also said that in comparison with a face-to-face class, the feedback may or may not be different, depending on the instructor, but it was definitely a slower feedback process in the online environment. They felt this, however, was not necessarily a detriment to their education. In the initial interviews when asked about their online experiences, all of the students had taken previous online classes and their experiences with the instructors were not a significant issue. "But I've not had an instructor yet that hasn't gotten right back to me by e-mail to help me out. It just might take an overnight or something it's not right now like in a classroom setting, lecture type" (David). Brian compared this with the current feedback he was receiving from the instructor to his feelings and experiences in the face-to-face deliveries.

Yeah, well that and when you turn in your assignments, he goes through and outlines you know, “this might sound better if you did this.” So, you get feedback that way but, in a face-to-face classroom obviously you are meeting probably a little bit more often. I think you can go up to him and say, “What about this section?” You know instead of just getting it all done and hoping you did it right. You can kind of get comments throughout your paper if you need a little bit of help saying, “well maybe you need to do this” instead getting a comment at the back, you know, where you maybe could have got maybe a better grade.

However, with this class the issue developed and continued throughout the course. In a subsequent journal entry, David offered the following frustration,

I do not think there has been a significant difference [between online or face-to-face] until the last class where the instructor had no interaction with me. I received no feedback on the papers and e-mail took up to three weeks to be answered. In the past the instructors have been a big part of the class and I can really see the difference in the learning.

When the feedback was not forthcoming, one student found other ways to validate or find answers. When responding to one of my questions regarding the impact on his learning with a lack of feedback, Chris responded by stating that it did not have much impact, but he found feedback through other means.

Yeah, whatever I needed I sought from either the discussion board or the other book and just sought it that way. Plus there were a couple guys that had taken courses previously that I would go up to and ask, “What do you think about this?,” or, I tried my ideas on them.

When I probed about the need for feedback, Adam felt that if the instructor had given a little more time to the class that his ability to learn would have been enhanced.

Well, there’s like maybe an emotional tie, but I think with stuff like that there’s not like a limit to what you could learn. So, if maybe he, through dedicating more time could have said, “you know this right here, when you said this, have you ever thought and considered this aspect of it?” And then that in turn could have, you know, made me, I don’t know, could have prompted me to do whatever. I don’t know.

He also added this perspective.



Online discussions allow students to virtually participate in a class discussion. For most courses there is a new topic every week determined by the instructor. I like it when the instructors participate, adding insight to students' opinions and comments. In this format, the discussion boards allow us to comment and reply to other students' postings as well.

Brian felt much the same as Adam, and responded similarly: "I don't think it has any effect, but it is nice to get somebody who's been through it that is teaching us and his point of view, rather than just all of the students' points of view too."

At one point in the interview, I asked each student what he would do differently if he were the instructor or if he had a chance to change something in the experience. The most common general comment I received was to have an instructor provide more timely and relevant feedback throughout the entire course; this also included precise instructions and course design, which would help eliminate confusion on the part of the students.

Adam provided the most comprehensive response to this question.

I think well if I were given the chance to be the lead instructor in one of the online courses, I think I would try to, first of all get very solid and clear organization of the IT material to where when somebody logs on and gets to the portal or whatever, they know exactly, you know, where this is, where this is, where to click and where to begin. Because in the first couple of days you just kind of look on there and it's just like this big Greek puzzle and you just kind of have to go through everything and piecemeal it all together. And so, I don't really have the skills to know how to do it, but I would just want to make sure that I, I kind of cleared some of that up a little bit, so to avoid that initial confusion and just ease in operating it. And, I would probably encourage as much participation with the discussions as I could. I think that is good practice and it kind of helps you just feel like you are involved with it and you feel like you are and so you want to try harder. And I think I would also, I would try to give as much feedback as I could to the papers, to even comments and stuff like that and just so they know that I didn't just make up a curriculum a couple of years ago and it's the same one and it's never changed and that I am still there updating it and going through it with them.

Even though there were negatively perceived experiences with the student/

instructor feedback loop, there were also, as explained previously, feelings that the instructor feedback was not as important as first believed (see the subtheme on self-directedness/self-discipline and the subtheme on paradigmatic shifting). I found that developing or constructing their own learning schema seemed as important as instructor feedback and appeared to create paradoxical beliefs within the students' value systems, as presented in the next section.

### *Paradigmatic Shifting and Conflicted Beliefs on Learning*

One interesting phenomenon the analysis of the data provided was what appeared to be a paradigmatic conflict. The prevailing belief, paradigm, or learning schema was that the face-to-face classes provide better instruction and facilitation of learning than asynchronous, online deliveries. During the initial interviews, all of the students shared that they thought the face-to-face delivery would be superior to the asynchronous, online delivery. They all had reservations at the beginning of their online experiences about how the program would work and what type and depth of learning could be accomplished. However, the data revealed that the paradigm was shifting or had shifted. This paradigmatic shift seemed to create a sense of inner turmoil or a struggle with acceptance of the new or developing schemas for the students.

I chose to report the data of this subtheme by showing the conflicting statements, perceptions and experiences of each student individually. I feel this gives a more accurate and richer representation of the lived experience of each student.

In my first interview with David, he told me about some of the apprehension he

had when he first enrolled in the online degree program.

My apprehensions I guess to begin with, were just the unknown. I mean I have been out of school for almost 15 years since I was in college; so, just kind of the unknown. But I think really that was my only apprehension, like I said, and the online to be able to do it when I had time to do it and not have to go to class, like five to six Monday, Wednesday, Friday or whatever; if I had just a couple of hours to be able to work on it.

He did not feel as much tie to the traditional deliveries as some of the others, but there was some intimidation. In the first interview, I asked him if he thought the role of the instructor and depth of the education was different between the traditional and online deliveries. His reply is revealing.

No, no I don't think it's different. I just, it's just something I'm not used to. I think there's a little more. I think there's a lot of instructors that I know or I know of them and their credentials and it's a touch intimidating to me to be writing a paper to them, you know? And after that first paper, I get over that intimidation. I think that is different than the traditional sitting in a class with 60 other guys and most of the time you think that instructor up there is not even going to see your paper. Where the classes here have been about 10 to 15 students and you know that instructor is going to see and read your paper. And you know what they've done in their career. You have that respect for where they've been and what they've done and so that intimidation factor is there a little bit, for me at least.

David relayed some apprehension with the assignments and with the format. However, he was starting to realize he was learning more in the online environment.

My frustration, I guess, would be the research and I bring that up—I've had a hard time this week with research actually so, it's kind of fresh in my mind. I really haven't had much frustration other than that. I really actually enjoyed the classes. I was apprehensive about the papers having not written papers forever. But I've really enjoyed them actually. It's really surprised me and this is going to go back to some of the other question but, it's really surprised me how much I've learned studying by myself. Um, I guess this would go back to one of the apprehensions that I didn't think of before about the online class, but how much you really learn by yourself. You know what I mean? Without having the traditional lecture setting and I've been pleasantly surprised at how much I have picked up and how much I've learned.

He described the depth of learning he was experiencing in the online format as compared to the traditional face-to-face delivery.

From a learning aspect, one of the things—the discussion boards I mean—I just don't think you can get that type of in depth discussion when you sit in a classroom; and when you are in the classroom you are limited to an hour or three hours or whatever your time frame is. Sometimes, I mean, that on that discussion board I have had discussions back and forth with an individual in the class that have lasted a full week. You know that whole week assignment it's back and forth, my point and your point. I really like the discussion board format. I think that's been one of the biggest benefits for me. It is, one of the other things I have really kind of enjoyed, it's forced—I don't know forced—but to remember how to do research or how to define study skills which has really helped me in my job, just taking a promotional exam, stuff like that.

In the final interview, these were David's feelings regarding the online program and his ability to learn.

As I have stated before, I feel the instructor has a huge role in the class. I do not think that role is any different with technology than face-to-face. This class has proven that to me. In previous classes the instructor was very involved and it made all the difference. *I enjoy the online classes, and I believe that I can learn more because I can go at my pace and I do not have to find time to attend a regularly scheduled class [emphasis added].*

Chris was the most vocal regarding his preference for the traditional delivery as compared to an online class. He made this point clear in our initial interview.

I still enjoy the interaction. I would still, if it was possible, I would still rather have the face-to-face. Like those firemen that I know, they are actually taking the same classes and they are having some people come in and teach at the fire station, because you know the firemen are right there anyway, waiting for you know—they are on call and they can all kind of gather there and you know I am jealous of that. I wish I could be in that, because I know me as an individual, I would learn more, I think I would learn more, depending on the variable of the instructor I guess. But, typically I would learn more.

A little later in the course, Chris is still feeling this way and wrote about it in his journal regarding communication. He is, however, appreciative of the convenience.

These classes are difficult because all communication is so informal, I have said it before and I'll say it again I think that I would do better and retain more if I was able to attend this class in a traditional classroom setting, but you just can't beat the convenience of online courses.

When asked to describe his experience, and comparing what he has felt about the online course to traditional deliveries, Chris seemed to have some ambiguity.

That is kind of hard...Initially I—I mean like Administrative Decentralization—and it took me a while to grasp like what is that? I mean it is a concept that we are all familiar with but I didn't know with a name attached to it; you know everything is kind of branched out and the Political Equity—I'm like, the political equity, what is that? So, I think it was taught well in the form that it is, but I think I still missed a lot of interaction. But at the same time, I think a lot more people participated in the discussion board. Because you know when you take classes there is always—and it may be in this upper level courses it may be different—but my experience in other courses where you take a class there is only four or five people that ever really assert themselves and put their ideas out. And so you don't get—everyone else is just like a wallflower—just do your time and get out. But in this it seems that a lot of people felt more comfortable—the anonymity of a discussion board where all they have is a name and they don't really know you and there were a couple of discussions that I felt pretty passionate about that I may not have asserted myself, especially in my position. I would be one of the one or two cops amongst everyone in the fire service and so I would be the odd-man-out. So, I may not have been quite as passionate in saying this is it, because when they say how fire service is and people working together, that happens, but there is also that rift [between firefighters and police officers] that has always existed. So, in one way I missed interaction, but I think we got a lot more, at least online interaction from everybody. Everybody was able to put their ideas in, because you had to—I mean it was part of the grade.

Chris's attitude begins to shift a little in some subsequent journal entries. He stated, "The class seems to be going better and better for me and I can only hope that it shows in the work that I have been turning in."

Interestingly, Chris shows the conflict, but also an acceptance or recognition that his paradigm may be transforming by his response to one of my questions in an interview.

And so, I appreciate online. I don't think the depth suffers, you know, because it

causes me—it puts more responsibility on me. And so I guess it's up to me what I learn. It kind of goes back to that first thing. I don't—I appreciate when people leave their comfort zone, that talk in class, especially in something I am not completely familiar with. But, that just doesn't happen. But, I like the way the course is taught. It is a little more difficult to initially grasp, but a lot it—I think a lot of people would struggle with tradition of things, but I have taken a lot of the online courses and I love them because of not only the convenience, but I am able to sit at a computer and then say “what is this” and then read up on it or Google the thing and there is a whole world out there versus, you know, thirty people. But, I like the war stories. You know that is something I like. Somebody will say what about this? And then they'll say “well I went to a fire and here's what happened.” Or, “you know I had a friend fall through a floor.” You know, here is the danger of it. I like that aspect of it and you miss that. But some of that also comes in the discussion boards.

In one interview, when I asked if there was anything Chris would like to add to the interview, he offered a different view than previously expressed. His response was “Just that I thoroughly enjoy the online.”

Adam was probably the most comfortable with the online environment, but also had some reservations and felt more familiarity with the traditional face-to-face delivery.

I started out as a traditional student six years ago. I only had one semester of traditional, on-campus, regular-hours classes. The following semester I began to take a combination of day/night classes to orchestrate some flexibility with my employer. Since then I've made a career switch into the fire service and the only option after that was online/distance-ed courses.

Adam also, showed some ambiguous feelings in a journal entry regarding formal communications and the lack of the communicative nuances lacking in the online environment.

In some ways it's good for students to learn to correspond and communicate formally through the internet. But on the other hand, online courses don't provide the necessary personal, face-to-face- social interactions and communication skills necessary for leadership development. For individuals that are striving for positions in public administration and management, personal communications skills are essential. Some of the finer nuances of communication cannot be taught from an online class—like facial expression, body language, facial features,

nervousness, eye-contact, posturing. Not only interpreting non-verbal communication, but also diffusing problems and calming situations. It's also handy to be able to express yourself in non-threatening ways, and how to help a subordinate feel more comfortable and relaxed when trying to communicate with you. I think it would be nice to have coaching on some of these methods of communicating on a personal level.

In the follow-up interview, I asked Adam if he felt like the online class helped facilitate his education more in spite of the interruptions he was experiencing. His reply was thoughtful.

Yeah, and I would say I was able to plan it out and still dedicate the time to it and the distraction of it still exists. But, I felt like the time I put in to it, I got more out than all the time I would have had to dedicate to a traditional class.

Adam also shared in a journal entry some other comparison information that showed his recognition of a possible paradigmatic shift in his thinking.

One other benefit to online classes is the discussions are more involved and focused when they are actually going on. In a traditional classroom, there are days when it's focused and days when it is not. Often it's determined by the way the instructor is feeling that day. In some traditional classes discussions occur, but they are easily sidetracked and go off on tangents irrelevant to course material or objectives. With online classes, the actual posted discussions are very focused and relevant to course materials/objectives. It is still easy to get distracted when doing online class work, by checking personal e-mail, funny *You Tube* video clips, web surfing, listening to music, telephone call, if you're on-duty you may get emergency calls, at home-you're wife/family members can come in a distract you, etc. I guess no class is free from distractions of staying on-task and on-topic.

From another journal entry, Adam shared some reflections on the online class and learning He stated: "In taking these courses, I believe that most of the benefit and education comes in the process [of being self-directed]." This is consistent with something he shared in his interview contrasting the traditional face-to-face delivery with the online format. He seemed to be accepting a new schema when he found the new format as an equally effective, if not better, alternative to traditional deliveries.

I think the online experience is a little bit better because where in a traditional class you would be going to class and then you would still have to come back and do your reading and study and then write your papers. Here I can pretty much do it all at once. It's kind of all in the same process for me. Where if the baby runs in and interrupts me or the phone rings or whatever, it is kind of expected, yet with a traditional class that would be above and beyond and I would get interrupted anyway plus all the hours I would have had to spend sitting in class. So, it kind of cuts all of that down to actually just the action of it instead of passively going to class.

Brian's experiences and perceptions seemed similar to everyone else's as well. In the initial interview, when asked to talk about his experience in the online classes in contrast with his experience in traditional deliveries. He felt that the traditional may be a better model.

I think it I think maybe overall you maybe learn a bit more on a face-to-face; just because I think, where am I going with this...I think facial reactions, expressions and the instructor may be a little more in all this because just in the online obviously, if you want to ask the instructor something, you have to go to his e-mail and actually ask him a question instead of him kind of coming in and saying that was a good comment, you know, or "what about this?" You know to maybe to further up somebody else's comments. I know there were a lot of comments that went for a long time. But still, I think you miss that a little bit, you know, you can say that during a discussion he might bring up another point that might spur another type of subject.

He reinforced this with an early journal entry.

I think one downfall to online classes is you do not get to see the instructor or other students; all we get is a name. When you have questions you have to wait for them to respond to your e-mail and that could take a few days. By then, the assignment is past due and it is too late for an answer.

However, the conflicts in perception were also present. When asked to describe his online experience he offered a change from before. "I enjoyed it. I think no matter what you do you are going to learn if you put forth the effort to want to learn. So, overall I think it was a good experience" (Brian). He also begins to seem a little confused with



his experience, but is recognizing a shift in his thinking. He wrote in his journal the following: “As I look back over the last month as I have taken this class I don't know if I would get more out of sitting in a classroom or not.” This was also corroborated with another of Brian’s reflective journal entries.

I think sometimes in the classroom, you get the personal aspect of it. So, you kind of miss that. In another way, the online course makes, also forces you to get more involved, instead of sitting there in class all night and everyone sitting around you answering the questions; you have to get involved also...more in depth.

As to be expected, there were small differences in the mental schemes or paradigms of each of the students. However, in a general sense this paradigmatic conflict was apparent in each of them. In fact, after identifying this particular theme, I conducted a follow-up interview with each and shared what had been discovered. I asked each of them if he could explain why he felt a reluctance to let go of the belief that the traditional delivery would be better, rather than accept that the online experience, as each reported, may have provided a deeper and better learning experience. After reflecting on it for a few moments, each of them similarly felt that it might be tradition and a familiarity with past experience causing the turmoil or conflict. However, each of them was appreciative of this delivery medium and all reported that they would continue enrolling and participating in asynchronous, online courses. Their mental schemas appeared to be changing.

### Summary

The students participating in this study had rich, interesting experiences with, and perceptions of the asynchronous, online environment. Each started with what I

interpreted as preconceived and previously defined beliefs or schemes regarding what to expect in an online class.

The online delivery medium provided opportunities for education, which previously had been out of their reach. With these opportunities also came the abilities to self-direct the depth and richness of their learning. This became an important experience for these students. As the class progressed and they began to more deeply reflect on their experiences, these preconceived ideas were challenged and they began to reveal schematic changes or paradigmatic shifts.

However, the new shifting paradigm(s) also created confusion and turmoil with their worldview. Challenging beliefs and values is in my opinion, what education is all about. I believe that these students were deeply affected by their experiences and came away from the class with more acceptance and willingness to see asynchronous, online delivery of classes as an effective means of acquiring education. While they may not be totally convinced that the medium can or should replace traditional delivery methods, they embraced and will continue using this method of pursuing higher education and attaining degrees. They were affected by the experience and appeared to accept it into their worldview.

The experience of these students in an asynchronous, online environment appeared to be filled with comparison and contrast. While using prior experience and learning schemas, the students entered into the online experience seeking to find a similar experience from their past. However, they seemed to immediately recognize the need to shift how they viewed the course.

First of all, they had to accept the fact that feedback would be delayed as opposed to the immediate feedback they had previously experienced. This was most evident in the student/instructor interaction. They all reported they would have preferred more feedback from the instructor, but also believed that the lack of feedback did not hamper their learning.

Second, the students also had to construct new ways of communicating. The delay in response created by an asynchronous environment gave them the opportunity to frame and/or shape their opinions and communications before presenting them. This delay seemed to be a benefit to the students, because they knew their responses had to be more thoughtful and complete than the responses given in a face-to-face dialogue. The delay was reported by the students as a benefit to their learning processes.

Social interaction was also altered. While a community of learning existed in the class, the students also found other methods of social interaction, which impacted their ability to learn. They reported this as a positive impact, because they had to take responsibility for their own learning and not be as dependent on the instructor as in prior learning situations. They reported this as helpful in getting more from the class.

In conclusion, the material being presented in the class was not much different than could be expected in a traditional class. However, the students constructed new ways of dealing with difficulties and found a way to make the learning environment work for them, or they developed new learning schemas to fit the situation. They found that their learning was not hampered, but in many ways, enhanced.

## CHAPTER V

## DISCUSSION

The starting point for this study was my love of teaching and my desire to make higher education more available to the nontraditional student. Having spent a large part of my adult life engaged in the pursuit of education while employed in a discipline with work schedules not conducive to attendance, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the nature and essence of the experience of the nontraditional student in a relatively new delivery method—an asynchronous, online environment. While performing an initial investigation of this topic, I found the literature replete with quantitative data specifically comparing and contrasting the traditional face-to-face delivery and the online environment with regard to cognition. Yet, I found a remarkable lack of qualitative data regarding the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of the nontraditional adult student. Because technology-based, online delivery is a relatively new way of facilitating higher education and is a much more convenient method of attaining a degree for the nontraditional student, my curiosity of how it would be experienced and perceived was piqued. My curiosity led to the research question, “How do nontraditional, adult undergraduate students experience asynchronous, online instruction?”

In this chapter, a discussion on the results and their impact will be presented. Because constructivism was the theoretical lens of this study, I believe it appropriate to review the results relative to the constructivist views, which will be presented in the first section. Secondly, a discussion on the themes will be presented. Then, to better understand the data and the analysis, I also feel it appropriate to revisit some of the

material from the literature review. While it may seem to be repetitive, I believe to revisit this area strengthens the report and gives the reader a better opportunity to understand the lived experiences of these nontraditional adult students in relation to known theories and assumptions.

### Constructivism

As was presented earlier, constructivism was the theoretical lens used for this study. The lived experiences of the students in this study appear to fit with the constructivist theory of learning. Constructivists assert that learners have some prior knowledge and experience as a basis from which to test out their beliefs or hypotheses and to build their own set of content (beliefs or schemas) for solving problems. This assertion is based on the premise that the student has active participation in constructing meaning rather than the passive acquisition of reading and writing skills and knowledge (Dixon-Krauss, 1996). In other words, learning is active, situated, and social (McDonald & Thompson, 2005). Constructivism at its core is learner-centric, meaning that the focus of instruction puts the learner's needs before the instructor in the instructional activity. The instructor is no longer the means by which knowledge is imparted; in other words, all knowledge does not have to pass through the instructor.

### *Developmental and Social Learning*

One could argue that these experiences supported both Piaget's developmental learning theory and Vygotsky's social development theory at the same time. Piaget's theory suggested that the key to growth and maturity of the student is through a twofold

process of accommodation of existing cognitive structures and assimilation or interpretation of environmental events based on existing cognitive structures. The students of this study were basically allowed to construct their own learning through some semiguided instructional activities and through dialog with other students and/or the instructor. They were not given specific structures to follow and were allowed to assimilate and use what they constructed in written, reflective assignments. Since there was no exam in this course and grading was done on how well the students incorporated their knowledge and learning into the written papers, the students were allowed to create or construct their own learning based on previous paradigms or schemas and then synthesize structure using the new knowledge.

Vygotsky's social development theory suggested that all learning takes place in a social environment and that the learner is gaining knowledge through the social structure or interaction with the social environment. Social constructivist theory has promulgated the idea with some, that distance education is inferior because effective learning needs to be situated in activity, context, and culture or a community of practice. In fact, many believe that distance education lacks the essential components of tangible peers, mentors and contiguous social environments (Marsh, 2005). Critics of the distance educational and social constructivism have asserted that spatial proximity is prerequisite. The experience of the students in this study seemed to be at odds with that assertion. Spatial proximity was not found to be as important as just the ability to communicate in some form or another. The students started out believing that spatial proximity was important, but later admitted they did not experience a learning disadvantage by being separated by

space and time.

In some of his later works, Vygotsky developed the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined as the distance between the actual developmental level and the level of potential development, through problem solving, under guidance of an instructor or more capable peer (Marsh, 2005). Basically, Vygotsky asserts that learning is a social function and can be enhanced when a mentor, whether a teacher or a more knowledgeable and/or skillful peer provides some explanatory instruction. The students of this study experienced social learning through discussion board communication and instructor guided feedback. While the study shows that the instructor feedback was limited but constructive, there was also much evidence that social learning was facilitated in the student-to-student interactions. As was pointed out in the results (Chapter IV), when the student(s) had issues or questions with some concept, he/they would seek counsel from someone either in the class or outside of the situated structure. Therefore, learning was enhanced by social interaction. Marsh (2005) stated,

There is no reason to believe that people cannot learn through distance education or through another, as yet discovered, socially-constructed artifact for that purpose, for it is obvious that this is exactly what learners do. The ZPD is situated with the mature learner. (n.p.)

The experiences and perceptions of the students in this study fit that premise. They reported an appreciation of learning from other students who may have had more experience in some areas and were willing to share this experience with the rest of the group.

The data of this study seem to support the constructivist theory of learning. In

particular it demonstrated to me that students may experience learning in the Piaget's developmental learning theory and Vygotsky's social learning theory. They do not appear to be independent of each other, but possibly interdependent in the online experience. The experience of the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous learning environment appears to be consistent with both theories.

*Endogenous, Exogenous, and Dialectic Constructivism*

As previously discussed, constructivism involves students constructing knowledge based on their understanding. Some additional interpretations of constructivism include endogenous, exogenous, and dialectic constructivism (Gueldenzoph, 2003). The results of this study demonstrated and supported these interpretations.

Endogenous (from within) constructivism asserts that the student learns from within. The results of this study discussed in Chapter IV support this premise. All of the students related the experience of developing their own learning or knowledge acquisition through self-direction/self-discipline. The ability to research in areas of interest while still working within the parameters of the course outlines and concepts allowed the students to construct meaning based on their previous experiences and paradigms. The meaning construction was facilitated by use of the Internet and the readily and seemingly endless resources the Web provides.

Using the resources of the Internet however, also led to some analysis and reflective activity. Just having large volumes of information available virtually at one's



fingertips is not very useful if it cannot be placed into a meaningful construct. The students, through the interviews and journal entries presented in Chapter IV, shared their experience and appreciation for the ability to delve into topics, research at their own pace and interest level, and then try to synthesize or at least apply the new knowledge in some meaningful and relevant way. As Adam said in Chapter IV,

I have tasks early on and I can dive into it and then I am given a lot more liberties of how I want to do it, when I want to do it and I think it just, I create a better learning environment um, rather than having to hit little benchmarks that someone else—it's more like I am given an objective, just like a broad, um, I don't know, just like a broad concept of here's what we're doing, submit your work after you're done. And then I go through and learn what I'm—as much as I can and hopefully can piece it all together in some sort of a document and get a grade for it.

David also shared a similar experience with endogenous constructivism,

Think it through, you know, you read a book sometimes and maybe you have just kind of a general platform if you will, a small platform of what they're trying to teach, but then if you go to other areas to extract the data or research what somebody else has done and has 3 or 4 references, plus the book you're reading and just process them all together.

Exogenous constructivism, though much more limited was also demonstrated within this study. While the students all felt there could have and should have been more student/instructor interaction, the course objectives and tutorial material, including the text, provided a guided learning experience. The instructor feedback which was received was appreciated. The interesting part of this study regarding exogenous constructivism wasn't necessarily the interaction with the course, instructor, and other tutorial or mentor-like interactions, but the student's ability to sense how much more learning and knowledge they could have constructed with a more direct and intimate relationship with the instructor. It became obvious to me through their journals entries and interview

responses that while they felt extremely good about the learning process and their overall experience with the online delivery, including the limited instructor feedback, they also sensed or even consciously recognized the value of an exogenous constructivist opportunity and had an awareness of what was missed in this experience.

Dialectic constructivism was a very important part of the overall experience of the students and was reported as one of the best parts of the online learning experience. As reported initially, communication was a concern for the students with respect to online learning—the lack of interaction in the “traditional” sense. However as the results indicated, the socialization of the students in this online environment was enhanced regarding their ability to construct meaning and knowledge then articulate their positions to other students.

The results of this study seemed to support the endogenous, exogenous, and dialectic constructivism theory. The students, through their assignments and discussion board conversations, had to understand their own feelings and/or positions on the topics (endogenous), understand their knowledge concerning the existing material/information presented by the course and/or instructor (exogenous), and have meaningful discussion and debate with other students by articulating personal views as well as relating to others’ opinions and perspectives (dialectic).

### *Transformational Learning*

Within the constructivist framework, another learning theory has been developed called transformative learning. This theory, espoused by Jack Mezirow, defined learning as the process of constructing new or revised meaning of experience using prior

interpretation to guide future action (Mezirow, 2000). He described his theory as a “constructivist theory of adult learning” (Mezirow, 1991, p.31), and his theory is concerned with how adults make sense of their experience(s). Learning is a process of using previous interpretation to construe or revise a new interpretation of the meaning from ones’ experience, thereby guiding future action or actions (Merriam et al., 2007). Mezirow differentiated between types of meaning structures, including frames of reference, points of view and habits of mind (Merriam et al.). He indicated that frame of reference is a perspective in meaning or a set of assumptions and expectations through which one filters sense impressions. He further pointed out there are two dimensions to a frame of reference: habits of mind and points of view (Mezirow, 2000). Hence, transformative learning occurs when there is a transformation in a belief/attitude or an entire perspective (Merriam et al.).

This study appeared to fit or support the transformative learning theory as well. In the beginning the students discussed a belief in the superiority of the learning experience provided in the traditional face-to-face delivery of instruction. This belief was based in an historical frame of reference, which included points of view and habits of mind. In this study, the students expressed their comfort with the familiar or traditional ways of learning (their learning schemas) and believed that to not have experience available to them, may make the online experience lacking in depth and meaning. However, as the data suggest, this point of view was not consistent with their experiences and over the course of the study, their points of view began to morph. It appeared that they wanted to hold on to their initial points of view, but experienced dissonance while trying to

maintain those long-held beliefs. The data suggest that the students transformed their schemas into acceptance of and appreciation for the asynchronous, online learning environment as equal, or possibly superior to the traditional delivery methods.

As students progress developmentally, their epistemic assumptions become increasingly complex, providing greater capacity for differentiating and reorganizing *how* they know the experience of learning, not just *what* they know. (Erickson, 2007, p. 64)

While this experience for the students was maybe not a complete transformation, they seemed to reorganize how they know of the learning experience as well as what they know, therefore had a transformational learning experience. There are four main components of Mezirow's transformative learning process: (a) experience, (b) critical reflections, (c) a form of reflective discourse, and (d) action (Merriam et al., 2007). The analyses of the data of this study previously presented seemed to support these criteria and therefore assert transformational learning occurred.

The students of this study were somewhat left to find their own experience and knowledge through Internet-based communication with other students and the instructor. This process is consistent with the assertion that constructivism is characterized by an experience or experiences in which the students "construct" through reflection an understanding of meaning from their actions in the world (Fenwick, 2000). They basically constructed knowledge through prior experience, the written assignments, and reflective practice. These experiences fit the constructivist foci of instruction, which are cognitive development and deep understanding (Fosnot & Perry, 2005).

#### Discussion of the Themes

The following section of this chapter is a discussion of the themes and findings as they related to the lived experiences of the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous, online learning environment. I discuss the findings of the current study and my interpretation of the rich lived experience of the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous, online learning environment. Next, I will present a discussion of the study results and their relationship with learning theories and assumptions. The learning theories and assumptions are: adult learning models, metacognition, and the affective domain. A model of the nontraditional, online student that emerged and was created from the data is also presented and discussed. I also suggest implications of the findings with respect to the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous learning environment. I offer my final reflections and lastly, I provide recommendations for further research.

### *Nontraditional Adult Learning*

As presented in the previous chapter, the student fitting the nontraditional adult profile had some unique challenges, barriers or roadblocks to negotiate, and some rich experiences. Two important themes were revealed through analyses of the data that, though not tied directly to the asynchronous online learning environment, were a big part of the overall experience of these students and cannot be ignored or marginalized. They are: the value of education and life's interruptions. My discussion of these will be brief, based on the fact that there is already a plethora of literature regarding the adult student's challenges and experiences with educational pursuits. For the purposes of this study, I deemed these themes as not directly related to the asynchronous online experience. In other words, these experiences would most likely be present in any learning environment

and not specific to online learning. However, as I previously stated, this is part of the holistic view of the experiences and perceptions of the nontraditional adult student and must be taken into account.

*The value of education.* As much of the literature suggest, the value of education to the working adult who has not previously pursued or has very little successful experience with formal higher education, can be or is very important. This feeling was certainly consistent among the students of this study. Each of these students had some prior higher-educational experiences, though at differing levels. Each had, at one time or another, taken time away from the pursuit of education for work, family, or personal reasons. Now upon returning to school, each expressed a deeper realization of the importance of education—not only for possible advancement or career change, but for the sake of providing a good example to family members. They demonstrated that their learning schemas had shifted with life’s experience and thereby constructed new modalities for learning.

I found the shifting shemas to be a consistent and interesting part of the study. Throughout the study, as presented in Chapter IV, comments were made by the students regarding their desire to set examples for their children in educational pursuits. The reason for education seems to have become not only a personal pursuit or goal, but had also morphed into a desire for the growth of others. Their belief about the importance of education appeared to have also transformed. I sensed and subsequently found in the data that their reasons for pursuing education were not just to obtain a degree, but to actually gain an education; the degree was secondary to the actual learning. Throughout the study,

they all expressed and demonstrated a desire to go beyond the minimum requirements. Each of them, at one time or another, expressed to me their commitment to reach the goal of becoming better educated and as a secondary benefit, to attain a degree. Their expressions seemed to support the extant literature regarding the assumption that adults want relevant and current information for immediacy of application. Again, this revealed shifting schemas regarding education.

*Life's interruptions.* One of the most common and expressed phenomena of the adult student is the load created by the pressures and demands of life outside of the educational experience, which may have direct impact on learning (McClusky's Theory of Margin will be discussed later in this chapter). This experience was no different for the students of this study. Career or work related demands, family responsibilities, church and social commitments, and other day-to-day issues impacted the students. Throughout their journal entries and the conversational interviews I conducted, this phenomenon was brought up and discussed often. It was not to the same level for each of the participants, at least that was my impression. While all of the students complained about interruptions and the difficulty of finding time to take care of school responsibilities, some complained more readily and more consistently than others.

It is impossible for me to make any sort of inference about these complaints, since I was not a participant or observer in each of their personal lives beyond the study. Yet, I could understand their condition having recently been in a similar situation myself. I did sense and it was often corroborated, that taking this course was difficult at times. However, it was also admitted at one time or another by all of the students, that life's

demands are present and part of anything the students undertook, whether school related or not.

The two themes I just briefly presented were important to understand and a relevant part of the study. Without them, the true experience and perceptions of the nontraditional adult student would be lacking. However, these same experiences appear to be true and exist in most, if not all adults pursuing an education. The purpose of this study however, was to explore the experiences and perceptions of the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous, online learning environment. Therefore as I stated previously, these unanticipated outcomes, while part of the holistic view of the students' lived experience, were not necessarily specific to the online experience and therefore not considered part of the major themes of the study. However, their importance and impact cannot be understated.

#### *Theme I: Flexible Learning*

The flexible learning environment was an important consideration for the students of this study. Flexible learning, by inference, is the ability to study and participate in a class anytime and anywhere. The students in this study were very passionate about the importance of this characteristic of online training. For emergency services workers, this flexibility is paramount to their success as a student and was emphasized by the students in both the interviews and the journal entries. More importantly, flexibility was reported as one of the most critical points in their learning experience. However, the flexibility reported was not just the convenience of the medium itself, but also the ability to be flexible in what and how they learned. Based on this flexibility, three subthemes were



revealed that defined the essence of their asynchronous experience: convenience, self-directedness/self-discipline, and reflectivity. Each of these will be explored below.

*Convenience.* In most of the literature regarding online research, convenience is usually one of the primary considerations for students to take this type of class. The students of this study were no different. Convenience was the reason cited most by these students for choosing to participate in an asynchronous, online learning environment. All of the students participating in this study had full-time jobs working in the emergency services discipline as either a firefighter/paramedic or police officer. The firefighters worked either a 24- or 48-hour shift, depending on where they are employed. Those working a 24-hour shifts work a rotating schedule of 24 hours on shift, 24 hours off, 24 hours on shift, 24 hours off, 24 hours on shift and then 4 days off. Those working 48-hours shifts work 48 hours on shift and four days off. This equates to an average of 56 hours per week. Police officers are usually scheduled for eight-hour shifts, but the schedule rotates so that an officer may work mornings for a period of time, then afternoons, and later night shifts. However, it is rare that the shifts do not go longer, or if need be the officer may be required to put in long over-time hours when investigating crimes, filling out written reports, or testifying in court. For these career-related reasons, the students of this study were grateful for and eager to participate in the online experience, with its accompanying convenience. They reported that if it weren't for this convenience, they would not have been able to participate in the program or finish their education.

Another interesting factor of the convenience reported had financial

consideration. Since many of them lived a good distance from the Western University campus, having to travel long distances to attend class, on top of tuition and fees would have added to the expense of the education. Traveling once or twice a week for an entire semester and the accompanying hardship may have made education difficult at best.

*Self-directedness/self-discipline.* Another aspect of flexibility that was revealed in the study was the ability to self-direct and be responsible for the educational experience. Self-directing, learning schemas have been identified as a component of andragogy (Knowles, 1970). Some identified, self-directing activities are used in traditional and online courses (Whipp & Chiarelli, 2004) They are: (a) forethought (characterized by goal setting and planning activities), (b) performance and self-observation (characterized by note taking, outlining, reducing distractions, relaxation techniques, seeking help from peers/instructor and etc.), and (c) self-reflection (characterized by self-judgment activities like checklists, rubrics, instructor comments, and placing success based on academic performance). The course in this study seemed to match most, if not all of these criteria.

Online students adapt some of these strategies to fit the environment they are in and the students in this study were no exception. In the case study reported by Whipp and Chiarelli (2004), online students adapted their forethought, which traditionally was done by calendars or organizers for setting self-imposed deadlines, to daily log-ons and coordinating of online and offline work. For performance and self-observation, online adaptations were things like printing off materials, working offline to compose and refine discussion postings, and frequent checks of online grade books. Self-reflection adaptations were things like using peers to shape their discussion postings and measuring

success based on technical, social, and/or academic performance. The students of this study reported or discussed many of the same learning schemas and therefore support the findings of the case study of Whipp and Chiarelli referenced above.

The format of the course allowed the student the freedom to self-direct or pursue his interest within the concepts being presented through the online material or assignments. Each student found ways to make the delivery and system work to his benefit. They constructed learning modalities to fit the situation, using prior and present circumstances. The students, in general, also reported that they were very appreciative to work in more detail on or research in areas of interest and that the ability to do this enhanced their learning experience.

All of the student participants reported a deep understanding of their individual responsibility for education. The flexibility of the online environment seemed to enhance this understanding and facilitated the discipline necessary to work in an environment for which there is no apparent or constant authority figure presiding in the class. This allowed each student to set a schedule or to make the time for study and assignments to fit individual needs. While there were deadlines for assignments, which created some stress or pressure, this did not seem to be a big detriment to the student's ability to participate at whatever depth or intensity he desired. Each student reported that this enhanced his experience and created a certain motivation to work beyond the minimum requirement for a grade, particularly in an area or concept for which he had great interest.

This experience supports some of the assumptions and assertions of the literature. Online students must have self-discipline and self-motivation to construct their own

learning modalities for success in the online environment.

If you have these qualities, according to them, only then will you find it a rewarding alternative to traditional classroom learning. Here are some qualities that online learners should have as pointed out by academicians: Independent and discipline: Online learning is a form of distance learning that requires students to work independently without a lot of prompting. Without the presence of a teacher, instructor or lecturer to see you through a lesson or induce you to complete your task, the temptation to put off completing your assignments is great.

This is why you will need to have self-discipline and motivation to see through what you have started. The convenience and flexibility offered by online learning does not necessarily equate to easy, but increased responsibility. (Devi, 2002, p. 1)

*Reflectivity.* One particular phenomenon revealed in this study providing a rich view of the nontraditional adult student was reflectivity. This subtheme of *Theme I: Flexible Learning* was talked and written about by all the participants of this study in great detail. Reflectivity, in this case, was not only used on the lesson material, but also on the entire online experience itself. Each of the students, at one time or another reported their use of reflectivity for all parts of the course. For example, when the students were engaged in the discussion board conversations with other students, the study participants reported that they would take time to reflect and ponder on what had been presented by other students, so that they might have a deeper understanding of the ideas and concepts of others, thereby gaining a deeper and better understanding of their own perceptions and opinions of the topic. These processes led the students to research and refine their own responses before posting them for the rest of the class to read.

As the data gathering continued, I began to notice how many times the students talked about the use of reflection in the course. This led me to explore more deeply the individual learning processes. As a follow up question in the interviews, I asked each if

he had ever thought about how he learns (metacognition). Each student responded to the affirmative, that he had spent some time reflecting on how he learns best and what he does to enhance his learning abilities. Each reported in their own way, that the flexibility of the online course allowed him to design his unique schema for learning which reinforced the subtheme of self-directedness/self-discipline. These phenomena are indicative of support for the constructivist learning theory, adult learning assumptions and metacognition. A look at how these experiences support those theories/assumptions will be presented later in this chapter.

*Theme II: Conflict of Values: A Paradox of Learning*

One of the overarching themes, Conflict of Values: A Paradox of Learning provided an interesting and rich base for understanding the lived experience of the nontraditional adult learner. From the beginning of the data collection, I sensed the students to be in a conflict with long-held beliefs or schemes of how learning best occurs and their current experience. As the data analysis and collection continued, I probed this apparent values conflict with each student. In fact, in the final interview I purposefully asked each student, based on what he had previously stated to the contrary, why he continued to hold onto the belief that the face-to-face delivery was superior to the online experience. The responses in general, though reported differently for each individual, were that there was just a sense of the familiar and the desire to hang onto what was most comfortable; this caused the conflict. During this discussion, each of them admitted that they needed to be more open to the growth they were experiencing. Again, they were

revealing shifting learning schemas.

This shift was again reinforced during the member checks. Most of them, after reading the results of the study commented first that the results were reported consistent with their meaning and intent, but more importantly, now more readily recognized the conflict they were having and reporting. From these comments and their endorsement of the results of the study, I sensed their acceptance of the experience as now becoming part of a new schema or worldview.

I am presenting below some of the phenomena demonstrated in the study relative to the subthemes of student-to-student communication/socialization, student/instructor interaction, and paradigmatic shifting and conflicted beliefs on learning.

*Student-to-student communication/socialization.* As the extant literature purports, student-to-student communication and the social aspect of being a student are critical to learning. This is consistent with the constructivist view and most adult learning models and was evident in this study as well. As stated, critics of online and/or distance education find that the lack of spatial proximity can be detrimental to the overall learning experience of the student. However, this did not appear to be true or consistent with the student experience of this study.

In the initial stages of data gathering, all of the students voiced or wrote concerns about not having the luxury of being physically present with the other students in the class. They felt not being able to read body language and hear intonation would lessen their learning experience and in the end, create an untoward learning environment. This initial perception, however, was not consistent with the experience reported by the

students regarding communication.

Throughout the study, each student reported a rich learning experience facilitated from the course design and the other students of the class. They were identifying a community of learning. The most common reason was that unlike the traditional face-to-face class experience where students could hang back and not participate in class discussions, the students in the online class had to participate as required for part of their grade. This produced some very thoughtful discussions, which allowed the study participants to learn from the perspectives and experiences of classmates at a much deeper level. They basically had to discover a new method of communicating. This supports the findings of McDonald and Thompson (2005), where they assert in a study of online deliveries that, "A whole new communication process has to be learned. It is not simply a process of shifting from speaking and listening to reading and writing" (p. 11). The students of this study felt this was due to the reflections and research-supported postings of most of the classmates. When I probed them to discover if they felt that the lack of spatial proximity helped, harmed, or had no effect on their learning, they all reported that they felt it helped. In fact, all of them reported that they felt that they would not have had as focused discussions and would not have gotten to the depth of learning they experienced had they been in a face-to-face environment. This experience was in conflict with the initial perception they reported.

One significant reason for the depth of learning seemed to be the lack of anonymity of the online student. In the findings of this report, the students shared how being somewhat anonymous (just a name on the computer screen) allowed the student to

feel more freedom to opine or share without the feeling of close, face-to-face scrutiny. However, the opposite was also evident. The student did not have the luxury of being anonymous like in the classroom. If a student chose and the instructor allowed it, a student in the face-to-face delivery may not participate in the discussion, thereby becoming anonymous in or detached from the discussion. In the online environment, “they are usually required to contribute to the discussion and to use good manners since the typed word remains visible once the discussion has ended” (Pelletier, 2005, p. 3).

This experience supported many of the assumptions reported in the adult learning literature. It is consistent with the findings of research (Althaus, 1997; Tallent-Runnells et al, 2006), who reported that asynchronous discussions avoid some of the undesirable characteristics of face-to-face discussions. Face-to-face discussions must take place at the same time and place and students must compete with each other for the opportunity to speak or offer opinions. This can cause a bottleneck in the discussions or even disrupt the flow or thread of the discussion by introducing sidebar comments or irrelevant interjections that move the focus of the discussion to other areas. In asynchronous discussions, students can join in the discussion whenever it is convenient. This allows for more time to read and digest the messages, which also allows for more thoughtful responses.

Another phenomenon of this study in conflict with the critics of distance/online education, regarding socialization, was the practice of the students to find or create mechanisms of sociality or learning communities. All of the participants reported that if they had questions or wanted further enlightenment about a topic, in addition to the



instructor or peers, they would seek people outside of the class. These social contacts may have been peers, friends, relatives, supervisors, past students of the same course, or experts in the field. In other words, the students went beyond the confines of the class to construct a better learning experience. It also provides what I believe to be the adult student's self-created ZPD, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. While this experience may be similar in the traditional class, the students reported that the online experience seemed to facilitate this phenomenon more.

*Student/instructor interaction.* Student/instructor interaction was found to be somewhat lacking by the students. Many times throughout the study they reported frustration with not having enough timely feedback from the instructor regarding their assignments or other work. While this particular phenomenon was frustrating to them, when asked if the lack hurt their learning, enhanced their learning or had no impact on their learning, they reported that it really had no impact on their learning. However, they would have liked to have received feedback on a more consistent basis. They shared that the feedback they received was helpful, but the lack of feedback was not detrimental to their ability to learn. When questioned as to why they were seeking feedback, the most common response was just to get some sort of validation for their work; that the work was being read and/or they could receive guidance and assurance that what they were producing was what the instructor wanted.

Again, I interpreted that their need for feedback was important and probably something they were used to receiving from the traditional classes of the past. However, they honestly admitted that this lack of feedback had little impact on their ability to learn

and retain knowledge from this particular course. What was important to them was that they were in control of what they learned and how deeply they wanted to pursue knowledge within the topics, which is consistent with adragogical principles (Knowles, 1970). The control is also consistent with their developing views or schemas on learning.

*Paradigmatic shifting and conflicted beliefs on learning.* The subtheme of paradigmatic shifting and conflicted beliefs on learning appeared to be evident from the beginning of my interaction with the students. In the first interview, as each talked about the convenience of online deliveries, the student first began by telling me that he would prefer to be taking the class in the traditional face-to-face manner, as he felt it would be a better learning experience. However, as the interview progressed I noticed them talking about how much they were learning and how surprised they were at this. In one journal entry, I noticed at the beginning of the entry the student talked about how he was convinced he would learn more in a traditional class. Yet, as he continued to write about his experiences, he stated how he was learning so much more in the online format, more than he thought he would have in the traditional delivery. This led me to ask questions to further explore this phenomenon.

In a follow-up interview with each of the students, I decided to get more direct in my questioning. When I spoke with each one separately, I shared with them my discovery of the internal conflict with their belief system regarding traditional classes and online delivery. I sensed that as I shared this with them, they knew exactly what I meant. So, I probed a little further with each student respective to his experiences. As they shared their feelings with me, it seemed evident that there was some trepidation to admit that

their initial perceptions and schemas regarding traditional deliveries were shifting. I probed a little deeper with each one and specifically asked him why he was reticent in accepting this new discovery. Each conceded that he just thought the way he had attended school and the way he had learned in the past were best. Throughout the rest of the study, in journal entries and conversations, a shift in learning schemas was becoming evident. One student made a journal entry stating that he was not sure that he would have learned any more or better in the traditional class. Another student made the comment that he just loved the online classes. Yet, there still seemed to be some reluctance to accept this new delivery method as equal to or possibly superior to the traditional deliveries, as they had at times professed.

### Summary of the Discussion

#### *Flexible Learning*

Flexibility for the students of this study was an important part of their online learning experience. Flexibility was identified in three important areas: (a) convenience, (b) self-directedness/self-discipline, and (c) reflectivity. The flexibility reported by the students enhanced their overall learning experience and provided opportunities for education at a level they did not anticipate.

Participating in the class at times and places convenient to each of them was not only appealing, but almost a necessity. The work schedules of the emergency services workers made participation in the traditional university offerings of prescheduled times and places significantly inconvenient; they could not have pursued their higher education

goals without the online learning environment or making major sacrifices in other parts of their lives, which they reported they had little desire to do. The other inhibiting factors of work, family responsibilities, community and church involvement etc., were experienced by this group much the same as other adult students reported in the literature. However, the convenience of the online course facilitated the overall experience and learning of the students. They reported an appreciation for the ability to archive, save, or print material for use at a later time or place. This was one of the areas where the online environment seemed to be superior to the traditional face-to-face class. In the traditional class, once the conversation was over it could no longer be reviewed unless recorded. With the online environment it was available for further study any time and any place they had an Internet connection. The availability seemed to enhance the learning and social aspects of the class for them.

The ability to self-direct learning and to embrace the self-discipline needed to be successful was one of the important experiences reported by the students. Knowing that education was the responsibility of the individual, particularly in the online environment was understood and accepted by all of the students. They expressed a deep understanding of the value of education in their lives and welcomed the opportunity to pursue it through this medium. This experience was enhanced by the ability to set the pace and depth (within the constraints of the class) of their pursuit of knowledge and its application in their lives.

In addition to this, the ability to reflect on both the discussion board conversations and the assignments/papers was appreciated. This was reported by student participants as

one of the most important benefits of the online learning environment. The ability to use reflection, particularly before replying to other student postings, added to the depth of their learning experience and to their abilities to understand the ideas and perceptions of fellow students.

The overall experience of the students of this study was one of appreciation for the flexibility an asynchronous online learning environment facilitates. In some ways, the students reported that the online environment was superior to the traditional face-to-face delivery. This is consistent with the findings of Smith and colleagues (2000),

Thus, the benefits of online learning environments over those of the traditional classroom environment include the ability to archive, print, or view any online conversation. This ability to work with the data after the class has ended is a powerful benefit. Faculty can gain insight into the conversation over time. Students can reflect on their responses before posting them to the discussion. (p. 44).

#### *Conflict of Values: A Paradox of Learning*

One significant finding of the study was the experience of the students regarding a conflict of their values respective to their educational paradigms. I believe that students were struggling between two important values or beliefs: (a) traditional education delivered in the face-to-face method is superior to an online environment, and (b) the online learning environment was providing a superior educational experience than previous traditional face-to-face classes. Each of these students seemed to experience this phenomenon and seemed confused by it. The data suggested that there were three subthemes or areas where this became apparent: (a) student-to-student communication/socialization, (b) student/instructor interaction, and (c) paradigmatic shifting and

conflicted beliefs on learning.

At the beginning of the study, the students reported that they believed student-to-student communication and socialization among the members of the class would be missing from the online learning environment; if not missing, would cause a significantly reduced interaction. However, as the study proceeded, the students began to express through their interview conversations and journal entries, an increased awareness of how well they were learning from each other and how the online learning environment was facilitating communications at a different level than previously experienced. Though they reported this experience, there seemed to be a reluctance to accept this shifting learning scheme. The reluctance was evident in conflicting statements like, "I know I would learn better in the face-to-face class," and "I am learning so much more [online] from the other students." They also recognized how the online environment facilitated their learning experience by allowing them to communicate at a much deeper and reflective manner than their previously experienced traditional classes.

This same issue was present in the area of student/instructor interaction. Based on previous experiences, they reported that instructor feedback was important to their learning experience and something they were familiar with. In this particular class, they all reported a lack of instructor feedback. Many comments were made or written that the class or at least their experience with it would be better with more timely feedback from the instructor (within one or two days of submitting assignments or posting discussions). While there is no way of quantitatively measuring the cognitive difference timely instructor feedback would have had on their learning in this study, their perception was

that it would have been better. However, a conflict was apparent in this belief as well. The students were asked directly if the lack of instructor feedback had any impact on their learning, good, bad, or indifferent. They all reported that the lack of feedback had no impact on their ability to learn. The class assignments, the ability to self-direct, and the interaction on the discussion board with other students and occasionally the instructor provided the mechanism for constructing their knowledge.

The lack of instructor feedback was a negative aspect of the experience for the students that should be recognized and hopefully ameliorated in future asynchronous, online deliveries. In this particular case, the students failed to connect with the instructor. I believe this may have had some effect on their experiences and perceptions, in spite of the fact they reported it had no bearing on their ability to learn.

Distance education, and in particular online deliveries have made it possible for students and teachers to exist independently of each other. Independence however, should in no way allow the teacher to forget his/her role and the power and authority of the teacher to influence, guide, and mentor the students. Jarvis (1997) stated,

Indeed, teachers can use their position responsibility and out of concern for their students' best interests by generating the type of environment in which they feel free to act and in which they are encouraged to develop themselves as persons.

But these relationships are always in danger of degenerating into I-It relations, especially when there are large classes and little time, and it is hard for the students to become persons for the teachers. Indeed, this also becomes a probability when the academic content of the teaching and learning sessions takes precedence over the people involved, the learners may be turned into objects to be taught (I-It) and the richness of human interaction lost. But teachers cannot escape from the power and authority of their position, but to exercise it without the intention to create a situation in which students might realize their best interests through relationships which benefit the learners as persons may well be an exercise in symbolic, violence and, therefore, morally questionable. (p. 82)

The experiences of these students seemed to support Jarvis's warning. While they did not perceive a harm to their learning ability, they did make mention of the fact they felt the need to be validated by the instructor and to assert their "personhood." However, this did not ruin their online experience and irrespective of the negative feelings toward student/instructor interaction, became part of the reported conflict in values regarding learning.

Because of these reported experiences, the students were starting to undergo a shift in schema. This shift created some conflict with their belief systems or values and they were reluctant to accept or embrace the change. Throughout the gathering and ongoing analysis of the data, I noticed this phenomenon and started to probe the students about it. As I listened to responses in the interviews and/or read the journal entries, I could sense a struggle in the students. It appeared that they began to sense a change in their experience, however did not want to recognize or accept it. When it became consciously apparent to them and when they started to accept this shift was when I brought it to their attention in follow-up interviews. I asked each of them directly about this conflict and each admitted that he was clinging to past beliefs. I even went as far as to ask each student why he was clinging to this perception or belief, to which each responded, in general terms, that it was just the comfort of tradition and familiarity with previous learning situations.

An interesting reinforcement of this phenomenon came as they had the opportunity to participate in the member checks. After reviewing the results of the study, I gave them each copies of the results chapter so they could make sure the intent of their



responses was reported with integrity. I received comments from all of them stating that it was interesting to read what they had shared in the study. They found the reporting of the data to be consistent with what they had said and intended. They all made comments about how interesting it was to read their own words and that the results of the study were on target with their experiences. One of them even went further to say the he now recognized how much he was speaking in conflict.

These results are consistent with some aspects of the findings in a phenomenographic study by Vallee (2007). Vallee reported five categories of description for graduate students participating in an online master's program. The five categories were: (a) stifled learning, (b) convenient and flexible, (c) changing perspective, (d) personal growth, and (e) changing as a person. With the exception of stifled learning (which in Vallee's study was reported to have occurred by the students in an online master's degree program, but reported as enhanced or accentuated learning by the students of this study), the results are similar. The students of this study experienced the online environment as flexible and convenient, had a changing perspective, demonstrated or reported personal growth and also reported changing as a person. This study, while not entirely consistent with Vallee's findings, added to Vallee's research, as well as some of the other previous studies regarding online learning environments. In the next section of this chapter, the results will be compared and contrasted with existing learning theories, models, and assumptions.

#### Comparison of Results to Existing Learning Theories, Models, and Assumptions

This study dealt with nontraditional adult students. It is prudent, therefore, to examine the results of this study and compare them to known learning theories, assumptions, and adult learning models. The following portion of this chapter will be used to discuss the results with respect to adult learning models, reflective practices, and the affective domain.

### *Adult Learning Models*

The results of this study appeared to be consistent with many of the theories and assumptions of the adult learner. A more detailed look at some of these theories/assumptions is presented below. While there are many theories to which a comparison of this study could be done, the study seemed to fit some more readily than others. Therefore, I have chosen the following theories and assumptions for comparison. These theories have been selected based on their prominence in the literature and their applicability to the reported experiences of the study participants.

*Andragogy.* Since the early 1970s, when Malcolm Knowles first introduced the concept of andragogy to the United States, adult learning theories and assumptions have been developed and debated. This study revealed that the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous, online environment experienced and reinforced adult learning assumptions. In Knowles' original work (1970), he offered a set of criteria that sets apart the adult learner from the child learner. They are: (a) changes in self-concept—the assumption that as a person grows and matures his self-concept moves from one of total dependency to one of increasing self-directedness; (b) the role of experience—the

assumption that as an individual matures he accumulates an expanding reservoir of experience that causes him to become an increasingly rich resource for learning, and a broad base to which to relate new learning; (c) readiness to learn—the assumption that as an individual matures, his readiness to learn is decreasingly the product of his biological development and academic pressure and is increasingly the product of the tasks required for his evolving social roles; (d) orientation to learning—the assumption that children have been conditioned to have a subject-centered orientation to learning, while adults tend to have a problem-centered orientation to learning; and (e) motivation to learn is intrinsic rather than extrinsic. Looking at each of these assumptions and comparing them to the experience of the students is interesting and the results of the study seem to affirm Knowles' assumptions.

With respect to the first assumption of self-directedness, the students of this study not only talked about this as something they did, but also something they understood and enjoyed. They shared that much of their experience in the asynchronous environment was driven by the fact that they were allowed to, within the confines of the course requirements, define and direct their learning. They all asserted this to be a positive aspect of the online learning environment.

The second assumption, the role of experience, was also supported in the results of this study. The students reported an appreciation for the ability to use the material from the course for current problem-solving strategies applicable to their individual needs and situations. Based on the ability to use experience in the course, the students employed past experiences and paradigms to construct current meaning from the course.

The third assumption of readiness to learn was also reported in this study. Each of the students described their belief and understanding of the importance and value of education. Because of life experience, each of them had returned to school to gain education. What made this more relevant is the fact that they chose the online environment to pursue this education. All of them reported that they knew completion of the requirements to receive the diploma was the responsibility of each and were willing and able to accept that responsibility. This is supported by previous studies, which “indicate that participation is clearly linked to adult roles of worker, family member, and so on, lending support to the assumption that the readiness of an adult to learn is closely linked to the developmental tasks of his or her social roles” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 92).

Looking at the fourth assumption, problem-centered orientation to learning, it is apparent this was important to the students. As brought out in the discussion of assumption 2, the ability to reflect and apply the concepts of their learning to problems and issues important to each life and/or situation was a benefit for the students. They reported reflection to be one of the more important aspects of the learning process and believed this learning to be enhanced by use of the asynchronous discussion boards.

Finally, the fifth assumption, that motivation to learn is intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic was demonstrated by the experiences of this study. One of the dislikes voiced by the students was the lack of what they considered timely and relevant feedback from the instructor. However, all reported that this lack of feedback had little (if any) impact on their ability to learn, since they were seeking validation more than assessment. This supports the concept that learning is intrinsic and not teacher induced.

One underlying question: does the asynchronous learning environment fit the assumptions of andragogy and is it a good way for adults to learn? From the results of this study, I would assert that this particular student experience affirms the effectiveness of online learning for the nontraditional adult. This is also consistent with the writings of Rossman, who asserts that distance education and distance learning programs are popular ways for adults to learn. Knowles (1984) himself, offers some insight on the planning and operating of educational programs for adults. He offers there are seven elements of the andragogical process: (a) establish a climate conducive to adult learning, (b) create a structure for participative learning, (c) understand or diagnose the needs for learning, (d) create the directions of learning (create learning objectives), (e) develop and design learning activities, (f) implement or operate the activities, and (g) reevaluate learning needs (pp. 14-18). The course design and lived experience of the students of this study support this (with the exception of the evaluation, which I did not know whether this was done by course instructors/designers or not).

Distance education, and in particular, asynchronous, online learning environments seem to have a climate conducive to adult learning (Rossman, 2000). While there have been many detractors and critics of Knowles' andragogy, the lived experiences of these students support and add to the concept. Andragogy is not the panacea for fixing adult education, but it is a colorful piece of the interesting picture called adult learning (Merriam et al., 2007).

*McClusky's theory of margin.* McClusky presented his theory of margin in 1963 (Merriam et al., 2007). His theory is based on the premise that an adult's life is full of

growth, change, and integration. Because of this, an adult is constantly seeking to reach a balance between the amount of energy needed and the amount of power available to manage life. Hiemstra (2002) explained McClusky's theory in the following way,

According to McClusky (1974) in his theory of Power-Load-Margin, the key factors of adult life are the load the adult carries in living, and the power that is available to him or her to carry the load. Margin was conceived of as a formula expressing a ratio or relationship between the "load" (of living) and the "power" (to carry the load). According to McClusky (1970, p. 27), load is "the self and social demands required by a person to maintain a minimal level of autonomy.... [Power is] the resources, i.e. [sic] abilities, possessions, position, allies, etc. [sic], which a person can command in coping with load [sic]. In this formula for margin (M), he placed designations of load (L) in the numerator and designations of power (P) in the denominator ( $M = L/P$ ).

As can be seen, the greater amount of power in relationship to load, the more margin available for use. In other words, if one has more power than load, one is able to negotiate or handle the issues or problems natural to one's life. Conversely, if load is greater than power, then one has diminished capacity to handle the problems or issues.

The participants of this study, without knowing it, talked much about the theory of margin as identified by McClusky. In the initial stages of the study, the students identified one of the major reasons they were grateful for the online learning environment was that their work schedules and other responsibilities made going to school difficult at best. In the journal entries, each student made comments about the difficulty he was having with demands upon his time and how it was impacting his ability to participate in the class. In fact, one of them made the comment that if it was not for the online offering, he would not have been able to be in school at this time because he felt the load would have been too great.

Another interesting factor brought out in the perceptions and experiences of the

students was related to external and internal load factors. Hiemstra (2002) posited that external load consists of things such as family, career, socioeconomic status, and so forth. Internal load is comprised of things such as self-concept, goals, and personal expectations. The students of this study made comments in the interviews and journal entries about their personal standards of performance and personal goals along with the external load factors of work, family, and community. While there was no way to quantitatively measure the relationship to power and load in this study, the experiences and perceptions of the participants were that they may have been close to an equal distribution and that having to attend scheduled classes on top of the assignments, may have tipped the balance to load being greater than power. Maintaining a sense of balance is something adults are aware of and seek when engaged in learning activities (Merriam et al., 2007).

While McClusky's theory of margin seems reasonable and something adults relate to, critics maintain it is a better counseling tool rather than learning theory. Their reasoning is the theory of margin does not "directly address learning itself but rather when it is most likely to occur" (Merriam et al., 2007, p.96). Irrespective of this criticism, the lived experiences of the students in this study supported the general premise of McClusky's theory and were an important component in the overall experience, perceptions, and attitudes of the nontraditional adult students in this online learning environment.

*Jarvis' process of learning.* British researcher and teacher, Peter Jarvis, introduced an adult learning model based around experience. Jarvis (1987) posited that

all learning begins with the five sensations of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. He also asserted that all learning begins with experience and more particularly, social experience. Some of these experiences are repeated often enough that they become routine and therefore do not lead to learning. Other experiences are so “out of the norm” that prior learning methods no longer work with the situation. This new experience causes a person to reassess, rethink, or create a new plan for how to act or what to do. Jarvis believed this process fits one of three groups of strategies or responses (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). The first group consists of presumption (presuming that everything fits into one of the past experiences, as will this new one), non-consideration (one is too busy or too distracted to give any consideration to the experience), and rejection (outright rejection of the experience as meaningful). In this group, Jarvis asserted that little or no learning took place.

The second group consists of preconscious (a person unconsciously internalizes an experience), practice, (a person can practice something repeatedly until it is learned), and memorization (a new skill or knowledge is internalized to be brought forth again at a later time). In this group, Jarvis asserted some learning occurs.

The third group is composed of contemplation (taking the time to think about the experience), reflective practice (thinking about something using processes similar to problem-solving), and experimental learning (someone experiments by implementing strategies or actions based upon what was contemplated and reflected). It is this final group in which Jarvis believed deep learning occurs.

The results of this study when applied to this model indicate that some deep



learning took place with these students. Throughout the study, the students reported their use of and satisfaction with reflective practice. By employing reflectivity, they claimed to have had a deeper, and potentially better learning experience. While it is difficult to determine if they reached the experimentation stage or not (it was reported by the students, however, that they were applying some of the learned principles to their work situations) it is apparent that they were reflective and contemplative in their approach to this online experience. Based on their experiences and perceptions, the students claimed they had internalized significant amounts of knowledge and/or skills from the asynchronous online environment. I believe, and the study shows this occurred through reflective practice, which is the basis of Jarvis' theory.

Jarvis believed that there are three possible ways that a person is affected or changed through the learning process: (a) the person is changed through the acquisition of knowledge mentally and emotionally, (b) the person places new meaning on the world and events by incidental or purposeful learning, and (c) the person is changed and able to cope or deal with similar situation which may occur due to the learning that has taken place (Merriam et al., 2007). When comparing the results experienced by the students in this study to Jarvis' model, I believe that the third way of learning—these students changed and will now be more able to cope or to handle similar situations better because of their experience with this course—has occurred and supports his theory.

There is some doubt as to the applicability of Jarvis' model to adults only. Although it was created mainly from his work with adult learners, there may be some validity when applied to children as well (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). This, however,

does not take away from the model and I believe the adult application of Jarvis' theory has been further supported by the study results.

*Metacognition.* Metacognition, as presented earlier in this report, is basically “thinking about thinking.” This refers to higher order thinking, which involves active control over one’s cognitive processes for learning or knowledge acquisition. Metacognition is important to education because it helps explain how and why cognitive development occurs or fails to occur (Kuhn, 2000). Learning processes vary from person to person. General knowledge about how people learn can be applied to all human beings, however, knowledge of one’s individual learning processes is important to understand as well (Livingston, 1997). As one understands one’s processes for learning, then one can develop learning schemas or metacognitive strategies. Knowledge is considered metacognitive if that knowledge is purposely used in a strategic manner to ensure that a goal or outcome is achieved.

Donaldson and Graham (1999) developed a model of adult college outcomes that hypothesized factors related to adult academic performance. Two of those factors are (a) psychosocial and value orientation (motivations and self-confidence), and (b) adult cognition (which includes metacognitive knowledge and self-regulation of cognition or cognitive processes. Donaldson and Graham asserted that being influenced by prior life and academic experiences, the metacognitive knowledge and abilities of older students may differ from those of traditional-age students. Justice and Dornan (2001) reported that older students were more likely to use a deeper, comprehension-focused approach to their learning; conversely, younger students tended to adopt a more-surface-level, assessment-

focused approach. They assert that these differences in approach to learning may have implications for the study behaviors that might be used by traditional and nontraditional students. Metacognition and metacognitive strategies used to monitor and regulate cognitive activities also affect academic performance (Donaldson & Graham).

The student experiences of this study may support the idea that nontraditional adult students use metacognitive abilities to facilitate learning. Many times throughout the interviews or in reading the journal entries, I found the students reflecting on how they learn best. In fact, I specifically asked each of them in the first interview if he had ever taken the time to think about how he learns. All of these students answered to the affirmative and then each began to explain his learning schemas to me. These strategies ranged from reading something over and over again, reflecting on what has been read, and then trying to conceptualize the reading into a significant analogy or metaphor, to learning by writing. Learning by writing was deeper, when explained, because it involved reading, researching, writing, and revising. Through this process, one of the students reported that a deeper understanding or cognition was achieved.

Use of metacognition and metacognitive strategies seemed to come naturally to these students, which may support the findings of a study by Justice and Dornan (2001), the results of which indicated that “the learning processes of the nontraditional-age students may differ in important ways from those of their traditional-age peers” (p. 247).

In the study conclusion, Justice and Dornan stated,

The current data provide evidence that higher education will need to respond to differences in the motivation and learning processes of nontraditional-age students. If the findings are replicated, faculty will be challenged to develop classes for students with a comprehension-focused approach to learning

(Richardson & King, 1998), who use strategies designed to interpret and apply course materials. Valid course assessments would need to measure the degree to which these higher level goals are met. As nontraditional-age students become a permanent part of the college population, the ability to provide appropriate academic experiences will depend on an understanding of the factors that affect their learning (p. 248).

The experience and perceptions of this study's participants seem to support and uphold this concept. The students indicated they were appreciative of the ability to think about and create individual strategies (schemas) for learning, thereby developing as a student and as a person.

*Affective domain.* Affective learning outcomes involve attitudes, motivation, and values (Miller, 2005). As can be seen from previous discussion and the amount of research available, the cognitive approach to online education has been the focus of research. Hence, it appears much emphasis has been put forward asserting the best way to get to the affective domain is through the cognitive domain. Once a student has achieved "cognition" it is assumed that the student will then apply the knowledge and by process, have a change in attitude or be "affected." Krathwhol and colleagues (1964) posed an interesting question: What if the reverse was applied—using the affective domain to achieve cognition? This posits that educators must be more aware of the affective domain (motivation, drives, and emotions) to develop or bring about achievement of cognitive behavior. "Obviously motivation is critical to learning and thus is one of the major ways in which the affective domain is used as a means to the cognitive" (Krathwhol et al., p. 57).

Learning theories of attitude change are not as popular as they once were (Miller, 2005). However, they still give substance to the potential of the affective domain being

used to achieve cognitive behavior. I believe a brief presentation of these theories is useful. These learning theories are: cognitive dissonance theory, affective-cognitive consistency theory, social judgment theory, social learning theory, functional theory, and Krathwohl's taxonomy.

Cognitive dissonance theory asserts when a person is for some reason persuaded to act or perform in a way that is not congruent with prior attitudes, then that person changes the attitude to reduce created dissonance. This is generally achieved if the new attitude is made to look more appealing by demonstrating its importance or acceptance (socially).

Affective-cognitive consistency theory looks at the relationship between attitudes and beliefs, and asserts that instability exists when attitudes toward an object, idea, event or person are inconsistent with knowledge about that object, idea, event or person. The theory implies that the affective component of the attitude system of an individual may be changed by providing new information through a persuasive message, thereby changing the cognitive component.

Social judgment theory emphasizes the role of prior attitudes in forming new or changed attitudes. It suggests that change in the attitude of a person might be more affected through moderate persuasion rather than a more radical approach. This is analogous to Vygotsky's ZPD asserting that with a guide or mentor providing persuasion that fits within the parameters of acceptance of the believer, a higher level of social acceptance of a new attitude can be achieved.

Social learning theory focuses on the expected outcome of behavior. This theory

asserts an individual learns attitudes by observing the behavior of others within the social context and then mirroring or imitating them. Therefore, observing a model may be a viable method of learning a new attitude.

Functional theory asserts individual attitudes serve various psychological needs and that a change in attitude requires an understanding of its purpose and how it can function in the individual's life. This theory is limited because research has not produced a set of attitudes relating to psychological needs; attitudes relating to self-concept may produce ego-defensive attitudes and become difficult to change.

Krathwhol's taxonomy (Krathwhol et al., 1964) attempted to classify learning in the affective domain. It posits that the intensity of a given attitude is built through successive stages. This means that learning at a given level is dependent on prior learning at lower levels, hence, the five levels of taxonomy: (a) receiving/attending (willingness to become aware); (b) responding (appreciating or internalizing); (c) valuing (accepting, preferring or becoming committed to); (d) conceptualizing/organizing (incorporating into a value system); and (e) characterizing by value (orientation toward or identification with).

Miller (2005) provided an overview of these theories and suggested interventions. This material is reproduced in Table 2.

The experience of the students of this study seemed to fit many of these theories of attitudinal change. At the beginning of the study, there was a strong belief that traditional face-to-face classes were superior for learning. However, due to the lack of opportunity to participate in traditional offerings, an alternative method had to be used

creating dissonance. Over the delivery of the course, the students explained how their

Table 2

*Theories of Attitude Change*

Theory	Basic premise(s)	Suggested intervention(s)
Cognitive dissonance	Unstable state created when attitude inconsistent with behavior	- Create dissonance - Provide means to reduce dissonance-free to make attractive choices
Affective-cognitive consistency	Unstable state created when attitude inconsistent with knowledge	Changing cognitive component first by providing new information
Social judgment	Existing attitudes surrounded by latitude of acceptance	Incremental provision of messages within (ever-shifting latitude of acceptance
Social learning	Individual learns attitudes by observing and imitating the behavior of others	- Provide powerful model - Multiple models doing same thing
Functional	Purpose attitude serves for person who holds it determines best method for changing it	Acknowledge ego-defensive role of attitudes related to self-concept
Krathwhol's taxonomy	Intensity of given attitude built through successive stages	Learning at a given level depends on prior learning at lower levels

dissonance was being lessened and began to reveal a new attitude toward the online environment.

The same experience can be applied to the affective-cognitive consistency theory. The students reported an attitude regarding online learning that was at conflict with their cognitive experience. Once the students began to process their knowledge and then accept it, a consistency between attitudes and beliefs became apparent in their reported feelings and perceptions.

Student experience and the social judgment theory can also be examined through

this study. Prior attitudes and values about education led to acceptance of new attitudes of how to attain education. Through subtle successes and through social interaction during the class, the students began to report changes in the ability to learn. This appeared based on the social guidance of other students and to a lesser extent, the instructor.

A little more difficulty exists when trying to apply the results of this study to social learning theory. The students all demonstrated knowledge of what the expected outcomes of the course and ultimately the degree requirements were, but did not have the ability to physically observe others as to how to achieve the outcomes. However, by participating in online discussions and/or seeking input from other sources (as reported by the students), they were able to learn what was acceptable, facilitating a change in attitude toward the online learning opportunity.

Functional theory was supported by these students in that they reported certain desires while pursuing their education and understood that the online learning environment was capable of providing a fulfillment of those desires in some fashion. I must note with respect to this theory, I did not observe nor did the students report any ego-defensive attitudes, which I believe add support of the student experience to this theory.

Before looking at Krathwohl's taxonomy I suggest revisiting Table 2. When reviewing the information on this table, I believe it becomes apparent that the online learning environment experienced by the students, facilitated or used intervention strategies for each of the theories discussed. Whether or not this was by design I have no way of knowing; it seems unlikely that this was planned in the design and construction of



the course. However, as the study results suggest, a change in attitude was demonstrated by the students and therefore supports the idea of affective domain as a method of achieving the cognitive domain objectives. While this work did not focus on cognitive experience, it would be an interesting study to measure the impact on cognition based on the attitudinal shifts observed in this or subsequent work.

I think the best method to employ in comparing the experiences and perceptions of the students of this study to the affective domain can be demonstrated by Krathwhol's taxonomy. As was presented earlier in this report, Krathwhol and colleagues (1964) presented an affective domain continuum, which was: (a) the student is aware of a phenomenon, (b) the student is able to perceive it, (c) the student is willing to attend to the phenomenon, (d) the student responds to the phenomenon with a positive feeling, (e) the student goes out of his/her way to respond, (f) the student conceptualizes behaviors and feelings and organizes the conceptions into a structure, and (g) the structure grows in complexity as it becomes his/her life outlook. The results of this study seem to fit this continuum well. The students were aware of, could perceive and were willing to attend asynchronous, online instruction (steps 1-3) or otherwise would not have enrolled. As reported, they had appreciation for the opportunity and therefore responded to the opportunity with a positive feeling (step 4). While working in the online environment, the students participated in class activities and many times went beyond expectations to fulfill assignments and self-directed achievement goals (step 5). Also during the class, students began to express their feelings and the strategies they were using to accomplish the goals and objectives of the course (step 6). Lastly, all of them began to appreciate and

understand the potential of this system and reported they would continue to use the asynchronous online learning environment to attain their education (step 7).

Furthermore, Krathwohl's taxonomy, as it has become best known by, consists of five levels. To review, they are: (a) receiving/attending (willingness to become aware), (b) responding (appreciating or internalizing), (c) valuing (accepting, preferring or becoming committed to), (d) conceptualizing/organizing (incorporating into a value system), and (e) characterizing by value (orientation toward or identification with). This is shown in Table 3, downloaded from the University of Connecticut web page regarding assessment.

The results of this study seem to demonstrate support for this taxonomy of learning. By looking at the "example" section of Table 3, the experiences and perceptions reported by the students showed progression through each level of the taxonomy. While they had difficulty accepting the new paradigm of online learning, their willingness to change behavior in light of new evidence, supports the notion that affective learning was demonstrated. The students (a) received the new way of learning, (b) responded in the system to other classmates and to the instructor, while at the same time questioning what they were experiencing, (c) valued and accepted this methodology as a good way to learn through their participation, (d) they organized their plans, schedules and activities to meet all of their needs while still participating actively in the class, and (e) worked independently and changed behavior/perceptions when experiencing new evidence. I believe affective learning was demonstrated by the study participants, and new attitudes/perceptions were developed and adopted into their worldviews.

Table 3

*Learning Taxonomy–Krathwohl's Affective Domain*

Level and definition	Level and definition illustrative verbs	Example
<p>Receiving refers to the student's willingness to attend to particular phenomena of stimuli (classroom activities, textbook, music, etc.). Learning outcomes in this area range from the simple awareness that a thing exists to selective attention on the part of the learner. Receiving represents the lowest level of learning outcomes in the affective domain.</p>	<p>Asks, chooses, describes, follows, gives, holds, identifies, Respecting the rights of others. Listen for and remember the name of newly introduced people. Names, points to, selects, sits erect, replies, uses listening to discussions of controversial issues with an open mind.</p>	<p>Respecting the rights of others. Listen for and remember the name of newly introduced people.</p>
<p>Responding refers to active participation on the part of the student. At this level he or she not only attends to a particular phenomenon but also reacts to it in some way. Learning outcomes in this area may emphasize acquiescence in responding (reads assigned material), willingness to respond (voluntarily reads beyond assignment), or satisfaction in responding (reads for pleasure or enjoyment). The higher levels of this category include those instructional objectives that are commonly classified under “interest”; that is, those that stress the seeking out and enjoyment of particular activities.</p>	<p>answers, assists, complies, conforms, discusses, greets, helps, labels, performs, practices, presents, reads, recites, reports, selects, tells, writes</p>	<p>Completing homework assignments. Participating in team problem-solving activities. Questions new ideals, concepts, models, etc., in order to fully understand them.</p>
<p>Valuing is concerned with the worth or value a student attaches to a particular object, phenomenon, or behavior. This ranges in degree from the simpler acceptance of a value (desires to improve group skills) to the more complex level of commitment (assumes responsibility for the effective functioning of the group). Valuing is based on the internalization of a set of specified values, but clues to these values are expressed in the student's overt behavior. Learning outcomes in this area are concerned with behavior that is consistent and stable enough to make the value clearly identifiable. Instructional objectives that are commonly classified under “attitudes” and “appreciation” would fall into this category.</p>	<p>Completes, describes, differentiates, explains, follows, forms, initiates, invites, joins, justifies, proposes, reads, reports, selects, shares, studies, works</p>	<p>Accepting the idea that integrated curricula is a good way to learn. Participating in a campus blood drive. Demonstrates belief in the democratic process. Shows the ability to solve problems. Informs management on matters that one feels strongly about.</p>

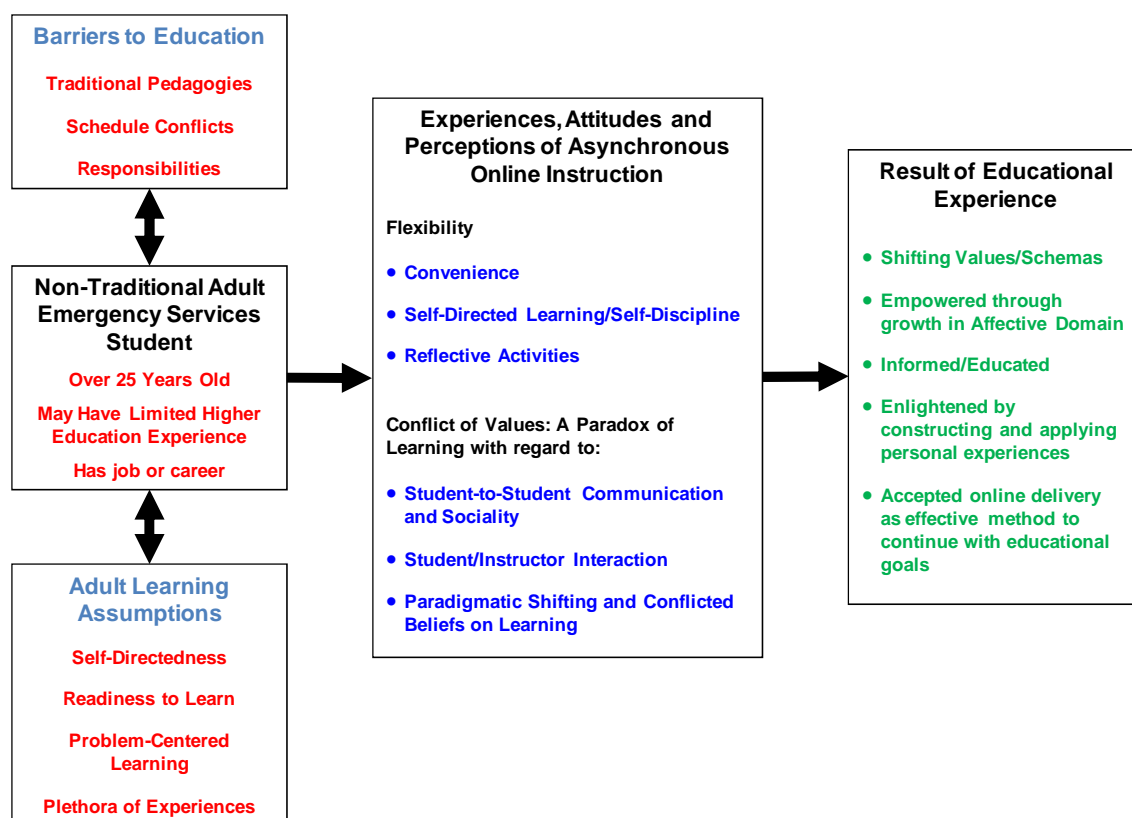
*(table continues)*

Level and definition	Level and definition illustrative verbs	Example
<p>Organization is concerned with bringing together different values, resolving conflicts between them, and beginning the building of an internally consistent value system. Thus, the emphasis is on comparing, relating, and synthesizing values. Learning outcomes may be concerned with the conceptualization of a value (recognizes the responsibility of each individual for improving human relations) or with the organization of a value system (develops a vocational plan that satisfies his or her need for both economic security and social service). Instructional objectives relating to the development of a philosophy of life would fall into this category.</p>	<p>Adheres, alters, arranges, combines, compares, completes, defends, explains, generalizes, identifies, integrates, modifies, orders, organizes, prepares, relates, synthesizes</p>	<p>Recognizing own abilities, limitations, and values and developing realistic aspirations. Accepts responsibility for one's behavior. Explains the role of systematic planning in solving problems. Accepts professional ethical standards. Prioritizes time effectively to meet the needs of the organization, family, and self.</p>
<p>Characterization by a value or value set. The individual has a value system that has controlled his or her behavior for a sufficiently long time for him or her to develop a characteristic "life-style." Thus the behavior is pervasive, consistent, and predictable. Learning outcomes at this level cover a broad range of activities, but the major emphasis is on the fact that the behavior is typical or characteristic of the student. Instructional objectives that are concerned with the student's general patterns of adjustment (personal, social, emotional) would be appropriate here.</p>	<p>Acts, discriminates, displays, influences, listens, modifies, performs, practices, proposes, qualifies, questions, revises, serves, solves, uses, verifies</p>	<p>A person's lifestyle influences reactions to many different kinds of situations. Shows self-reliance when working independently. Uses an objective approach in problem solving. Displays a professional commitment to ethical practice on a daily basis. Revises judgments and changes behavior in light of new evidence.</p>

*Note.* Affective learning is demonstrated by behaviors indicating attitudes of awareness, interest, attention, concern, and responsibility, ability to listen and respond in interactions with others, and ability to demonstrate those attitudinal characteristics or values that are appropriate to the test situation and the field of study (Learning Taxonomy, n.d.)

*Model of the Experiences and Perceptions of Nontraditional Adult Students*

Based upon the results of this study, I have created a model of the experiences and perceptions of the students. While these results may be transferrable to other students, the model is specific to the experiences of this study. By looking at these adult emergency services students, with the barriers to their efforts, adult learning assumptions, and so forth, their experience and perceptions created change in attitudes, paradigms, behaviors, and ultimately in their educative experience to this point. The model (see Figure 1) shows how this movement through their experience leads to new learning schemas, facilitating



*Figure 1.* Model of nontraditional adult emergency services students in an asynchronous online learning environment.

empowered, informed, and enlightened students with shifting paradigms, and acceptance of asynchronous learning environments as an effective means of learning.

### Reflections, Conclusions, and Recommendations for Further Research

It is common for people involved in qualitative research to have particular feelings, perceptions and experiences regarding the research. This can include exploring the methodology used as well as the processes and results of the study. This was certainly the case for me and I believe it important to share these.

I feel this study has provided a glimpse into one period of time in the lives of nontraditional adult students embarking on a new learning journey. Because of this, I must ask if this study has provided anything relevant with respect to the needs of a growing demographic and new system of educational delivery. I believe that it has, but the study had many limitations as well. I feel it important to examine a few of these things. I will also present what I think are areas for further research and make recommendations.

### *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*

For this study, I chose to use hermeneutic phenomenology because of its use in human studies. This appeared, and as I later came to understand was, the right method for this study. It was appropriate because it explored the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of a group of human beings. It provided rich data derived from the participant's lived experience. The hard part of using this methodology was my own

humanness. To explain, I had to be very protective that I was not putting my own personal twist on interpreting the data. I did this by continually reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and journal entries of the students to ensure it was their experiences and perceptions that were being analyzed and not mine. At the same time, I cannot and should not exclude some of my own experience since I was a part of the study too. I have no way of knowing if my exploration of the phenomena in any way altered their true experiences. In other words, would the experiences have been the same if they did not know that I was investigating it? I do not think this study interfered, but it is a question I thought about often.

One particular thing I believed supported the use of phenomenology was that the student participants, with varied backgrounds, perceptions, and ages reported very similar experiences. The similarity became an interesting point and was verified during the member checks. The data analysis explained their lived experiences and each participant was surprised, yet approving, of what he read about his experiences, especially with respect to seeing what the other participants were also experiencing.

One limitation of this methodology was that it did not explore the experiences of a whole program or a whole class in the program, and therefore may not represent the same experience for everyone. While this is a weakness in the method, it can also be considered a strongpoint. Understanding the human experience, regardless at what level, gives a better picture of the overall human experience and can then be a guide to use when working in similar situations.

As I reflect back on the study, I think the results shed some light on the

experiences of the nontraditional adult student in an asynchronous, learning environment. I would hope that those who read this study can understand what the students were experiencing and gain insight into an understanding of those experiences, for that is the purpose of the research.

### *Affective Domain versus Cognitive Domain*

As I began to explore the need for this study I was drawn to the affective domain. As presented in the literature review and other areas of this report, plenty of comparative studies regarding cognition between traditional and online deliveries exist. One question that continued to bother me was: are researchers considering how a change in methodology for online deliveries (in other words not using the same pedagogical assumptions about learners) could affect the results of the research? This thought plagued me for some time and I also wondered if one tested the cognition of students in the same manner (e.g., multiple choice, true and false, or combination tests) was there any way of knowing whether or not the learning was being applied by the student after the assessment (affective application)? Testing for cognition seems to be the traditional method of assessment, but does it ensure a change in behavior? These questions and thoughts led me to seek to understand the experience of the student. This understanding could then be a starting point for possible future studies regarding the use of new or different pedagogies for the nontraditional adult student. Hence, I determined that this was an appropriate starting point for research, in that if one does not understand the human experience, then one cannot fully understand how best to ensure cognitive development.



The processes of this study and the results presented have piqued my interest in exploring the affective domain in greater depth. In fact, I am a little baffled as to why educators and researchers have tended to, for the most part, ignore the affective domain. This study has opened my eyes to the need to understand how students experience learning, so as to better develop ways of understanding why they demonstrate learning as they do. I believe this to be something needed in the future as technology continues to steadily and rapidly evolve.

### *Conclusions*

Based on the results of this study, I believe that asynchronous, online learning environments have the potential to be an important and effective method of educating students. I believe this to be especially true for the nontraditional adult student, a growing demographic in higher education. However, the experiences of these students were somewhat narrow (within the confines of one class in an entire program). There is no way of knowing if the students had experienced different teachers, different peers, or different course design that the results would be the same. This is one of the limitations of this (or for that matter, much other) research. That being said, the experiences of these nontraditional adult students in an online learning environment gave a view in time, a particular slice of the human experience, to enrich our understanding. For this reason the study had relevance.

I believe that more care and concern for the design and use of pedagogies and/or adult learning models can enhance the experiences and learning of the adult online student. This may require the instructors and designers of curricula to be more aware of

the experiences and perceptions of the students. I believe this based on my research and the results of this study regarding affective learning. As Krathwhol and colleagues (1964) asserted, the affective domain can be very effective in helping achieve the desired outcomes of the cognitive domain. If students are having an untoward time in their learning experience, they may do what is necessary to pass the course, but has learning in its truest sense been accomplished? I will leave this to the opinions of the reader by once more defining learning. Learning is best described as, “a persisting change in human performance or performance potential. This means that learners are capable of actions they could not perform before learning occurred and this is true whether or not they actually have an opportunity to exhibit the newly acquired performance” (Driscoll, 2005, p. 9).

This study provided a deeper look at the experiences and perceptions of an important demographic of higher education. Understanding the lived experiences of nontraditional adult students provides us with a unique and important look at humanity. By using this experience as a means of understanding and learning, current and future students may be able to develop individual and useful learning schemas. Curriculum designers and instructors may also be able to use these experiences to develop methodologies to better facilitate learning, which enlightens and adds to the unique experience of being human.

#### *Recommendations for Further Research*

As I suspect it is with all studies, many areas of possible research became apparent while conducting this study. I would like to offer my suggestions on some of

those areas which may need to be researched in more depth to develop better learning opportunities or strategies.

First, I would suggest that a longer study be done, one that encompasses a full program (which may take four or more years) delivered by asynchronous, online methods, to determine if a theory about this type of learning is grounded in the experience. While exploring a “slice in time” of the experience of the online learner is relevant and helpful, knowing whether some theory or deeper phenomenon is present in the experience may be of significant value.

Next, a study to determine both cognitive and affective learning, maybe using a mixed methods methodology, would be of significant value. If students are having an acceptable experience, with supportive attitudes (affective), there may be a correlation with the level of cognitive change. This study did not concern itself with cognitive value other than what was reported by the students. While all reported they “learned as much or more than they thought they might have in a traditional delivery,” there was no way of measuring their cognitive growth beyond personal or anecdotal evidence. A study of this may provide some much needed and relevant data concerning online curricula and course design.

Another area of research that may need to be investigated is the post educational experience of students of asynchronous online instruction compared to traditional face-to-face students. For one, the affective domain could be measured through the attitude or willingness to accept and use the knowledge gained between the two groups. For another, the experiences of the two groups in applying in the workplace what was learned could

be explored and reported. This may also be of value in helping with the design and instruction of online learning environments.

Another interesting topic for research was revealed by this study. With the ease of the Internet for finding information, the information readily available to today's students may not be reliable. As was reported by the students in this study, using a search engine, such as Google, provides an easy mechanism for finding information. However, this also creates a problem for students and instructors. Using non-refereed material may become much more prevalent and may obfuscate the relevance and/or depth of learning. I believe that research into this phenomenon and its impact on education may need to be conducted.

Finally, based on my findings and the experience of the students, I believe research needs to be conducted exploring the use of specific adult learning strategies, including the use of self-directed learning scales, for online learning. What seemed apparent in this research is that most of the literature was focused on the technology and the implementation of traditional pedagogies (those used in the face-to-face deliveries) using the technology. While many researchers and educators have identified the importance of facilitating adult learning, there seems to be a lack of data or research regarding the explicit use of adult learning models. With the dearth of theoretic studies regarding andragogy and the experience, perceptions, and attitudes of the students of this study, I believe research into using learning strategies and assessments specific to the adult online learner may be of great value. The research I am aware conducted in this area has shown the use of adult learning models provides greater satisfaction for the adult

students and thereby greater acceptance of the medium as a means of learning. Therefore, empirical data would be valuable to reinforce old or maybe develop new strategies for learning.

This study has revealed relevant data and suggested the importance of understanding the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of nontraditional adult students. I hope that the revelations of this study may in some way be useful in developing stronger and more effective strategies for providing meaningful learning experiences in the asynchronous, online learning environment. Who knows where technology will lead us? Wherever it is, the lived human experience will be an important, interesting, and poignant part of that future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Sample Material Used for Recruitment

Subject Line: Call for Participants:

I am conducting research on the experience of online learning and adult students in the Public Emergency Services Management online degree program. Because you are enrolled in this program for the 2007-2008 academic school year, you are invited to participate in a research study on the perceptions of that online experience. This research will be the basis for a doctoral dissertation I am conducting at Utah State University.

The purpose of this research is to better understand student experiences in the online learning environment. This will help identify and define the ways in which students perceive online experiences. The research will be conducted using student journals and interviews. Interviews will be approximately 1 hour in duration. I will contact you and arrange an appointment at your convenience. You will also be asked to keep an electronic journal of your feelings and experiences throughout the course. Your participation in this study is strictly confidential and has no relationship to your standing at the university.

No one, with the exception of my dissertation Chair, me and maybe a professional transcriptionist, will have access to the research materials of this study. This study will not be discussed with other students, faculty, staff or university administrators. Your name and any identifying information will be deleted from any materials. If any of the statements you make are used in the final report of the study, they will be encoded using a pseudonym.

The results of this research will be published as a dissertation at Utah State

University. The interviews and student journals will be completed during the semester. If you elect to participate, I will send you a packet in the mail with instructions, including an informed consent form for you to sign and return to me. Please understand that your participation in this study is voluntary, but greatly appreciated. You may review the work at any time you desire and you may withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without consequences. Also, there is no financial payment for your participation.

If you have any questions regarding your participation with this research, please contact me using the information below. It is my sincerest desire that your participation will allow you to deeply reflect on your online experience and share your insight and opinions with me. I will follow-up shortly, after I receive your affirmative response.

Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Jeff Maxfield  
[maxfieje@uvsc.edu](mailto:maxfieje@uvsc.edu)  
(801) 201-2591



Appendix B  
Informed Consent Form

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

*Online Education for Nontraditional Adult Students: Perceptions and Attitudes of  
Emergency Services Workers in Asynchronous Learning Environments.*

**Introduction/Purpose**

Professor Martha T. Dever Ed.D., of the Secondary Ed. Department in the College of Education and Human Services at Utah State University, and R. Jeffery Maxfield, a doctoral student are conducting a research study to find out more about the perceptions and attitudes of nontraditional adult students in online learning environments. You have been asked to take part in this study because the method and course of study you are enrolled in fits this profile. There will be a total of four students participating in the study. The results of this research will be published as a dissertation and possibly in subsequent research article and/or books.

**Procedures**

This study involves keeping an electronic journal of experiences and perceptions throughout the selected class a few interviews to be arranged at your convenience. These interviews should not last longer than one hour. If follow-up interviews are necessary, they will again be conducted at your convenience. The study will be conducted throughout the duration of the selected class.

**New Findings**

During the course of this research study, you will be informed of any significant

new findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research, or new alternatives to participation that might cause you to change your mind about continuing in the study. If new information is obtained that is relevant or useful to you, or if the procedures and/or methods change at any time throughout this study, your consent to continue participating in this study will be obtained again.

**Risks**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. The informed consent forms and other materials will be kept at a secure location and any emails will be kept on a computer with special encrypted access. The tape recordings will be listened to only by the principle investigator, student researcher and if necessary, a confidential transcriptionist. There are no hidden or experimental treatments and no risk or apparent discomforts beyond the possibility that some of the questions may remind you of strong emotions experienced in the class.

**Benefits**

There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from these procedures. The investigator, however, may gain a better understanding of the lived experiences in an asynchronous learning environment. This should help in delivering better and more appropriate material to adult students in asynchronous online classes. The possible benefits of this study for you are a better understanding of your experience and increased self-awareness.

**Explanation and Offer to Answer Questions**

R. Jeffery Maxfield has explained this research study to you and answered your questions. In addition to discussing the preliminary results with the researcher, you may also request a copy of the summary of the final results by indicating your interest on the attached form. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights, you may contact Professor Dever at (435) 797-2225.

**Payment**

There is no financial reward for participation in this study.

**Voluntary Nature and Right to Withdraw**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time, either during or after the interview, without negative consequences. Should you choose to withdraw, your data and information will be eliminated from the study and subsequently destroyed.

**Confidentiality**

You will be assigned a different name for any quotes that might be included in the final research report. You will also have the opportunity to review a transcript of your interview and remove material you do not wish to have used by the researcher. In addition, the tapes and all related research materials will be kept in a secure location and destroyed five years after the completion of the study. The results of this research will be published in the researcher's dissertation, and possibly in subsequent journals or books.

In addition to discussing preliminary results with the researcher, you may request a copy of the summary of final results by indicating your interest on the attached form.

**IRB Approval Statement**

The Institutional Review Boards, for the protection of human participants at USU and Utah Valley State College, have approved this research study.

**Copy of Consent**

Two copies of this informed consent form are provided. Please sign both copies, indicating you have read, understood, and agreed to participate in this research. Return one signed form to me and keep the other for your records.

**Investigator Statement**

I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual by me or my research staff, and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered.

**Signature of Principle Investigator**


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Signature of PI

Martha T. Dever, Ed.D.  
Principle Investigator  
(435) 797-2225

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Signature of student or Co-PI

R. Jeffery Maxfield  
Student Researcher  
(801) 201-2591

**Signature of Participant**


---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

Appendix C  
Initial Interview Questions

### Initial Interview Questions

1. What were the major factors for you to choose this online class you are currently enrolled in?
2. What, if any, were your apprehensions in taking an online class? What were the appealing points?
3. As detailed as you can be, what has been the *most* rewarding experience for you in this online environment and why?
4. As detailed as you can be, what has been the *least* rewarding experience for you in this online environment and why?
5. What do you feel are the benefits of taking a class online?
6. What are the drawbacks of an online class offering?
7. Relative to your traditional class experiences, what would you feel is your greatest frustration? What is most rewarding?

\*\*\*Note: Because this is a phenomenology study, these questions are only guidelines for beginning the dialogue with the participant. The questions will be dynamic and the direction of the questions may change as the phenomenon is developing or being clarified.

Appendix D

Peer Review of Data Analysis



March 2008

Jeff Maxfield has requested that I read the transcripts of the interviews and journal entries he collected as data for his dissertation study. In addition to the transcripts, I have also read his analysis of the data he has written for his dissertation document.

His analysis contains accurate quotations from the transcriptions. As I read the interviews, the recurring themes mentioned in his analysis were apparent in all the participants' responses. Each student mentioned that the flexibility offered through the online program made it possible to continue their education, which is the first major theme in the analysis. In the first interviews, they all mentioned that they felt the classroom situation would have promoted a better learning situation, but later admitted that they felt they learned more in the online class than they would have in the classroom causing the paradox in learning, which is the second major theme mentioned in Jeff's analysis.

Jeff has taken complete quotations from each of the students to demonstrate the emergence of each theme and subtheme. His explanations are documented by the statements of the students themselves, allowing the students' voices to verify his analysis of their experiences.

In my opinion, Jeff's analysis of the data is consistent with all the data gathered and the emergent themes were apparent in the students' interviews and journal entries. The analysis is thorough, well-documented, clear, and well done.

Laurel Howard  
Assistant Professor  
Developmental Mathematics  
Utah Valley State College

Appendix E

Bracketing Interview of Jeff Maxfield

## Bracketing Interview of Jeff Maxfield

This is John Krutsch and I am here with Jeff Maxfield and we are doing an initial, a bracketing interview, to reveal Jeff's biases on his study here. So I am going to start by asking him these prompting questions and we'll take it from there and we'll see where it leads us.

John: Alright, number 1: what were the major factors for you to choose this online class you are currently enrolled in?

Jeff: Well currently I am not, but based on classes I have had in the past, number one is it was part of the program I was in which means you know you have some form of coercion, if you will, for taking the class. Number two, convenience is a big factor, particularly with my job, being able to work on it when I have the time as opposed to someone else's schedule, I think gives me a better opportunity to learn and I think that is the biggest reason.

John: You used the word coercion. Do you think it is really coercive in nature?

Jeff: Not, no, not coercive in that sense, but in the sense that if I had been given a choice, one over the other, then I don't know which one I would have taken. So, in some cases it is mandatory that you take the class as opposed to given a choice. I might have, given the choice, opted for that over the other depending on the instructor.

John: Have you had bad experience with instructors online before?

Jeff: Oh yes. Um, I think that is probably my worst experience. I think one of the best classes I ever took was an online class and one of the worst classes I have ever taken was an online class. And I think it boils down to outcome, what the outcome of the class was designed to be and instructor involvement.

John: What, if any, were your apprehensions in taking an online class? What were the appealing points?

Jeff: My apprehension was you don't get a lot of student interaction and student to teacher interaction that you do in a normal class. So, if I were to identify it, it would be kind of the fear of the unknown, because I don't know what it is going to be like in terms of comparison to a traditional class. In a traditional class, you know there is a lot of discussion, a lot of chance to voice opinion immediately, but based upon something. Whereas an online class it takes longer and longer feedback. So there was some apprehension on how much I would gain from other students and teachers.

John: So you perceived there would be a lack of interaction?

Jeff: Yeah, I think...

John: Earlier you mentioned that you had one class that was really bad. Was interaction a key factor in those outcomes for you?

Jeff: Interaction with the instructor was, not necessarily the other students.

John: So in the good class the instructor interacted with you and in the bad class the instructor didn't? Or were...

Jeff: Pretty much. In the bad class, it was pretty much here is the stuff, read it, take a stupid test...my bias just came out there with stupid test... take a stupid test and say yeah, I learned. Where in the good class, there was immediate feedback, there was a lot of paper writing and research and stuff. You would send it in and man, you had feedback like the next day, which is unbelievable. But...

John: Can you describe a stupid test for me?

Jeff: Read the material and take a multiple-choice exam online that is timed. Um, you know in the class I am thinking of the questions were the most obscure things the instructor could find; not pertinent to the meat of the course, but something you had to read the minutia to get something and I didn't feel that I learned anything.

John: So how were you assessed in the class that you felt was done right?

Jeff: Um, it was based on feedback on my writings and reflections and things, given feedback on what to maybe look at to research deeper. If I made a statement that I couldn't back up, I was challenged on it.

John: Were there tests in the traditional sense in that class at all?

Jeff: No.

John: Alright, uh, did you talk at all about any of the appealing points?

Jeff: Well yeah. The real appealing point to me is the time frame. You know in some of the classes that I have had online, there has been a synchronous portion of the class where you had to be online with the instructor and other students and I found that difficult, number one, because I had to adjust everything to meet the needs of mostly the instructor. Number two, um, in an online synchronous environment, where a chat room was used, there was a lot of side talk and a lot of garbage going on amongst the other students and stuff, that you had to wade through to get to the meat of what was being discussed. I have had classes where, like "Breeze" technology was used, where you are having synchronous voice-over

and video protocol on the Internet. I didn't find them as effective for me as an asynchronous course, because, again I could do it at my own pace and I didn't have to wait for somebody. And even though you had the availability of discussing you didn't. It was like listening to the instructor and waiting to see who would be the first student to respond and those kinds of things. So it wasn't very appealing.

John: You mentioned wading through the garbage of other students. Was it always garbage or was there ever any value in the discussions?

Jeff: Maybe one posting out of ten or twelve might have something worth discussing or a good point. Most of it was bantering back and forth with jokes, things that I felt wasted my time and I know that other students that I talked to felt the same way. It just kind of got out of control on the private chats, things that were being typed in.

John: Alright. As detailed as you can be what has been the most rewarding experience for you in this online environment, and why?

Jeff: Well for me, and I am probably a different person, but it is the ability to research what I want to research that fits with the topic rather than being led by someone else. If I am doing my own work based on the assignments and things, I have had the ability to go deeper, using online/internet search engines and things like that and do it at my timeframe. I really like to learn. I don't like to be force-fed something that I don't think is going to be of value. And so, if I am given the leeway to do what I want which meets the parameters of the outcomes; that has been very appealing to me.

John: So in that sense, what would the role of the teacher be in your ideal course?

Jeff: Facilitator. I had a class with a professor at the university I was attending. It was a face-to-face class, but the concept would work very well online. And that was we were given an opportunity to build a contract, within parameters, of what we wanted to study and report and those kinds of things, which I found very appealing, because I didn't have to waste my time on things that had very little meaning for me personally, but still being able to learn the concepts and the theory behind it.

John: As detailed as you can be what has been the least rewarding experience for you in an online environment and why?

Jeff: Probably again it goes to course development and the instructor. I think, again this is my personal bias coming out, I think a lot of instructors and course designers use it as a "throw what we have done in class in terms of reading online"—you read it, answer a little test and your done with very little feedback from the instructor; very little learning methodology involved. It is just read

regurgitate and you have completed the course. Those courses have been meaningless to me. There is no feedback from the instructor. For example if you have a paper or something due, often you don't get any feedback until you are six weeks into the course and you have already had six assignments turned in without feedback. You have no knowledge of whether you're doing it right or not. I think that is a lack of training and understanding of the online environment by the instructors.

John: Is that isolated to online or do you see that in traditional classrooms as well?

Jeff: I don't see it as much in the...I mean, yeah there are instructors who don't teach. They just say read and answer and I understand that. Teach maybe a bad word because I am a believer in adult principles or assumptions of learning. I am a constructivist. I think that everybody constructs their meanings, based on their own situations and the instructor who facilitates that is effective. An instructor who just says "here is the stuff, just read it" doesn't give you any feedback, which can happen in a face to face class. The difference is in immediate feedback. If I don't understand or I don't agree, I can voice that right then and there and get the feedback I am looking for without having to wait or type it out. So, I think that would be a minute difference, but maybe a very important difference.

John: Do you think that the online environment affords teachers a better opportunity to do things differently and that is not what is being taken advantage of?

Jeff: Yeah. Being a faculty member myself, it would be very easy in an online environment to be lazy and just take the easy way out. But the student suffers for that. I believe that if an instructor or teacher is really interested in imparting the knowledge and experience to the student, online can be a really effective way of doing it, but it takes more work. I have had this argument with my Dean. He thinks there should be no difference or compensation difference for online versus face-to-face. My argument to him is there is more work. His argument back is "not really, because most teachers don't take the time to do it right." Then my argument is then they should be punished or kept from doing it, instead of punishing the ones who are doing it right. So, again, my bias is I think online can be very, very effective, if the instructor or teacher is willing to put the effort forth.

John: So what do you think are the benefits of taking the class online?

Jeff: Again, most of the students I teach are older adult students who have careers. I think the flexibility of the timeframe they can do their work on is good. I think the ability to research or learn and construct your learning based on your own needs, your own experiences through an online is much more meaningful. I think there is a deeper level of actual learning. One of the concerns that I have is that a lot of people like online classes because they were fun. But, has any learning taken place? You know it is pretty hard—again my personal bias is coming out here—it

is pretty hard to say whether someone has learned by regurgitating information on a multiple-choice exam. It just means the remembered for a week, rather than that they have really learned. Whereas reflective activities, role-playing, actually doing some synthesis of what you learned, putting it in realistic context, which can be done either way, but has to be done basically online, I think is much more effective.

John: What are some drawbacks that an online class offers?

Jeff: Sometimes people can procrastinate. You know if you have got a whole week before you have to turn an assignment in, often times it is done at the very last minute, which means there is not a lot of thought put into it. Again, that is a commitment to the student or the instructor. That can be a problem and again the drawback as compared to a face-to-face class if I have a question I can turn to the guy next to me and discuss it or get immediate feedback that way. In an online class, I have to type a message to somebody and hope they check their message board that day to give the answer. It is not as immediate of feedback as in the traditional way of learning.

John: Relative to your traditional class experiences, what would you feel is your greatest frustration?

Jeff: Again, not in all classes I have had, but in most, the unwillingness of the instructor to be involved on a daily level, with immediate feedback. Often it is three or four days down the road before you hear from them. Some of the papers that I have received with grading on it has a grade with very little feedback; just “good job” or something like that, but not really telling me what was good and what wasn’t—feedback that way. In the classes that have been really rewarding for me in the online that’s been something that has been taken care of; so a lot of feedback, even personal messages in the email from the instructor with some encouragement or some direction. I would say if you don’t have that, it is very difficult to demand it like you can in a traditional class.

John: So what was it you found the most rewarding then, the flipside of that?

Jeff: On the flipside of that, I got a lot of feedback. In the particular class I thought this the most, and I know you went through the same one, I was amazed at how much detail and how much work the professor put into it to give feedback. I was allowed to research and do what I wanted to do, which fit the parameter of the class. What I did, I got quick feedback on; personally or on discussion boards, whether she answered mine perfectly or not or whether she didn’t answer mine, you got of feedback when you saw that the instructor was involved in the discussions. That meant a lot and I know how much effort that took having taught online myself. I was very appreciative and respectful of that.

- John: Well that is all of the questions we have here for now. Do you think you revealed your biases sufficiently?
- Jeff: I think so and I think that is my biggest concern with my biases. I want to go into this kind of fresh. Not everyone is going to go into this with the same experiences. Most of my students are younger and so I don't want to taint their thinking in any way based on my experience. It will be interesting to see what comes out of this study, if there is some phenomenon or not.
- John: Are all of your students from the fire service or are there others?
- Jeff: I honestly don't know. In this class there are EMS, police, and fire. I am not going to ask the students who they work for. I may when it gets to the interview stage. But, I just selected based on those who were willing to participate and fit the profile as best as I could determine—of the nontraditional adult student.
- John: Alright then, good luck.
- Jeff: Thank you.



## CURRICULUM VITA

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**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

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Utah Valley University – *Orem, Utah* *May 2008 to Present*  
***Assistant Dean, Emergency Services Program, College of Technology and Computing,  
Utah Valley University***

- Currently responsible for all programs, budget, and staff of the Emergency Services Program in the College of Technology and Computing, which consists of the Criminal Justice/Law Enforcement Department, the Emergency Services Department and the Institute of Emergency Services and Homeland Security.
- Oversight of the Utah Fire and Rescue Academy (UFRA) and the Utah Valley Peace Officer Standards and Training Academy (POST.)
- Serve as a member of the North American Fire Training Directors.
- Serve as a member of the U.S. Fire Administration's Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) Consortium.
- Member of the Utah State Fire Chiefs Association, Western Fire Chiefs Association and the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

Utah Valley State College, *Orem, Utah* *2003 to 2008*  
***Associate Professor/Department Chair, Emergency Services Department at Utah  
Valley State College***

- Oversight of all academic programs, faculty, and staff for the Emergency Services Department.
- Director of the Utah Fire and Rescue Academy.
- Director of the Institute of Emergency Services and Homeland Security.

- Developed curriculum for and taught several courses in our PESM Baccalaureate Degree Program.
- Conceived, developed and implemented, with staff, an on-line delivery of our Bachelor of Public Emergency Services Management (PESM) Degree.
- Served as an advisor to Draper City for the formation of the Unified Fire Authority of Salt Lake County.
- Served on various college committees.
- Awarded tenure April, 2007

Utah Valley State College, *Orem, Utah*

*1985 to 2002*

- Adjunct faculty for Fire Science Department

Maximum Performance Consulting, L.L.C. – *Draper, Utah*

*1995 to Present*

### **President/Founder**

- Facilitated hundreds of seminars throughout the United States, Canada, and internationally, mentoring thousands of people in leadership and personal development.
- Helped city governments develop strategic plans for growth. I completed an organizational audit for Salt Lake City Fire Department and assisted Farmington City in developing a strategic plan for hiring a full-time Fire Chief. I also facilitated the hiring process of the fire chief for the city.
- Conducted a Fire Station Location Study for the Draper City, focusing on current needs, as well as, future considerations. As a result of my work and because I live in Draper, I was asked to represent, and recently sworn in as, Draper City's representative to the Unified Fire Authority Study and Formation Committee.
- Consult with business owners, assisting with management and organizational development on an ongoing basis.

University of Phoenix – *Utah Campus*

*1997 to 2005*

### **Faculty**

- Instructed courses in Management, Critical Thinking, Executive Management, Ethics, and other related fields for the University's Undergraduate and Graduate degree programs.

Salt Lake County Fire Department – *Salt Lake City, Utah*      *1972 through 1996*  
*Assistant Chief/Chief Operations Officer*

I started as a Fire Fighter/Paramedic, working up the ranks and eventually becoming Chief of Operations for the fire department.

- Supervised the service delivery of municipal fire protection for unincorporated Salt Lake County (population of about 600,000) and emergency medical services for all of Salt Lake County (population of about 1,000,000), with an annual budget of approximately \$28,000,000.00 and a staff of over 400 employees.
- Administrated/Facilitated Human Resource Management function for the fire department.
- Conceived and developed *The Wasatch Fire Academy*, a training academy jointly operated with Salt Lake City Fire Department, where we developed training and educational programs for firefighters/EMS workers. We also trained recruit firefighters for our respective departments and other cities.
- Conceived, developed, and implemented an in-house paramedic training school, saving the taxpayers thousands of dollars each year in training costs (this school is currently tied to UVU for college credit).
- Conceived, developed and delivered a 120-hour leadership course for fire officers throughout Salt Lake Valley.
- Served as Region VIII Co-Chair for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Training Resource and Data Exchange (T.R.A.D.E.) Program, under the direction of the National Fire Academy.
- Served as a member of the Western Fire Training Officers Association, Greater Salt Lake Fire Chiefs Association, Utah State Fire Chiefs Association, Western Fire Chiefs Association, and International Fire Chiefs Association.

## **PUBLICATIONS & PRESENTATIONS**

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Presented professional paper, *Reflective Practices in Technology-Based Deliveries for Non-Traditional Students* at Teaching with Technology Idea Exchange a National Conference, June 11, 2006, Provo, Utah

*Simple Wisdom—Game Plans for Joyful Living*, Fisher House Publishing, Boise, Idaho and Edmonton, Alberta Canada, February 2000

Sending Fire Prevention to School. (1985). *Fire Command*, 52 (8), 64.

Doing the Right Thing. (1994). *American Fire Journal*, 46, (10), 24-25.

The Value of Leadership. (1995). *American Fire Journal*, 47(1), 20-21.

To Hire or Not To Hire...What Is The Question? (1995). *Fire Chief*, 39(11), 62-64.

Ethics and Example. (1996). *American Fire Journal*, 48(1), 28-30.

Character and Leadership. (2000). *Living Better Online Magazine*. Fisher House Publishing.

## **PUBLICATIONS PENDING**

Reflective Practices in Technology-Based Deliveries for Non-Traditional Students: A Literature Review. *Journal of Emergency Services and Security Education* (scheduled for publication in the summer of 2008)

## **EDUCATION & PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND CERTIFICATIONS**

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

*Doctoral Candidate (Ed.D) (Anticipated completion: spring of 2008)*

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY – Provo, Utah

**Master of Public Administration - 1992**

UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX – Phoenix, Arizona

**Bachelor of Science, Business Administration - 1986**

UTAH VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE – Orem, Utah

**Associate of Applied Science, Fire Science - 1990**

(I received “*Student of the Year*” honors in the Fire Science program in 1990)

National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)/State certification levels:

- Firefighter I
- Firefighter II
- Fire Officer I
- Fire Officer II
- Instructor I
- Instructor II
- Instructor III
- Instructor IV
- Inspector I
- Utah EMT/Paramedic Certification (1976-1994)

I also have completed several courses from FEMA/National Fire Academy, including:

- Curriculum Development
- Risk Analysis
- Hazardous Materials Mitigation
- Various other classes and seminars (certificates available on request)