A Phenomenological Investigation of Online Learners’ Lived Experiences of Engagement

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Dedication

I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist... Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.

– John Steinbeck

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the great teachers and great artists I’ve encountered in my life... to those who have helped color the canvas of my character and then passed the palette and brush on to me; to those who have inspired my love of learning and nurtured my insatiable curiosity; and especially to those who believed in me and held the lantern, most patiently, while I struggled in times of darkness to find my way.
Abstract

This study examined the phenomenon of learner engagement as it was experienced by adult learners while learning online. Learner engagement has been suggested to be one of the most significant predictors of learning and academic achievement (National Research Council, 2004; Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), and several instructional design models have been proposed to meet the challenges associated with supporting engagement among learners in online learning environments (Kearsley, 2000; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). However, many of these models are based on abstract conceptualizations of engagement, which vary greatly, rather than how it is actually experienced by online learners. As online learning becomes increasingly more prevalent in various adult learning and postsecondary educational contexts (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010), educators are prompted to consider how engagement is actually being experienced by adult learners within virtual environments, what dynamics influence it, and how their efforts might help promote and foster it. A phenomenological understanding of learners' perceptions as they experience engagement while learning in online courses holds great potential to provide new insights into online teaching and learning from an authentic, learner-centered perspective. To this end, the purpose of this study is to help adult and higher education professionals, including online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers, understand more deeply how adult learners may experience engagement in online learning environments by addressing the following research questions: (1) What is it like to be an adult learner in online learning environments? (2) What is it like to experience engagement in online
learning environments? and (3) How do various elements of learning online and
dynamics of the learning environment influence adult learners’ feelings of engagement?

This qualitative study utilized interpretive phenomenological methodology and a
post-intentional phenomenological research design (Vagle, 2010a) to investigate four
adult learners’ lived experiences of engagement while enrolled in a completely online,
graduate-level, university course. For eight months following the conclusion of the
course, qualitative methods were used to collect data from the research participants’
personal narrative accounts shared through individual interviews, written lived
experience descriptions (van Manen, 1990, p. 63-66), and other digital media artifacts
created as part of the learning activities while the course was in progress. Iterative cycles
of phenomenological data analysis using a whole-parts-whole approach captured
tentative manifestations (Vagle, 2010a, p. 7) of the phenomenon of engagement as it was
experienced in online learning environments and revealed in shifting and changing
ways. Thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) was also used to identify three themes
of pedagogic significance: (1) The unbounded nature of learning online may significantly
impact the overall learning experience, especially how engagement is experienced; (2)
Engagement may be experienced online as a form of praxis; and (3) There is a temporal
nature to engagement in online learning environments, suggesting that it changes over
time and space, according to the influence of various dynamics. Research findings also
suggest particular dynamics that influenced the lived experience of engagement online,
including learner autonomy and shared decision-making. The insights gained from this
study were used to propose a flexible online engagement model that suggests research-
based pedagogical design principles to help promote and foster engaging online learning experiences.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Data reported by The Chronicle of Higher Education (2010) forecasts an 83% increase in enrollment in fully online higher education courses in the United States from 2009 to the year 2014, by which time it is anticipated that online enrollment will reach an estimated 3.92 million learners. To better prepare for the challenges and opportunities that will accompany this exponential growth in online courses and programs, educators and instructional designers are prompted to consider what conditions will be necessary to facilitate effective learning in online environments. Online teaching and learning presents unique challenges for educators responsible for facilitating and designing online courses, because they require different pedagogical and instructional design approaches than those used for traditional courses in order to be effective (Brookfield, 2006; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Kearsley, 2000). Considering dimensions of teaching and learning that significantly contribute to effective learning, learner engagement has been suggested to have a significant influence on learning effectiveness in general (National Research Council, 2004; Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), but is even more critical for learning online due to the isolation some learners may feel while being physically distanced from one another and the instructor (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Conrad and Donaldson, 2004; Paloff & Pratt, 2007). Thus, promoting engagement in online environments becomes imperative for effective online learning, and educators must consider how their efforts might help promote and foster it. To this end, I contend that advances in online teaching and learning warrant looking at pedagogy and
design in new ways, and additionally warrant looking at learner engagement in new ways to reveal unique challenges as well as unique opportunities.

**Exploring Learner Engagement in Online Environments**

When considering how to enhance learner engagement online, perhaps most problematic is that conceptualizations of learner engagement vary. Although many definitions have been proposed in the literature (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Kearsley, 2000; Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2011; Robinson and Hullinger, 2008; Russell, Ainley, and Frydenberg, 2005; Skinner and Belmont, 1993; Wlodkowski, 2008), each seems to fall short of fully capturing the multidimensionality of this phenomenon holistically. Moreover, a lack of consensus on what constitutes learner engagement presents a challenge for determining what influences it and therefore how to responsively design for it. Educators and instructional designers must come to understand online learner engagement more deeply and more concretely in order to determine what is necessary to support it and then appreciate how their efforts might promote and foster such engagement within virtual learning environments.

In addition to the concerns associated with limited empirical research, a significant amount of published conceptual literature presents guidelines for practice, or “best practices,” which are often rhetorical and not substantiated by research (see Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Fish & Wickersham, 2009; Paloff & Pratt, 2007; Wlodkowski, 2008). Echoing this concern, Patton (2002) problematizes educational practitioners’ reliance upon “best practices” literature in general, arguing that published “best practices” or “lessons learned” have deteriorating meaningfulness because they may not be theoretically or empirically grounded. Because this is often the case for literature on
online pedagogy and instructional design, future advances in these areas are critically dependent upon sound principles of practice based on research that seeks to expose important dimensions of online learning and to understand it new ways.

**Exposing the Human-Centered Nature of Learning with Technology**

One such line of inquiry is to explore online learning experiences and the relationships that exist among learners, online technologies, and various dynamics within online learning environments. In this regard, I am interested in exposing the human-centered nature of learning with online technologies. Aside from the technological tools, the pedagogical approaches, and instructional design strategies necessary for online teaching and learning, I am also concerned with how learners, as thinking and feeling human beings, actually experience online technologies. What is their experience like while they are learning online? What influences their experience? How can online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers impact their experience in positive and meaningful ways? In order for the experience to hold the most educational value, I am interested in understanding learners’ perceptions, feelings, frustrations, challenges, joys, and curiosities, and what aspects of pedagogy and design of the learning environment influence the experience. Thus, it is my belief that much can be learned by focusing in on the perspectives of the learners... the individuals... the human beings on the other side of the computer screen and by investigating the relationships and connections mediated by the Internet.

According to Ihde’s (1993) philosophy of technology, “Technologies must be understood phenomenologically, i.e., as belonging in different ways to our experience and use of technologies, as a human technology relation, rather than abstractly conceiving
of them as mere objects” (p. 34). In order to leverage the full potential of learning
technologies in the area of online and distance learning in adult and higher education, we
must consider how learners experience various online technologies and what human
beings’ relationships are with the technologies while they are learning online. There is
currently very little published research on this topic. My interest in this line of inquiry is
also fueled by grave concerns over technology integration in education that is overly
focused on technological tools rather than on teaching and learning processes,
relationships, and connections in unity with the tools (Jonassen, Campbell, & Davidson,
1994). As Ihde (1993) suggests, the ubiquitous and profound ways that technologies are
being used today philosophically positions them as more than mere objects and tools;
they hold agential potential to open up new spaces for deep and meaningful connections
and, in the context of online technologies, can radically alter how we experience learning
and various phenomena associated with learning. In this light, educators are implored to
consider the relationships that are formed and shaped with learning technologies and the
connections that are made possible because of them.

I also contend that in order to make the greatest impact on future directions in
online teaching and learning and to leverage learning technologies to their fullest
advantage, we must move beyond the technological euphoria that exists today in
education causing practitioners and administrators to place too much emphasis on new
tools and devices without also considering the human-centered nature of learning with
technology and what is pedagogically necessary to support it. This re-focus will allow us
to reach the deeper understandings and new perspectives necessary for informing the
work we do and for harnessing the potential technology genuinely holds for radically
transformation teaching and learning. Effective online learning is just one example of how learning technologies can transform education by connecting people and resources around the world and by lifting limits on learning in ways that reach beyond the confines of traditional classroom walls. Yet we must approach these exciting possibilities with cautious optimism, as there is danger in misguided enthusiasm directed at technologies as objects exclusively capable of powerful impacts, as has historically been seen in decades of unfulfilled promises of technology integration in education. These prophetic claims date back to Edison’s 1913 lofty proclamation that motion picture would revolutionize education and make books obsolete (Saettler, 1968, p. 98). Online teaching and learning holds the potential to fundamentally alter the trajectory of higher education in the future, but it should not be regarded as a panacea and nor should the technology itself take center stage.

Rather, there is a critical need for scholars in the field of Learning Technologies to probe the human-centered nature of learning with technology and the associated issues of complexity in ways that are more holistic and transcend traditional approaches to promote understanding of leaners’ experiences with technology on both philosophical and practical levels. DiSessa & Cobb (2004) contend that there is a critical need for ontological innovation in educational research in order to reach new understandings, disrupt antiquated practices, and continue to make unique scholarly contributions (p. 84). This is particularly appropriate for scholarship in Learning Technologies. In order to keep up with the rapid pace of technological innovation as it impacts learning, we also have a responsibility to invest significant energy in generating ontological innovation as
well, by exposing and pursuing new lines of inquiry in order to reach new understandings about learning with technology.

**Identifying a Phenomenon of Critical Interest**

Among the various phenomena associated with online learning, this phenomenological investigation places an analytical focus on *engagement* particularly and illuminates how it is experienced by adult learners while learning in a completely online course. Learner engagement has been suggested to be a significant predictor of learning and academic achievement (National Research Council, 2004; Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and as a result, remains a salient topic in higher education and in critical need of further study. Disengagement of the learner is a particularly critical concern within online learning environments that are often characterized by distance and physical isolation among individual learners and the instructor (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Paloff & Pratt, 2007). Several instructional design models have been proposed in the literature to meet the challenges associated with fostering learner engagement from a distance while learning online (Kearsley, 2000; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004), but few focus on the learner experience with online technologies specifically, or within online learning environments. As online learning becomes increasingly more prevalent in various adult learning and postsecondary educational contexts (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010), educators are prompted to consider how engagement is actually being experienced by adult online learners within virtual environments, what dynamics influence it, and how pedagogically-grounded design efforts might help promote and foster it.
To address such issues, Cilesiz (2010) argues that phenomenology holds great potential in education for understanding how learners experience various phenomena associated with learning with technology because it helps provide educators with greater insight into how their efforts influence teaching and learning processes. Although she advocates the utility of phenomenology for studying learning technologies in general, I would assert that it is a valuable methodological approach for probing online learning environments more specifically. A phenomenological understanding of how adult learners experience engagement while they are learning in online courses and what dynamics influence their experience can provide educators preparing for the challenges and opportunities of online teaching and learning with new insights from a more direct, and therefore more authentic, learner-centered perspective.

**Overview of the Research Study**

This dissertation presents the research study I conducted which utilized interpretive phenomenological methodology and qualitative methods to systematically examine the phenomenon of engagement as it was experienced by adult online learners. Using Vagle’s (2010a) post-intentional phenomenological research design, this study investigated the lived experiences of four adult learners while they were enrolled in a completely online, four-week, graduate-level, university course. According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological research often involves the retrospective study of lived experience and thus, research data was collected about participants’ lived experiences of engagement for eight months following the conclusion of the online course. The purpose of the study is to contribute to ontological innovation in the fields of Learning Technologies and Instructional Design by phenomenologically probing the human-
centered nature of learning with technology in online learning environments. More specifically, the insights gained from this phenomenological study can help adult and higher education professionals, including online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers, understand more deeply how adult learners may experience engagement while learning online by addressing the following research questions: (1) What is it like to be an adult learner in online learning environments? (2) What is it like to experience engagement in online learning environments? and (3) How do various elements of learning online and dynamics of the learning environment influence adult learners’ feelings of engagement?

Phenomenology was employed in this study as both a philosophical framework and as an interpretive research methodology. Phenomenological methodology is informed and guided by the historical foundations of phenomenology as a branch of philosophy originally theorized by Edmund Husserl in Germany in the early part of the twentieth century (Moran & Mooney, 2002; Sokolowski, 2000). Van Manen (1990) aptly describes phenomenological research as “the attentive practice of thoughtfulness” (p. 12) and a key tenet of phenomenological philosophy is a commitment to openness in order to gain deep insight and understanding into a phenomenon as it is consciously experienced or concretely lived. Methodologically, this presents the challenge, or the freedom rather, to move beyond the constraints that pre-determined hypotheses and abstract theories might place on empirical educational research as it is traditionally conducted. Systematic and deliberate protocol outlined in Vagle’s (2010a) five-component process for conducting post-intentional phenomenological research was followed to lend to the methodological rigor of the research endeavor as well as the
trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). However, a phenomenological commitment to openness and flexibility was also preserved throughout the inquiry process.

A post-intentional approach to phenomenological methodology is based on a post-structural framing of Husserl’s theory of intentionality (Vagle, 2010b), which refers to the meaningful connections, or intentional relationships, that connect all things meaningfully in the world. Intentionality is the central philosophical commitment in phenomenological methodology (Vagle, 2010a, p. 2). The unit of analysis in phenomenological research is the phenomenon of interest, but the aim of the inquiry is to seek and illuminate the intentional relationships associated with the phenomenon as it is lived.

Considering intentionality through a post-structural lens assumes that the phenomenon and the intentional relationships associated with it are not stable, but instead, shift and change over time so that they cannot be centered nor singularly defined. These intentional relationships or relations within the environment in which the phenomenon is identified are tentatively manifested, then, in different ways at different moments according to variations in context as well as the influence of various dynamics within the complexity of lived experience. Thus, a post-intentional research design was used in this study to capture such tentative manifestations (Vagle, 2010a, p. 7) of the phenomenon of engagement as it was experienced in different ways online and as significant meanings were revealed in the intentional relationships that exist within the online learning environment.
Framing, Rather Than Defining Terms

Phenomenology, as the deeply attentive and contemplative study of human experience, is a descriptive science rather than an explanatory science (Sokolowski, 2000). It focuses on identifying a phenomenon of interest and then describing or revealing how that phenomenon is manifested in one’s experiences in the world. It seeks to analyze individuals’ perceptions of their experiences as they find themselves interacting in the world, or in the environment. The goal of phenomenological inquiry, then, is not to determine or assert causal explanations, but rather to seek and then articulate vivid, compelling descriptions from first hand accounts of such experiences as they are embodied or lived out by the research participants. In this sense, phenomenology aims not to define, but to illuminate meaning, or to bring to light how the phenomenon appears to the individual, how it feels, and how it is experienced. These meanings are entangled in the relationships and connections within the world and are woven tightly together in unity by threads of intentionality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2005, p. xv). Again, these connective threads are important in that they hold significant meaning, but they are often so tightly woven into the fabric of everyday life experiences that they are difficult to see, notice, recognize, or genuinely appreciate. In the busy-ness of life, such connections and relationships are often obscured by distractions, personal judgments, assumptions, and biases. Husserl refers to this inattentive state of being as the natural attitude, or the living and moving through the world with little attention paid to the details of everyday experiences. Heidegger (1953/2010) described this attitude as the “average, everydayness” (p. 43) in which we find ourselves on a typical day or within a typical experience, quite naturally. However, by making an effort to purposefully focus
our gaze, to take notice and look more attentively, we shift into the phenomenological attitude. And by doing this, we reach a heightened awareness and a “mindful wondering” (van Manen, 1990, p. 12), thereby slackening the meaning threads and allowing for a more attentive, aware, and mindful examination of them in order to tease out the intentional meanings.

In so much as phenomenological work seeks to describe, reveal, and illuminate the intentional meanings in our lived experiences, it must be made clear that we are not moving to certainty, generalizations, or prescriptions in this work. Whereas other research traditions, including many interpretive and positivistic methodologies, favor repeatable or replicable and transferable methods, data, and findings, phenomenology actually resists them. As van Manen (2010) explains, “phenomenology is, in a broad sense, a philosophy or theory of the unique; it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable” (p. 7). Phenomenology does not attempt to solve problems or assert generalizable definitions or theories by which other scientific research methodologies are judged as a measure of rigor or credibility. The aims of phenomenological research are much different in this regard as van Manen (1990) further contends, “the tendency to generalize may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience” (p.22). Vagle (2010b) maintains that creating or asserting definitions or theories privileges and edifies the very assumptions, theoretical abstractions, and predeterminations that a phenomenological methodology seeks to challenge. Instead, phenomenology ultimately seeks to elucidate meaning; and the validity of phenomenological research, then, lies in its ability to resonate with the reader (van Manen, 1990, p. 11) by stimulating curiosity, offering insight, and deepening
understanding. Indeed, van Manen argues that “phenomenological questioning teaches the reader to wonder, to question deeply the very thing that is being questioned by the question” (p. 44).

Van Manen (1990) further contends that experiences evoke lived, intentional meanings (p. 11). Thus, it is in these lived, intentional meanings, revealed through phenomenological data analysis, that we can authentically understand what it is like for adult online learners to experience engagement. For these reasons, definitions are not presented here; however, for the sake of clarity and as a point of reference, it is important to frame a few specific terms and concepts that are used throughout this dissertation.

**Online Learning.** In this study, online learning is framed as learning that takes place entirely over the Internet or is mediated exclusively through online media and other online technology tools. The context of this study was open to online learning inclusive of formal, informal, or incidental learning that occurred while the participants were enrolled in the online graduate course and as they participated in the act of seeking, exploring, discovering, creating, sharing or reflecting on information resources or any communications associated with such resources. Initially, the online learning parameters in this study were established as the adult learners’ participation in a university-affiliated graduate course that was conducted completely (fully) online and **within an** online learning environment. As presented in the data in Chapter 4 and elucidated in Chapter 5, however, the research participants’ narrative accounts of their experiences of engagement while they were learning online actually resisted bounded parameters or constraints of any kind, and ventured from **within to beyond** the parameters of the environment that had been explicitly designed for the completely online course. Participants’ accounts of their
online learning experiences also called into question the parameters that were initially established to frame this research study as an investigation of the experience of engagement within an online learning environment as a singular entity; their experiences of engagement led to self-directed pursuits into online spaces beyond the online learning environment designed for the course. These findings warrant a critique of establishing pre-determined parameters, or regarding the online environment as singular or stable, from the start. It was determined that a more appropriate description, reflecting participants’ experiences of learning online as they were really lived, would be to reference online learning environments as pluralized.

In contrast to the completely online course that comprised the context of this research study, online learning may also be a component of hybrid learning, or hybrid courses that are conducted partially online and partially face-to-face. However, inquiry into online learning associated with hybrid courses was not a part of this study.

*Environment.* In the sense that it is referenced in this study, the environment is not limited to that which may be associated with a physical environment such as people, objects, materials, or other physical surroundings. In this context, it is also a figurative reference inclusive of conditions, dynamics, and situations comprising any learning experience. Moreover, aligning with Dewey’s (1938) conception of environment in his philosophy of experience, this term is used throughout this dissertation to include “whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had” (p. 44).

*Online Learning Environment.* In the context of this study, ‘online learning environment’ is also a very inclusive term that very openly refers to a conceptualization
of any virtual “place” or “space” the research participants “occupied” as well as any
dynamics that influenced the experiences they had while they were connected to the
Internet, insofar as this was related in any way to their participation in the online graduate
course. Further, the terms online and virtual are used interchangeably throughout this
dissertation and are meant to reference the same concept of relating to the Internet or
involving online technologies. Similarly, the terms learning environment and learning
space are also used interchangeably and are meant to reference the technologically-
mediated “place” or “space” in which learning occurred in many forms, including the acts
of seeking, exploring, discovering, creating, sharing, or reflecting.

Overview of the Dissertation

In the following chapters, I present in more detail the post-intentional
phenomenological study I conducted investigating how adult learners experienced
engagement in online learning environments, including a review of relevant literature, the
conceptual framework, the methodology and research design, the results of data analysis,
and the implications for the insights that were gained from the research findings. More
specifically, in Chapter 2, I present a review of the literature relevant to this research and
the conceptual framework, including meaningful connections between phenomenology
and the aims and goals of the fields of Learning Technologies and Instructional Design. I
also articulate a warrant for the research study I conducted, including the unique
contributions I believe this study can make to these fields. In Chapter 3, I present the
research methodology and the research design detailing each of the five components of
Vagle’s post-intentional research design (2010a) that was used to guide the inquiry. In
Chapter 4, I discuss the qualitative methods used for phenomenological data analysis in
depth, including iterative cycles of a whole-parts-whole analytical approach (Vagle, 2010a, p. 18-20) used to illuminate tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement and the associated intentional relationships. Further thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) is also described as it was used to identify three themes of pedagogic significance (p. 159). I conclude this chapter with a brief overview of the outcomes of data analysis. Chapter 5 is organized thematically and in this chapter, I present the participants’ narratives of their online learning experiences and discuss the outcomes of phenomenological data analysis in depth. A narrative framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is used to present the research findings by weaving authentic and compelling narratives from the research participants’ lived experiences in online learning environments and crafting a text that captures the tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of learner engagement in its multiple, partial and varied contexts (Vagle, 2010a, p. 7). And in Chapter 6, I discuss conclusions and implications for the research findings, including the relevance that these insights hold for adult educators, instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers in terms of pedagogical thoughtfulness (van Manen, 1990, p. 8) as well as informed practical reasoning (Brookfield, 2006, p. 6) and responsive practice (p. 2) to address the challenges and opportunities associated with online teaching and learning. I then propose a flexible online engagement model or framework that suggests empirically grounded pedagogical design principles to help promote and foster engaging online learning experiences. Finally, I end by addressing the limitations of the study and exposing future directions for further inquiry.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

As online learning becomes increasingly more prevalent in higher education and other adult learning contexts, there is a critical need for contemporary educational research to explore adult learners’ lived experiences in online learning environments and the significant phenomena associated with them, including learner engagement. The purpose of this study is to investigate four adult learners’ lived experiences of engagement while enrolled in a completely online, four-week, graduate-level university course as a means to help online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers better understand how adult learners may experience engagement when learning online.

In this chapter, I first provide a review of literature and research related to online learning and learner engagement, including various learner engagement models and instructional design practices. I then discuss the conceptual framework supporting the study, with an emphasis on the overarching phenomenological assumptions that grounded the methodology and consistently guided the research process. More specifically, this conceptual framework includes Husserl’s, Heidegger’s, (Sokolowski, 2000, Moran & Mooney, 2002) and van Manen’s (1990) phenomenological philosophies as they relate to the study of lived experience; Vagle’s (2010a, 2010b) post-intentional phenomenological philosophy informing the research design selected for this study; Cilesiz’ (2010) support for the utility of phenomenology to examine educational experiences with learning technologies; dimensions of Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of experience; Parrish’s (2008) conceptualization of the learner experience as it relates to instructional design; and finally, Brookfield’s (2006) adult learning theory as he contextualizes it for a pedagogical
approach to working with adult learners in higher education. Woven throughout this chapter, I articulate a warrant for the research study I conducted inclusive of all these issues that exposes opportunities for ontological innovation (diSessa & Cobb, 2004). These new, meaningful lines of inquiry aim to inform the fields of Learning Technologies and Instructional Design as well as educational practice in Adult and Higher Education from a valuable perspective based on a unique philosophical and methodological approach.

**Increasing Prevalence of Online Learning in Higher Education**

Data reported by The Chronicle of Higher Education (2010) forecasts an 83% increase in enrollment in completely online courses by students attending higher education institutions in the United States from 2009 to the year 2014, by which time it is anticipated that online enrollment will reach an estimated 3.92 million learners. To better prepare for the challenges and opportunities that will accompany this explosive growth in online courses and programs, educators are prompted to consider what conditions will be necessary to support them and to facilitate effective learning in online environments. To this end, *learner engagement* has been suggested to be one of the most significant predictors of learning and academic achievement generally (National Research Council, 2004; Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and is especially critical for success in online environments (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Brookfield, 2006; Conrad and Donaldson, 2004; Paloff & Pratt, 2007).

**The Intersection of Learner Engagement and Online Learning**

Conrad and Donaldson (2004) assert that effective online learning is particularly dependent upon keeping learners engaged because it is typically characterized by
physical distance among learners and between learners and the instructor. This potentially leaves some learners feeling remote and perceiving their learning as being isolated, which can lead to discontent, decreased motivation, and disengagement in the learning process (p. 10). When considering what this means for educators attempting to encourage and maintain learner engagement online, perhaps most problematic is that published research on learner engagement in online environments is limited. Further, conceptualizations of learner engagement in the literature vary and often tend to be abstract and decontextualized. Although many definitions have been proposed (Blumenfeld, Kempler, & Krajcik, 2006; Dixson, 2010; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) each seems to fall short of capturing the multidimensionality of this phenomenon as it is actually lived and experienced by learners in concrete ways. Moreover, a lack of consensus on what constitutes learner engagement presents a challenge for determining what influences it and, therefore, how to foster it or responsively design for it. Educators, including instructors, facilitators and instructional designers, must come to understand learner engagement more deeply and as it is concretely experienced in order to appreciate how their efforts might encourage and support such engagement within virtual learning spaces filled with unique challenges and opportunities.

Learner Engagement Definitions in the Literature. According to research conducted on learner engagement and online learning in higher education based on benchmarks for engagement proposed by Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research’s National Survey of Student Engagement (2011), Robinson and Hullinger (2008) suggest that engagement is a matter of degrees of involvement and that it occurs
along a continuum. This involvement dimension is further supported by Russell, Ainley, and Frydenberg (2005) who describe engagement as a combination of active involvement and authentic connection or “energy in action” (para. 2), manifested by a deep connection between the learner and the activity. Learners engage most highly in authentic tasks, which are those they find to be personally challenging, interesting, and meaningful. This need to find personal interest as well as authentic meaning in the learning process is also discussed frequently in adult education literature (Brookfield, 2013; Henschke, 2010; Jarvis, 1995; Knowles, 1973) and has been linked to learner engagement specifically by Wlodkowski (2008) who emphasizes the imperative of engagement for adult learning as he contends, “engagement is the portal for meaning” (p.232). As learners become increasingly engaged in the content, the complexity of the learning experience and resulting understanding deepens, thereby deepening the value and purpose of the learning event.

Russell et al. (2005) suggest that the prediction potential of engagement for learning and academic achievement is reliant upon a complex interplay of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. This multidimensional interplay is further supported by a study conducted by Skinner and Belmont (1993), which suggests that engaged learners exhibit a positive emotional tone throughout sustained behavioral involvement in the learning activity. Moreover, they “select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest” (p. 572).
Additional research more specific to online learning supports learner engagement as particularly critical for meaningful learning online (Blumenfeld, Kempler, & Krajcik, 2006; Dixson, 2010) as well as for the retention of learners in online courses (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011; Herbert, 2006). Thus, it remains a significant consideration for online course facilitation and instructional design (Fink, 2003; Kearsley, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Parrish’s (2008) research into the influence of instructional design efforts on engagement suggests that engagement may be the most critical factor in any learning experience (p. 121); and as such, educators should design for the learner experience by responding to conditions that impact the nature of engagement (p. 141). Considered by many to be an innovative leader in the field of Instructional Design, Parrish positions design as being more than just problem solving, but also encompassing the “process of composing an experience that will stimulate the engagement that leads to learning” (p. 121).

Drawing from Dewey’s (1938) notion of interaction as a criterion for educative experiences, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, Parrish (2008) also describes the learner experience as an internal process influenced by external conditions and the learner’s engagement with the environment. This further speaks to the significance of environmental factors or dynamics necessary for learning and is particularly relevant for learner engagement online since the environment is the center of all learning activities, interactions, and exchanges and serves as the central meeting “place” or virtual space connecting the instructor, the learners, and the content (Doering, 2010). Doering and Veletsianos (2008) also highlight the significance of the learner
experience in the context of designing engaging online learning environments as they state, “Engaging instruction refers to instruction that draws students in a learning experience while allowing them to invest their self to the experience” (p.142).

**Learner Engagement Models and Practices.** Many have proposed models or frameworks for influencing the conditions necessary for learner engagement including Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research in their model which can be applied generally to all learning environments, as well as Kearsley (2000) and Conrad and Donaldson (2004) who have each proposed models specifically for online learning. Kearsley’s (2000) online education model places a practical emphasis on the significance of interaction for promoting engagement by asserting, “the most important role of the instructor in online classes is to ensure a high degree of interactivity and participation. This means designing and conducting learning activities that result in engagement with the subject matter and with fellow [learners]” (p. 78). This model underscores the instructor’s responsibility to promote interaction as a means to develop engagement.

Another model that shares this value for interaction is the one used by Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research (IUCPR) to conduct the well respected National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) (2011). This national survey collects data annually from private and public universities and colleges across the U.S. examining engagement levels of students enrolled in higher education courses by centering on five critical factors including, (1) a supportive environment, (2) interaction, (3) challenge, (4) active and collaborative learning opportunities, and (5) enriching educational experiences. Although the NSSE model has been implemented to measure benchmarks of engagement in postsecondary learning environments very generally regardless of
format (online and face-to-face), I believe it holds relevance for the design of online learning environments and could be used to study online learning engagement more specifically.

Conrad and Donaldson’s (2004) ‘engaged learning model’ for online learners also promotes interaction and suggests that an engaged learning environment comes at the intersection of social constructivist and problem-based learning philosophies within a collaborative context. This emphasis on social dimensions of engagement results in individual knowledge construction as well as the generation of collective knowledge by the group (p. 5-7). Under such a model, Conrad and Donaldson suggest pedagogical and design strategies that should be integrated online, including encouraging learners to establish their own goals and suggest their own timelines, the exploration of essential questions relevant to the learner’s life, group work to create authentic products connecting knowledge to real world applications, and ongoing, formative assessments. These strategies may be deemed particularly appropriate for adult learners in higher education contexts, as they clearly align with key adult learning principles as proposed by Brookfield (2006) in that the responsibility of the adult educator is to serve as a trusted guide (p. 64) in the democratic process of learning rather than as a dominant autocrat. Moreover, he suggests that adult educators are charged with the responsibility of helping to move learners toward self-directed learning, rather than simply delivering content to them. Toward these ends, Brookfield advocates responsive adult education practice to meet the highly situational nature of teaching (p. 2) and contends that working with adult learners requires a recognition of and appreciation for their competing life demands as well as their desire for autonomy, real-world relevance for what they are learning, and the
ability to then immediately apply it to their lives. Brookfield purports that being responsive to these needs contributes to increasing engagement as adult learners move along a continuum from externally regulated compliance toward self-regulated collaborations within the learning environment. This is the ultimate goal of Brookfield’s approach to responsive practice through informed practical reasoning (p. 6).

Prior Research on Learner Engagement in Online Learning. It is interesting to note that a significant amount of the limited published research on online learning models in higher education and their impact on learner engagement that have indicated a strong link between dimensions of online learning and engagement have studied the construct of engagement quantitatively according to statistical measures (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011; Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Nelson Laird, & Kuh, 2005; Richardson & Newby, 2006; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). And this link has been evidenced by persistent positive correlations between conditions within technology-mediated learning environments and increased levels of learner engagement. However, I would argue that these studies do not adequately address the deeply meaningful nature of the relationships between various conditions within and beyond the environment nor the learner’s experience of engagement. Instead, quantitative measures associated with positivistic methodologies are privileged over the holistic experience of the learner or the meaningful nature of the relationships among dynamics influencing the experience of engagement in context. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) caution that when we try to quantify experience, we strip it of its richness and expression (p. xxvi).

Further, while there is some overlap and yet some variance among learner engagement definitions and models in the literature, I would argue that the experience of
engagement is even more dynamic, nuanced, and influenced by a more complex interplay of environmental factors beyond what mere definition or formerly suggested pedagogies and instructional design models can provide. Therefore, I propose to better understand learner engagement within online learning environments and the dynamics of influence, we should focus less on a succinct definition and quantitative measures and, instead, focus more on interpretive methodologies and meanings associated with how it is experienced by learners; that is, how it is really *lived* while they are learning online. It is imperative that educators and instructional designers gain a deeper, more holistic understanding of how learners actually experience engagement in online environments in order to be more effective in their efforts to foster it and responsively design for it.

**Conceptual Framework for the Study**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, in his adult learning theory, Brookfield (2006) advocates for responsive practice based on pedagogical knowledge by way of informed practical reasoning and a genuine concern for unique needs among learners in order to meet spontaneous demands that present in different ways in the learning environment (p. 2). He further contends that the most important pedagogical knowledge is an understanding of how learners *experience* and perceive learning (p. 17). Such an assertion warrants an in depth examination of the significance of the learning experience and how perceptions of the experience are influenced. To begin conceptualizing learning experience, I first draw upon Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of experiential education, which positions experience as the most important source of learning. I then discuss Parrish’s (2008) conception of the learner experience as it impacts instructional design.
Dewey (1938) asserts that education should be based upon and grounded in natural, ordinary, or everyday life experience (p. 38). He contends that experience is the foundation of learning and is reflected in the interactivity inherent in our engagement with the world (p. 27). This infers that experience and engagement, then, are one and the same, and are a critical element of learning. Viewed through a phenomenological lens, this can be extended to mean that education is lived experience and that we learn through our lived experiences in the world.

However, Dewey (1938) cautions that not all experiences hold educational value, and he contends that two criteria are necessary for experiences to be educative: learning experiences must involve an active union between continuity and interaction (p. 44). The phenomenological value for unity and meaningful connections surfaces in Dewey’s assertions as he suggests that the quality of the learning experience is based upon the unity and intersections of these two criteria as they are woven into longitudinal (continuous and historical) and lateral (interactive, personal, and social) dimensions of growth (p. 44). Longitudinal growth contributes to depth of knowledge and lateral growth contributes to breadth of knowledge.

*Continuity,* or the “experiential continuum” (Dewey, 1938, p. 33) that Dewey describes is a very constructivist principle and refers to building upon prior learning experiences and the knowledge that is gained in order to enrich subsequent learning experiences which lead to new knowledge. Every experience includes the residue of those that came before it and is part of the sediment of those that come after. That is, as we learn, we build on former experiences to create new experiences.
Regarding the second component necessary for educative experiences, Dewey (1938) describes the *interaction* necessary for learning. Interaction that is more readily considered and observed in education refers to that which transpires among variables and resources within the learning environment such as peers, the teacher, content, and learning activities. But Dewey means something more as he refers to the interaction associated with experience being comprised of an interplay between external and internal conditions, or external factors associated within the learning environment in transaction with internal factors within the learner (p. 42). Thus, there are social *and* personal dimensions to interaction. Dewey emphasizes these dual dimensions of external (social) and internal (personal) conditions to reflect shared responsibility in creating the experience; that is, both the educator and the learner hold agency in the design process. External conditions for which the educator is responsible include the pedagogical and instructional design decisions associated with arranging the environment in ways that are conducive to learning. Internal conditions, then, also have an influence on the experience and refer to such things as the personal needs, motivations, and goals of the learner. It is important to note that although Dewey’s assertions about educative experiences were presented over 75 years ago in the context of children’s learning and did not explicitly account for modern technological innovations in education, his profound philosophies are equally relevant for adult learning and can be applied to educative experiences associated with modern technological advances, including online teaching and learning initiatives in higher education today.

Parrish (2008) draws on Dewey’s philosophy of experience in his approach to instructional design and describes the learner experience as an internal process within the
learner influenced by external conditions and events (p. 34). Like Dewey, he also emphasizes the significance of the interaction that transpires as the learner engages with the environment. As such, Parrish contends that experience is “an interaction between an individual and the world with the underlying goal of establishing unity or stability between the two” (p. 29) insofar as it includes “a conscious individual engaging with a responsive world” (p. 34). This idea of unity is a critical consideration in design and thus, designing for the learner experience requires an attentive process of arranging the external conditions while paying close attention to how they influence the learner’s internal processes (p. 42).

Parrish’s assertions about designing for the learner experience speaks to the significance of the environmental conditions or dynamics necessary for learning and holds significant relevance for online teaching and learning. Educational research must explore how online educators and instructional designers can influence these environmental dynamics, effectively designing for the experience as a means to enhance learner engagement. Dewey (1938) asserts that learners are authors of their own experiences, but emphasizes that educators also have agency in the learning process by guiding experiences to ensure they are indeed educative. Educators must understand and recognize their responsibility to intervene in non-imposing ways to enhance the learner experience. They must also consider Brookfield’s (2006) plea to honor adult learners’ need for autonomy and respond appropriately to the spontaneous challenges that result from the highly situational nature of teaching (p. 2). In this regard, educators must design for the learner experience and provide for the environmental dynamics conducive to
learning engagement while negotiating the unique and often spontaneous demands of teaching.

This idea of designing for the learner experience can be traced back to Dewey. Yet, I believe it is highly significant for, and must be a necessary part of, a pedagogical approach to online teaching and learning as it continues to evolve and to influence the future direction of higher education. Supporting the need for new approaches to address technologically-driven innovations in higher education, Spence (2001) criticizes the historically dogmatic adherence in U.S. colleges and universities to behaviorist traditions and passive learning, including teacher-centered pedagogical practices such as lectures. He argues, “We won’t meet the needs for more and better higher education until professors become designers of experiences rather than teachers” [emphasis added] (p.11).

**Phenomenology and the Learner Experience**

When considering the methodological significance of the learner experience and how we might come to understand it better, a phenomenological perspective holds great value in serving to open up phenomena associated with learning experiences. With a long history that can be traced back to its origins in 20th century Germany, phenomenology is considered to be both a philosophical tradition as well as a human science research methodology, and it focuses on exploring phenomena associated with human experience (Moran & Mooney, 2002; Sokolowski, 2000). Methodology refers to the systems, practices, and assumptions that guide scientific inquiry (van Manen, 1990, p. 27-29); and in phenomenological methodology, these systems and practices are grounded in the theoretical foundations of phenomenological philosophy.
In naturalistic research that employs phenomenological methodology, a phenomenon of interest is identified and is positioned as the unit of analysis throughout the research process with the aim of crafting a phenomenological description. The distinguishing characteristic of such descriptions is that they seek to elucidate lived experience (van Manen, 1990, p. 27) and the connections, relationships, and meanings associated with it. Van Manen asserts that experiences evoke lived, intentional meanings. Thus, phenomenological methodology is guided by core phenomenological philosophies that suggest the most effective way to uncover the connections, relationships, and intentional meanings associated with an educational phenomenon such as learner engagement, is to go to the learners themselves and study their lived experience of it. However, because the meaning of lived experience is often hidden or obscured, this presents the researcher with a significant challenge.

The aim of the phenomenological study presented in this dissertation is to heighten awareness and focus attention on the phenomenon of engagement in order to reveal how it is experienced by adult learners in online learning environments. The connections and relationships associated with the phenomenon of engagement were explored and mined for meaning in order to gain a more concrete understanding of how it is actually experienced, as opposed to how it has been formerly abstractly conceptualized in the literature. As educators begin to understand how learners experience engagement in online environments, this very authentic, learner-centered awareness can help to more effectively design for engagement and foster it pedagogically.

*Husserl’s Theory of Intentionality.* Phenomenological philosophy asserts that as attention is focused on phenomena as they are lived in our experiences in the world,
meanings are revealed in intentional relationships that connect all things in the world. It is important to note that the term “intentional,” in this regard does not refer to the popular use of ‘intend’ in the English language to mean ‘on purpose,’ ‘deliberate,’ or ‘with willful intent.’ Instead, as it is used in phenomenology and translated from its origins in German language, this refers to the key philosophical principle of intentionality. The notion of intentionality can be traced in medieval literature dating back as early as the 11th century in the philosophical texts of St. Anselm, an Archbishop of Canterbury (Chisholm, 1967). And it appeared again much later in the writing of Franz Brentano who was influential in legitimating Psychology as an empirical science and distinguishing it from the natural sciences at the end of the 19th century (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 30). The theoretical basis of intentionality was further developed by Edmund Husserl, a former student of Brentano, and become a core principle upon which phenomenology was founded. As a result of Husserl’s influence, phenomenology emerged as a new tradition in 20th century continental European philosophy.

Intentionality, as it was proposed by Husserl, assumes that everything in the world is inextricably connected in an intentional relationship. And these relationships or connections hold significant meanings. Van Manen (1990) describes intentionality as our inseparable connections to the world (p. 5). That is, we are connected to everything around us and everything around us is, in turn, connected; and these connections exist and endure whether we are aware of them or not. To explain this principle another way, Merleau-Ponty (1962/2005) refers to “intentional threads” (p. xv) that connect us to everything in the world and within our environment. These connections place every thing in the world an interdependent, intersubjective, intentional relationship. And again,
these connections or intentional relationships create an intricate fabric that is infused with meaning and is richly complex. Due to this vast complexity, Husserl proposed that to examine intentional relationships adequately, we must enter into epoché, also referred to as the phenomenological reduction, which he argued allows us to transcend above, and therefore free ourselves from, the distractions of our personal judgments, presumptions, assumptions, or biases and gain a clearer view of the phenomenon under investigation and the participants’ lived experiences.

Husserl also referred to this state of transcendence as the “phenomenological attitude,” which has also been described as a heightened attentiveness with a meditative quality (van Manen, 1990) or a contemplative sense of wonder (Vagle, 2010b) as we take notice and then are able to examine the things around us by seeing them in new ways. This includes the things in our environment that we would typically take for granted as we move through the world uncritically in what Husserl conversely called the “natural attitude.” Merleau-Ponty (1962/2005) described this heightened attentiveness to connections this way:

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis: it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world, and thus brings them to our notice. It, alone, is consciousness of the world, because it reveals the world as strange and paradoxical” (p. xv).
To enable transcendence, Husserl refers to “bracketing,” or suspending the judgments, presumptions, and assumptions that we naturally hold as human beings living every day in the world. And he argued that through transcendence and bracketing we can separate ourselves from the lived world in order to reveal the deep meaning in intentional relationships. However, Husserl’s advocacy for transcendence or separating oneself from the lived world in order to examine phenomena and intentional relationships more clearly was later challenged by one of his students in Germany in the early 20th century. Martin Heidegger, who is also regarded as a key figure in the evolving history of phenomenology, argued that Husserl was overly focused on transcendence, inappropriately and unrealistically separating the individual from consciousness. Moreover, Heidegger asserted that it was not possible, nor preferable to “bracket” or set aside our personal assumptions or preconceptions in an effort to examine lived experience and intentional relations in the world. Heideggerian philosophy assumed it was not realistic to completely separate oneself from the world and one’s conscious experience in world. Merleau-Ponty argues similarly in the above quote. Heidegger asserted, as many well-respected contemporary educational scholars such as Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Peshkin (2000), and van Manen (1990) assert today, that we are interpretive beings living in an always, already interpreted world. As this relates to phenomenological methodology, we must acknowledge that “all field texts are interpretive texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 94) and that we are always interpretive in our research endeavors, rather than transcendent and objectively descriptive.
Hence, phenomenology as a human science research methodology continues to evolve and has been pragmatically pluralized in different ways as it has been theorized, applied, and practiced by a range of scholars since its inception in 20th century Germany. More recently, phenomenologies have emerged as a result of variations in scholarly approaches being “extraordinarily diverse in their interests, in their interpretation of the central issues of phenomenology, in their application of what they understood to be the phenomenological method, and in their development of what they took to be the phenomenological programme for the future of philosophy” (Moran, 2000, p. 3). New directions and approaches are necessary to maintain contemporary relevance and applicability according to Mills (2005) who asserts “To prosper and advance, it becomes important for any discipline to evaluate its theoretical and methodological propositions from within its own evolving framework rather than insulate itself from criticism due to threat or cherished group loyalties” (p. 150).

The ways in which the practice of phenomenology as a human science research methodology has evolved or has been pluralized can be grouped into three main categories: descriptive phenomenology, interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology, and most recently, post-intentional phenomenology. Grounded in Husserlian philosophy and as practiced by Giorgi (1997), Dahlberg (2006), and others, the aim of descriptive phenomenological approaches is to describe lived experience free from interpretation in order to reveal the essence, or stable core features, and the essential meaning structures of a phenomenon of interest as it is lived. In contrast, stemming from Heideggerian philosophy and as practiced by van Manen (1990), Moustakas (1994), and others, the aim of interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenological approaches is to interpret phenomena as
they are consciously experienced in our lived experience in the world and to identify experiential themes, converging patterns of meaning, or meaning structures. Vagle (2010a) further pragmatizes phenomenology by introducing a post-intentional phenomenological approach, which honors aspects of both descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology but resists a singular, stable core essence and moves toward multiple, partial, and variable contexts (p. 10). This phenomenological investigation of online learners’ lived experiences of engagement embraces fundamental philosophical elements of phenomenology that undergird all three methodological orientations, but it aligns most closely with the assumptions guiding a post-intentional phenomenological approach.

A post-intentional approach to phenomenological methodology is based on a post-structural framing of Husserl’s theory of intentionality (Vagle, 2010b), which brings to light the meaningful connections, or intentional relations, that exist among all things in the world whether we are consciously aware of such connections or not. Intentionality considered through a post-structural lens assumes that the phenomenon of interest and intentional relationships associated with it are not stable as Husserl had originally proposed, but rather, that they shift and change over time. These intentional relationships or relations within the environment in which the phenomenon is identified are tentatively manifested, then, in different ways at different moments according to variations in context as well as the influence of various dynamics within the complexity of the lived experience. Thus, a post-intentional research design was used in this study to capture such tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement as it was experienced online and as significant meanings were revealed in the intentional relations that exist within the online learning environment. These tentative manifestations were elusive and
fleeting, however, as they transformed in different ways and in fleeting moments throughout the research participants’ online learning experiences; but they were captured in glimpses in personal narrative accounts that were shared in individual interviews, written lived experience descriptions (van Manen, 1990, p. 63-66), and other digital media artifacts produced during their participation in the online course. Indeed, this is both the beauty and the challenge inherent in the vast complexity of phenomenological work.

In summary, regardless of distinctions among methodological orientations, it is important to emphasize that phenomenological research by and large is grounded in a shared philosophical core commitment to openness and flexibility (van Manen, 1990, p. 162). It resists being pinned down to fixed or rigid methods. The complexity inherent in pluralized phenomenological methodologies recognizes and aptly reflects the complexity and ambiguity that exists in the lived world.

It is also important to note that phenomenology is fundamentally an *ontological* pursuit (Glendinning, 2007, p. 59). In its ontological philosophical orientation, it is interested in the state of *being* or the state(s) in which human beings find themselves in the world living through experiences (p. 74). Thus, those who enlist phenomenological methodologies seek to understand the nature of *being* as Heidegger (1953/2010) explains, “For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression ‘being’... We, however, who used to think we understood it have now become perplexed. ... So it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of *being*...” (p. xxix). What this means methodologically in the context of this study is that phenomenology seeks to explore how an adult learner comes to *be*, or finds oneself
manifestly, engaged while learning online. Although educational research writ large has an obvious alignment with epistemology or the nature of knowledge and how it is we come to know, the ontological assumptions and emphases in phenomenology are paramount and must not only be acknowledged, but also carefully preserved when it is put to work in educational research.

**Phenomenology Meets Technology**

Cilesiz (2011) very eloquently argues for the significance of phenomenological inquiry for deepening our understanding of technologically mediated learning environments and illuminating how learning technologies are experienced. She asserts that this is an ideal way to understand the pedagogical impact or the role of the teacher; in other words, what conditions and what interventions affect the experiences associated with technological learning environments. I would add that the insights gained also help educators further understand and appreciate their responsibility in the learning environment, as Dewey (1938) emphasizes. Although Cilesiz addresses educational environments and technology very generally, I see great implications for her assertions in this research endeavor, which is more specifically focused on understanding the lived experience of learners in online learning environments in adult and higher education contexts.

To frame this dissertation and to provide a warrant for the value phenomenology holds to illuminate lived experiences in technological learning environments, it is useful to consider all of these issues, including conceptualizations of the learner experience based on the work of Dewey (1938) and Parrish (2008), the phenomenological philosophies of Husserl & Heidegger, phenomenology’s methodological appropriateness
for educational research as discussed by both van Manen (1990) and Vagle (2010b), and its particular relevance for investigating technologically-mediated learning environments as Cilesiz (2011) maintains.

I utilized a post-intentional phenomenological approach that pursues intentionality and is infused with dimensions of Heideggerian hermeneutics to examine adult learners’ experiences in online learning environments in order to attempt to determine not only how engagement is lived or experienced in these unique, virtual learning spaces, but also to explore the dynamics that potentially influence engagement as it shifts and changes over time. This study serves to not only contribute to insight and philosophical understanding but also has important practical implications for educators as well. Informed practical reasoning (Brookfield, 2006, p. 6) is highly necessary today as educators and instructional designers prepare for current and future challenges in higher education due to the increased prevalence of online courses and programs (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2010). Thus, it is my intent for this work to hold both philosophical and practical relevance in better preparing adult educators and higher education faculty to meet these challenges and turn them into exciting opportunities.

**Establishing a Research Warrant**

I contend that profound insight and understanding can be reached by leveraging the immense potential of phenomenological inquiry for exposing important dimensions of learners’ lived experiences of engagement in online learning environments. To this end, I propose that the infusion of phenomenological philosophy to frame a post-intentional phenomenological research design (Vagle, 2010a) is an ideal approach to qualitatively investigate how adult learners experience a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.
such as learner engagement pragmatically by framing intentionality in a post-structural sense as forever shifting and changing over time and taking different forms based on influential factors and variations in context (p. 6). This approach allowed me in my role as researcher to naturalistically capture and reveal the phenomenon of engagement in the data more concretely as it really lived, rather than abstractly defined or conceptualized.

According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological approaches reveal fundamental meaning dimensions that hold practical relevance for education and the enterprise of educating real learners according to the reality of their lived experiences (pp. 44-45). He asserts that the purpose of phenomenological educational research, then, is to lend to pedagogic competence (p. 158-159) in the form of pedagogical thoughtfulness (p.8) and practical resourcefulness (p. 4). Brookfield’s (2006) advocacy for the necessity of responsive practice (p. 2) and informed practical reasoning (p. 6) for teaching in higher education in order to meet unique needs among adult learners are well aligned with van Manen’s assertions.

Brookfield (2006) argues that skillful teaching relies heavily on “developing a trust, a sense of intuitive confidence in the accuracy and validity of one’s judgments and insights” (p. 12). He also refers to the “endemic unpredictability” (p. 8) of teaching and characterizes teachers as “struggling gladiators of unpredictability” (p. 9). In addressing such unpredictable struggles and spontaneous demands, van Manen (1990) argues that effective pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to learners’ realities and a heightened attentiveness to connections, relationships, and unity within the learning environment (p. 2). Brookfield (2006) echoes this notion of attentiveness, but with a more pragmatic emphasis, in his discussion of responsive practice and informed practical
reasoning. And he defines this as “the reasoning we conduct in the midst of situations that call for immediate action” (p. 6). Informed practical reasoning is “highly mindful, entailing a speedy yet intentionally thoughtful response to unanticipated events” (p. 6). Teaching in action, then, requires a phenomenological sensitivity to connections and relationships and the responsive application of informed practical reasoning.

**Phenomenological Research and Technologically-Mediated Learning Environments**

Very little phenomenological research has been published on technologically-mediated learning contexts such as online learning environments in which communication and interaction (among instructors, learners, and content) is facilitated exclusively through online technologies and social media. However, Cilesiz (2011) articulates a compelling argument for the suitability and utility of phenomenology to investigate the learner experience with technology in general as a way of providing rich insights into the learning process. She contends that phenomenological research designs are very promising for the in-depth study of experiences associated with educational technology and digital media as a means to help educators better understand their role as well as their impact on teaching and learning (p. 488). However, within the context of online learning, there is a severe lack of published research that explores how adult learners experience various phenomena involving online technologies specifically, e.g. online learning environments or virtual learning spaces. Further, there are no published phenomenological studies of engagement within online learning environments, which provides greater warrant for the significance and necessity of the research study I have conducted.
Summary

This research informs the fields of Learning Technologies and Instructional Design by uniquely addressing the need to help adult educators and instructional designers understand learner engagement in online environments in more depth and more holistically than mere definition could provide. Thus, the insights gained can better prepare them for learner-centered pedagogical practice and responsive online course design by fusing technological innovation with ontological innovation, or innovative tools with innovative educational approaches. Armed with this knowledge, I believe that some of the challenges associated with online teaching and learning can be transformed into exciting opportunities. Next in Chapter 3, I present the research methodology used for this study, detailing each of the five components of Vagle’s post-intentional research design (2010a) that was used to guide the inquiry.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

For this dissertation, I conducted an interpretive research study in a naturalistic setting by utilizing phenomenological methodology and a post-intentional phenomenological research design to explore adult learners’ lived experiences of engagement in online learning environments. Qualitative methods appropriate for phenomenological inquiry were used for data collection and analysis. The unit of analysis in the research design was the phenomenon of learner engagement as it was experienced in online learning environments. The purpose of this study is to help online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers in postsecondary contexts better understand how learners experience engagement while learning online by specifically addressing the following research questions: (1) What is it like to be an adult learner in online learning environments? (2) What is it like to experience engagement in online learning environments? and (3) How do various elements of learning online and dynamics of the learning environment influence adult learners’ feelings of engagement?

This phenomenological study pursued tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of learner engagement by collecting and analyzing data about learners’ experiences in online learning environments. First person narrative accounts were collected in multiple media forms from adult learners as they were enrolled in a completely online, graduate-level course at a large research university. A post-intentional phenomenological research design (Vagle, 2010a) was used while also incorporating phenomenology as a conceptual or philosophical framework to examine some of the ongoing, dynamic tensions within the lived experience of engagement while learning online.
Vagle’s (2010a) systematic but flexible five-component process for conducting post-intentional phenomenological research was followed for collecting qualitative data from multiple sources and for phenomenological data analysis using a whole-parts-whole analytic approach (p. 18-20). A post-intentional research design places a very pragmatic emphasis on contemporary elements of hermeneutic phenomenology by emphasizing a post-structural view of intentionality as forever shifting and taking different forms over time based on influential dynamics and variations in context. Thus, this methodological approach seeks to identify and capture such tentative manifestations (Vagle 2010a, p. 7) of the phenomenon of interest (i.e. learner engagement) and the intentional relationships associated with it that are continually changing and transforming within the online learning environment.

Additionally, thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p, 78) was used to identify themes of pedagogic significance (p. 159), which served as heuristic tools (p. 170) to give shape to the outcomes of data analysis and organize the research findings in a way that is pedagogically meaningful. A narrative framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was used to present the research findings by weaving and connecting evocative narratives from the participants’ first hand accounts of their lived experiences through creative synthesis.

The research design was systematically followed while striving throughout the process to attend to three criteria for methodological rigor in qualitative inquiry that are appropriate for phenomenological methodology: trustworthiness, authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002), and credibility (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). These criteria reflect the qualitative researcher’s commitment to ethically and systematically pursue and
balance multiple perspectives and interests of those impacting and being impacted by the research. Additionally, adherence to these criteria contributes to the intellectual rigor, professional integrity, and methodological competence of the research endeavor (Patton, 2002). While many educational research traditions also aspire to generalizability as an indicator of rigor, it is important to note that Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggest that naturalistic fieldwork such as phenomenology does not aspire to generalizability of findings by confirming data across multiple sources or by privileging similarities. Rather, it seeks to provide as much detail as possible in order to represent the uniqueness and individuality of each case (p. 201-202; see also van Manen, 1990, p. 22).

It is also important to note that a predetermined hypothesis was not established for this phenomenological study. Phenomenology assumes a generative approach to qualitative inquiry in a naturalistic setting and counters deductive qualitative inquiry that generally begins with a predetermined hypothesis (Patton, 2002, p. 94). Patton argues, “part of the value of open-ended naturalistic observations is the opportunity to see what there is to see without the blinders of hypotheses and other preconceptions” (p. 278). Moreover, predetermining a hypothesis contradicts core philosophical and methodological commitments of phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology assumes, and even requires, that the researcher moves beyond normative assumptions and, instead, remains open to the phenomenon and intentional relationships as they organically reveal themselves in the lives of the research participants, without the undue influence of potential predeterminations, presumptions, or pre-understandings (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008; Sokolowski, 2000; van Manen, 1990).
The Research Design

Vagle’s (2010a) post-intentional phenomenological research design includes the following five major components:

A. Identify a phenomenon in its multiple, partial, and varied contexts.
B. Establish a bridling plan.
C. Devise a clear, yet flexible process for collecting data appropriate for the phenomenon under investigation.
D. Read and write through the corpus of data in a systematic, responsive manner.
E. Craft a text that captures and illuminates tentative manifestations of the phenomenon in its multiple, partial, and varied contexts (p. 9).

This ordered list should not suggest a linear progression, but rather, these components were followed in an iterative, responsive cycle while honoring the core phenomenological commitment to openness. Each component was revisited continually throughout the research process. In this chapter, all five components are addressed according to how this study progressed as well as the most logical sequence for readability. As such, it should also be noted that the components are presented here in a modified order than they were originally presented by Vagle.

Component A: Identify the Phenomenon of Engagement in its Multiple, Partial, and Varied Contexts

This first major component is comprised of several elements, including articulating a problem statement, conducting a partial review of the literature, explicating some of the core philosophical claims or assumptions in phenomenology, and identifying the phenomenon by writing a primary phenomenological research question and
supporting it with secondary research questions that help focus the data collection plan and situate the phenomenon in the contexts in which it resides (Vagle, 2010a, p. 11). Each of these elements from Component A are represented and discussed in detail and in an integrated fashion throughout Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation. The remaining element of this first component of the research design that is yet to be discussed is participant selection.

**Participant Selection.** The phenomenon of learner engagement was identified in context through the selection of a criterion-based, purposive sample (Patton, 2002, p. 238) drawn from graduate students enrolled in a completely online, graduate level, university course whose premise was an exploration and critique of distance education theories. This was a very rigorous, three-credit course conducted over four weeks.

Initially, all seventeen adult learners enrolled in this online course were asked via email to participate in the study, and six responded to the request and consented to participate. These six adult learners were individually interviewed to screen for high levels of engagement using the general interview guide approach (Patton, 2002, p. 343) to seek illuminative cases that would best serve to reveal how the phenomenon of engagement was experienced in online environments. A general guide was used for the first screening interviews in order to determine very general issues related to the phenomenon to be explored in this initial phase of the study, yet remain open enough to allow new directions of inquiry to naturally evolve as well.

In preparation for the interview screening for the phenomenon of engagement, NSSE’s five critical factors for learner engagement (IUCPR, 2011) were referenced to establish a starting point and determine very basic issues to be explored. These factors
were used to help identify potential research participants who indicated high levels of engagement associated with their learning experiences in the online course: (a) supportive environment, (b) interaction, (c) challenge, (d) active and collaborative learning opportunities, and (e) enriching educational experiences. This method of interview screening established initial lines of inquiry into each participant’s lived experiences while learning online, but in the interest of openness it then allowed for the freedom to build a conversation from these early points of reference. Spontaneous new directions could be followed based on what was shared by the participants and what was deemed by the researcher to contribute in valuable ways to an understanding of what their experiences while learning online were really like.

In the interest of researcher transparency, it is important to note that the five factors or indicators of engagement were never shared with or communicated to the participants at any time during the interview nor during any additional data collection. However, to remain reflexive throughout the research process, I then had to bridle my assumptions about each of these five indicators of engagement as well as what has been proposed in the literature about their influence (IUCPR, 2011). For example, I scrutinized my perspectives about how I had seen them manifested in the online learning environment through the learners’ participation in the course. And this was done regularly in an effort to remain open to the research participants’ lived experiences and how they had uniquely experienced engagement while learning online. I sought to explore their lived experience, as free as possible from outside suggestive influences that could have potentially hindered my view.
Purposive Sampling. Four of the six adult online learners indicated that they experienced high levels of engagement based on the NSSE’s five critical factors (IUCPR, 2011) according to very compelling personal accounts that they shared during the first interview. These four individuals were chosen for their ability to articulate very striking and vivid descriptions of their experiences while learning online, including details about their feelings of engagement. Descriptions of how engagement was experienced in these participants’ narrative accounts were determined to provide powerful, valuable insights warranting further investigation. Thus, they were selected for further study.

Ultimately, a criterion-based, purposive sample (Patton, 2002, p. 238) of four adult online learners was deliberately chosen to continue in the study, while the remaining two participants were released from the study. Each of these four learners were chosen for their ability to mostly richly inform the purpose of the research study because (1) the learner indicated during an initial screening interview that she/he had indeed experienced high levels of engagement while enrolled in the online graduate course based on the NSSE’s five critical factors for engagement (IUCPR, 2011), and (2) the learner was able to articulate compelling accounts of her/his online learning experiences in ways that helped to illuminate what it is like to experience engagement in online learning environments. The following dimensions of participants’ experiences of engagement were all carefully noted throughout subsequent phases of data collection: how this phenomenon manifested itself in online learning environments, how it shifted over time and according to contextual dynamics, and what (if any) other factors influenced how this phenomenon was experienced.
Research Participant Profiles. The participant sample for the research study was comprised of two females, Jessica and Rebecca, and two males, José and Graham (see Table 3.1). Pseudonyms are used throughout this dissertation in order to maintain confidentiality and preserve the anonymity of the participants. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym, and the two males did so; whereas, the two females preferred that I choose a pseudonym to represent their identities.

Jessica. Jessica is a Caucasian female who was 35 years old during the online course and at the time of data collection. She was a high school writing teacher as well as an educational consultant and writing coach for K-12 faculty in her school district. Her responsibility in this consulting and coaching role was to help faculty integrate writing across content areas throughout the curriculum. She was consistently a very thoughtful and articulate communicator both in written and verbal exchanges throughout her participation in the online course, and this became even more evident when I met with her in person for the initial screening interview and in the other data artifacts collected during the research process. Jessica took this online course as part of a certificate program in online distance learning (ODL), and it was her first formal, completely online course. She was very adept at using digital media and information communication technologies (ICT), although she expressed that she struggled occasionally while learning how to use new technology tools in the course.

Jessica’s interest in writing extended into other personal and professional avenues as well, and she described herself as a creative writer and poet. She regularly engaged in personal creative writing projects and often referred to teaching as a “craft” as she articulated her passion for education in a way that was both artistic and poetic. This was
remarkable to me and she was purposively selected as a participant for this study because of her unique ability to express herself and elaborate on dimensions of her lived experiences in ways that gave beautiful insight into what she felt and thought while learning online. Her gift for evocative writing and her ability to communicate very rich descriptions of her experiences became increasingly more striking as the study progressed and she made very valuable contributions to understanding what it was like to experience engagement online through her remarkably detailed accounts.

_Graham._ Graham is a Caucasian male who was 23 years old and employed as a high school physical science teacher. He was a graduate student in science education during this course, and he also went on to begin a doctoral program of study in a technology-related educational discipline shortly following the course and during our interviewing process. This was his second formal, completely online course and he was also very adept at using digital tools and ICT. Like Jessica, Graham also provided very rich details about his online learning experiences, particularly during the two individual interviews that were conducted. Whereas Jessica’s accounts were most compelling in written form, Graham was chosen for participation in the study because his experiences were most strikingly revealed as he shared them verbally, in spoken narratives during the course in the podcasts and audio recordings he created and after the course during interviews.

Also noteworthy is that Graham participated in the online course while he was temporarily residing several states away from the physical location of the university affiliated with the online course. All other research participants were residing in and therefore completing the online course from within the same metropolitan area in which
the university campus was physically located. Graham often commented during the course on how “cool” or “crazy” it was that he was participating in the course “from so far away” or while “lounging by the pool” and thus, how convenient online learning was for him in order to be able to achieve his educational goals while travelling. I additionally selected Graham for further study because I was interested in exploring this increased physical distance that Graham experienced during his participation in the course to see if this influenced or played any significant role in this online learning experience and his feelings of engagement.

*José.* José was a 26-year old Latino male who was a doctoral student and a university research assistant. He was very adept at using a variety of educational technologies and worked as instructional technology support and video editor for faculty at the same large research university he attended as a graduate student. He was highly skilled in using ICT as well producing and editing digital media, and he did a significant amount of video editing and work with other online technology tools in his faculty support role. As a graduate student, he was also involved in learning technology-related research projects focused on mobile learning as well as digital access to open educational resources. He had a marked sensitivity to and interest in leveraging technology for learning, which also influenced the decision to include him in this study due to this heightened sensitivity to nuances associated with learning with technology that he could potentially share.

Like Jessica, José also took the online course as part of an ODL certificate program, but this was his second formal, completely online course. His narrative accounts were also compelling in both written and verbal forms, but in addition, he often
shared his perspectives throughout the online course using video or webcam recordings. These personally recorded videos held unique insights into his online learning experiences that I wanted to be able to capture in the data for this study. He was also selected for participation in the study due to his high level of technological skill using multimedia to communicate online. I wanted to probe for insights that could be gained from the perspectives of an online learner more adept in using multimedia communications as a means to learn more about how, or if, this impacted the experience of engagement in online learning environments or the online learning experience overall.

Rebecca. The fourth research participant, Rebecca, is a Caucasian female and was 53 years old at the time of the online course and throughout data collection. She worked as the manager of education and organization development for state court administration, with primary responsibilities for judicial education and court employee education. Although the online course was a formal, university-affiliated course, she indicated that she enrolled for nonformal learning purposes, or professional development. That is, she did not take the course as part of any degree or certificate program. She expressed during her class introduction as the course began that her primary motivation for taking the course was to learn for the sake of learning and to improve her knowledge as a means to inform her new professional responsibilities. The department in which she worked had recently secured a grant to fund a new distance learning initiative and she wanted to learn more about distance education in order to be most effective in her leadership efforts with this new initiative.

Rebecca shared during her class introduction that this was her first completely online course, and she expressed a great deal of concern and anxiety about her ability to
succeed in the course due to her perceived lack of skill and experience with online technologies. She revisited and shared these concerns throughout the course in her written reflection blog postings and final paper, audio podcast reflections, email communications with me, as well as in the data that was collected after the course concluded from two interviews and a written description of her experience. Rebecca was selected for participation in the study for several reasons, including her perceptions about and anxiety related to a lack of technical experience and low level of technological skill. This was in contrast with Jessica, Graham, and José’s perceived high levels of technological skill. I wanted to seek a deeper understanding of Rebecca’s experiences in this online course in light of these perceptions and concerns, and I sought to illuminate the joys and challenges she experienced as well as they related to her experience of engagement. Additionally impacting the decision to include her in the study, Rebecca was also able to share profound insights into her online learning experiences in written and verbal communications throughout the course and in the initial screening interview.

Table 3.1

*Research Participant Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Professional Commitments</th>
<th>Prior Online Learning History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Jessica”</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>High school English and writing teacher; educational consultant and instructional coach relating to English and integrating writing across the curriculum; poet and creative writer</td>
<td>This course was her first completely online course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Graham”</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>High school physical science teacher</td>
<td>This course was his second completely online course.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“José”  
26  
male  
Doctoral student; Instructional technology support and video editor for faculty at a large research university  
This course was his second completely online course.

“Rebecca”  
53  
female  
Education and organization development manager for state court administration with primary responsibilities for judicial education and court employee education  
This course was her first completely online course.

My Role(s). In addition to serving as the primary and sole investigator for this study, I was also the primary and sole instructor of the online course in which this research was situated. In my role as the instructor, I had pedagogical and instructional design responsibilities preparing the online course and throughout ongoing facilitation while it was in progress. In my role as researcher, I had methodological, philosophical, and ethical responsibilities.

As the instructor of the online course, I positioned myself as a democratic facilitator or trusted guide (Brookfield, 2006, p. 64), rather than as an autocratic “teacher” delivering content to passive recipients. As such, I designed each class session with content and learning activities, but then additionally encouraged the adult learners enrolled in the online course to actively pursue and explore supplemental resources individually at times, and collaboratively in small groups as well. They would then share what they discovered each session and we would critically evaluate the content that we created together.

It must be explicitly acknowledged that in addition to serving as the primary investigator in this study, I was also an intimate part of the online graduate course, the online learning environment, and the learners’ lived experiences while enrolled in the
course. Reflexively and in the interest of ethical integrity and credibility of the data, it was necessary for me to continually interrogate what influence my close proximity had on the inquiry. As Lather (1993) suggests, the researcher’s role and agency in interpretive inquiry requires ongoing interrogation by which, “it is not a matter of looking harder or more closely, but of seeing what frames our seeing” (p. 675). My systematic and deliberate attempts to do so, through an ongoing reflexive project called bridling, is discussed in detail later in this chapter in Component B of the research design.

As the researcher in this study, I positioned myself as both an empathetic observer and an invested participant in the study. In my efforts to methodologically explore the online learners’ lived experiences while learning online, it was necessary to continually interrogate these dual roles, responsibilities, and the way I was situating myself in the context of the study. It required an ongoing commitment to reflexivity through regular journaling; and as I did so, it became increasingly more clear to me that I was, indeed, a significant part of the participants’ lived experiences while they were learning online throughout the course. My influence on the online learning environment and on their lived experiences while learning online mattered and was undeniable. So rather than looking past this, it was necessary to remain aware and continually acknowledge it.

As the course instructor dialogically involved in the learning activities and responsively arranging aspects of the environment when necessary to facilitate learning, I interacted with the learners and with the content constantly throughout the course. To suggest that I should attempt to remove traces of my imprint did not seem possible nor preferable if the experience and intentional relationships were to be revealed in a holistic and authentic manner as they were lived out. In seeking the intentional relationships or
intentional threads that Merleau-Ponty (1962/2005) describes, my impacts on the experience comprised some of those meaningful threads and I was a significant part of the research fabric that must be acknowledged, interrogated, and mined.

In an interpretive research paradigm, the researcher is the primary instrument for the inquiry during data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Peshkin, 1988). The processes of data collection and analysis for this type of research involves researcher reflexivity as a means to ensure the trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) through “self-questioning and self understanding” (Patton, p. 64) and throughout iterative stages of watching, experiencing, inquiring (asking), reviewing, and examining (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2005, p. 140). Moving forward and circling back through each stage in this reflexive process involved informed strategic action based on critical reflection throughout each stage of data collection and interpretation that preceded it. As a means of such reflexivity to continually acknowledge my influence and the predicament that dual roles presented, the next component of a post-intentional research design required that I commit to a plan for bridling throughout the research process.

Component B: Establish a Bridling Plan

As a second component in the research process, I established a bridling plan (Vagle, 2010a) to promote my reflexivity as a researcher and, as described above, to acknowledge and interrogate the pre-understandings and assumptions I held in my dual roles and ethical responsibilities as both instructor/instructional designer and researcher. This bridling process is a valuable part of both data collection and data analysis; but
understanding what bridling involves, the purpose it serves, and what it aims to do are all important things to consider as the bridling plan is established.

*Bridling* is a description coined by Karin Dahlberg, a contemporary phenomenological researcher who drew upon her former experience as an equestrian to conceptualize this phenomenological process with methodological implications. This process is based on the analogy of harnessing and bridling a horse, or more specifically, moving back and forth between tightening and then loosening the reins in order to guide the horse’s progression over time (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008). Bridling in the context of phenomenological inquiry, then, refers to the recursive process of tightening and slackening the threads of intentionality that Merleau-Ponty (1962/2005) describes to tease out intentional meanings, guiding the progression of the inquiry over time. Bridling is an interpretive revision of Husserl’s transcendental notion of bracketing, or the act of setting aside all preconceptions and assumptions, in order to view the phenomenon under investigation as it is experienced by the research participants more clearly.

In contrast, Dahlberg et al.’s (2008) proposal of bridling argues that bracketing as Husserl envisioned it is not completely possible, nor preferable. They argue that this just isn’t a realistic possibility; it isn’t what actually occurs in the research process. Instead, phenomenological researchers must consider their preconceptions as they interpret and make sense of the data throughout the process of data collection and data analysis. To help further understand how bridling is more appropriate than bracketing, it is useful to consider Patton’s (2002) themes of qualitative inquiry for data collection and fieldwork strategies, specifically the personal experience and engagement theme whereas, “the
researcher has direct contact with and gets close to the people, situation, and phenomenon under study; the researcher’s personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon” (p. 40). Further, with regard to the notions of voice, perspective, and reflexivity that Patton argues are central to qualitative analysis strategies, “The qualitative analyst owns and is reflective about her or his own voice and perspective; a credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness; complete objectivity being impossible and pure subjectivity undermining credibility, the researcher’s focus becomes balance—understanding and depicting the world authentically in all its complexity while being self-analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness” (p. 41).

Although much of Dahlberg’s work is oriented in descriptive phenomenology and aligns in many ways with Husserlian theory, she critiques his approach to transcendence (Dahlberg, 2006). Instead, for this reflexive aspect of phenomenological work, she draws from Heidegger’s assertions that we cannot separate the individual from consciousness and that the research act is always, already an interpretive act. Further, Dahlberg argues, it is valuable and necessary to bring to bear the researcher’s interpretation of the data as meaningful; that is, leveraging her deep knowledge of the issues at hand in order to contextualize data throughout collection, analysis, and presentation of the findings.

Thus, bridling as a reflexive process throughout data collection and analysis involves continually moving back and forth between harnessing the researcher’s preconceptions, assumptions, and biases to pull them back and temporarily set them aside to access the participant’s experience as it is genuinely revealed free from any constraints
or assumptions; and then to loosening them once again in order to bring them into play and determine appropriate and relevant data collection methods, analyze data, make meaning of what is revealed, and make meaningful the conclusions or implications of the study. Throughout the bridling process, it is also important to ensure that the integrity of the data is maintained in that every effort is made to attempt to fully capture and preserve the participants’ storied phenomenological descriptions of their experiences as their own.

*The Bridling Plan.* A bridling plan serves to document the researcher’s reflexive process and to provide an opportunity for regular, systematic reflection on that which might limit the understanding of meaning and the openness of the investigation. However, it also holds the potential to open up the phenomenon and enhance understanding as well. In this sense, bridling provided a valuable opportunity for me as a researcher to also bring to bear my experiential knowledge gained from over thirteen years of practice as an educator and instructional designer in a multitude of adult and higher education contexts, including eight years of online teaching and instructional design. I considered myself an important part of this particular course and the learning community that developed, and as such I was an important part of the participants’ online learning experiences. Therefore, in my dual roles as both instructor during the course and researcher retrospectively, I did not come to regard these as competing roles at all, but rather as profoundly and richly complementary in their utility to burrow deeply, phenomenologically into the participants’ lived experiences while learning online. I found that the relationships I had established with the adult learners during the online course and beyond precipitated a depth of trust that made some things more possible for me as a human instrument of the research, just as Peshkin asserts (1988, p. 18).
example, it afforded me greater access into the participants’ lived experiences due to their comfort with me and the depth of what they would then feel comfortable enough to share and reveal.

In his advocacy for establishing a bridling plan early in the research process, Vagle (2010a) contends that researchers must remain committed to the bridling process throughout the inquiry, be very transparent in their descriptions of how they bridled, and identify the preconceptions, assumptions, and biases revealed during bridling. This reflexive process lends to the methodological rigor as well as the trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

To facilitate and systematize the bridling process, I used Tumblr <www.tumblr.com> to create an online blog that was used as a virtual space for journaling (see Figure 3.1). I chose Tumblr for its ability to easily upload and host multimedia entries (text, audio files, and video files). Throughout the research process, it served as a convenient repository for the regular entries I made expressing my thoughts and ideas in multiple forms throughout data collection and analysis. At the onset of my bridling plan, I committed to creating an entry in my bridling journal at least once per week. However, I found bridling to be so helpful and valuable that in reality over the entire duration of the study, I made two bridling entries each week, on average.
As I continuously reflected on the research process and what was being revealed in the data, entries were made in this online bridling journal using a variety of media at regular intervals. And these bridling entries were created using text-based written communication as well as audio and video recordings according to how I was feeling compelled to express myself and most effectively articulate and document my thoughts and perspectives. These were created often, so convenience was also key to ensure that I remained faithful to my commitment to bridling.

Ultimately, what was most powerful and insightful for me as a researcher were the audio entries I created using a small, portable audio recorder that fit in the palm of my
hand and could be used easily, conveniently, and at any time. Time was a significant consideration for my bridling and journaling because I often thought about and reflected on the data at different times, sometimes spontaneously throughout the day; and occasionally it was difficult or inconvenient to document. Often writing just was not feasible during these times. Instead, the audio recordings were much more easily generated and were usually created when I had the greatest luxury of time, as I found that ample time was crucial and necessary for the metacognitive processing, intermittent transcendence, mindful presence, interpretation, and thoughtful reflection that phenomenological work required of me (Vagle, 2010a; van Manen, 1990).

During this research study, such valuable, intense reflection time was afforded during the daily long distance running that I did while I was conducting the research study, with an audio recorder tucked conveniently and comfortably in the palm of my hand. I referred to these as ‘phenomenological runs’ based on a similar pedagogical activity of ‘phenomenological walks’ that I was introduced to in a graduate course on phenomenological methodology in educational research (Vagle, 2011a). This reflexive activity is characterized by an increased sensitivity to that which surrounds you as you spend time in an environment and mindfully observe in order to take note of phenomena that reveal themselves during a state of contemplative attentiveness.

In his workshops and methodology courses, Vagle (2011a) uses the pedagogical strategy of incorporating what he refers to as ‘phenomenological walks’ as an activity to encourage learners to move beyond abstractly philosophizing about phenomenology and to additionally experience it and practice it. To facilitate this, he integrates a learning activity whereas learners are given time to literally walk by themselves for a certain
length of time out in the environment. And they are encouraged during this time to attempt to enter into the phenomenological attitude and make notes about what they notice. That is, they are encouraged while they are moving through the place or space to pay special attention and take note of the things they might typically take for granted. This pedagogical exercise is designed to help practice phenomenological sensitivity or heightened awareness to identify everyday practices and phenomena we notice, or that which manifests itself to us in our being in the world. Learners then come back together as a group and share their experience and what they noted with the class.

This was a powerful activity for me in my scholarly development and was an exercise that impressed upon me the profound impact that an open sense of wonder could have on what becomes more visible to us as we move through the world when we make an effort to free ourselves from busy distractions and slow down in order to take note of that which surrounds us. It was at that point that I began to exercise a similar attentiveness in my online teaching and became increasingly captivated by how I saw engagement being manifested in shifting and changing ways in online learning environments for the adult learners I worked with in the online course I was teaching that became the context for this study. A similar heightened awareness, taking time to move through, yet free myself from other worldly distractions, became the way I approached my bridling process throughout this study as well and became the basis for my bridling plan. My phenomenological runs held great value in that they untethered me from my other obligations and afforded me the focus and increased time for metacognitive processing and attentive, thoughtful reflection necessary for effective bridling. I was able to conveniently document and record my thoughts using audio media and then upload the
files I created to my online Tumblr blog that I had purposed as a multimedia-friendly online bridling journal.

I also continued to make regular entries to this online bridling journal as I analyzed and wrote through the data throughout the length of the study. Such reflexivity required making connections between the data and the conceptual framework of the study. It also involved determining connections among particular items of data in parts and as a whole, while also remaining aware of my personal assumptions of normality, yet remaining open in an attempt to get to the heart of what the participant’s experience of engagement was like for them while they were learning online. However, again, it was important to acknowledge that my experiential knowledge and perspectives were also brought to bear and honored as a critical lens through which I was able to interpret and analyze data, make connections between items of data, and frame the data with relevant theory to ascertain meaningfulness.

Component C: Devise a Clear, Yet Flexible Process for Collecting Data Appropriate for the Phenomenon Under Investigation

As a third component of the research process, Vagle (2010a) recommends that a deliberate, clear, yet flexible plan be established for determining data sources and data collection methods appropriate for the phenomenon under investigation.

Phenomenological methodological approaches have historically privileged interviewing as the sole method of data collection, and this holds true today for many who practice a Husserlian descriptive or transcendental approach to phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997; Sokolowski, 2000). In this approach, the interview is deemed to be the most appropriate source of data to access an authentic, direct account of an individual’s
lived experience. However, van Manen (1990) who uses an interpretive phenomenological approach, introduced the written lived experience description (p. 63-66) as a data source or data collection method to additionally capture aspects of the lived experience in written narrative form as a means to reach understanding using alternative forms of expression (p. 63-66). He argues that “writing mediates reflection and action” (p. 124) and phenomenology requires a certain praxis or form of consciousness (both reflective and active) that writing, as an act of literacy, helps to create. Because of the mindfulness that writing mediates, some individuals may be more reflective, and therefore more articulate, in communicating descriptions of their lived experiences than they may be verbally.

In the spirit of phenomenological openness, perhaps provocatively so, van Manen (1997) further argues that in our methodological approach and in our selection of data sources and collection methods, we must be more flexible and place priority on meaning over method:

What methodological insights are to be gained from working backwards, as it were, not from method to meaning but from meaning to method? The point of method is not to claim that, above others there is one correct or superior mode of inquiry to discover and ascertain the truth or the true meaning of something. There is no single method, just as there is no uncontested truth. Rather, the reason for reflecting on method is to discover the historical approaches and suppositions that may hold promise in rendering human experience interpretable and understandable in our present time and place. So the expectation is not to arrive at a recipe, a
foolproof set of techniques and know hows that are guaranteed to produce repeatable scientific results; rather, we hope to become sensitive to some of the principles that may guide our inquiry (p. 346).

Here van Manen (1990) contends that rather than privileging and strictly adhering to a single prescribed method in order to pursue meaning, phenomenological inquiry should instead be more open and inclusive in its pursuit of meaning and determine method according to that which would prove to be most helpful and insightful in such pursuits. That is to say, any method that helps gain unique insight into the lived experience should be considered. Moreover, he argues that all data sources that can potentially help to open up and understand the phenomenon of interest most deeply should be and must be included in the data collection process. Vagle (2011b) advocates similarly for multiple data sources, as long as they valuably contribute to the phenomenological description of lived experience (p. 21). It is important to note that although this could also be seen as triangulation of data or using multiple sources of data to demonstrate the concurrent validity of the research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2005, p. 112), the notion of triangulation in post-intentional phenomenological inquiry is problematic for two reasons.

First, triangulation is necessary and appropriate for qualitative research that is most interested in general properties, commonalities, and patterns (Patton, 2002) because it assumes that in approaching the object of study from multiple views, we can come to a general description or an understanding of its general characteristics in a nomothetic sense. However, interpretive phenomenological approaches, including post-intentional,
are ideographic rather than nomothetic in that they are not as concerned with commonalities among experiences as they are with uniqueness—that is, revealing the exceptionality and specificity of a participant’s lived experience in ways that are compelling, profound, and deep... leading to a depth of understanding. They are more interested in seeking meaning in the uniqueness of an individual’s experience of a phenomenon and using multiple data sources as a means to open up the phenomenon and delve deeper into unique dimensions of experience, rather that seeking general descriptions or commonalities among experiences. For example, in the context of this study, I was not seeking a singular description of the lived experience of engagement in online learning environments, nor a singular objective understanding about what the experience of online learning is like for online learners that could be generalized. I was instead seeking ideographic signs and unique elements of the phenomenon of engagement from each participant’s experiences while she/he was learning online. As the research findings and participants’ narratives support, engagement was experienced in very different ways, and often very uniquely among participants. And although there were some commonalities across them, I was more concerned with elucidating their uniqueness.

Second, the very notion of triangulation must be scrutinized in a post-structural sense. Richards and St. Pierre (2005) argue that triangulation assumes a fixed point that can be triangulated, as though we can center the inquiry on one object of study that remains stable, universal, and can be completely viewed if we approach it from so many angles. In the context of this post-intentional phenomenological study seeking tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement while learning online, the inquiry
assumes the phenomenon of engagement shifts and changes and resides in multiple partial, and varied contexts; thus, it cannot be centered or fixed. Instead, Richardson and Pierre suggest the metaphor of crystallization over triangulation as a means to view the phenomenon under study as multifaceted. They propose that, like a crystal, the phenomenon under investigation includes “an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of response—not triangulation but rather, crystallization” (p. 963).

Data Collection Plan. In devising a data collection plan for this study, the online context played a pivotal role in determining data appropriate for the phenomenon under investigation (i.e. learner engagement in online environments). The unique nuances, opportunities, and challenges that online learning environments and technology tools hold were considered in order to inclusively determine suitable data sources that could serve as meaningful. Online technologies afford the unique opportunity for learners to communicate in a variety of ways, including text-, audio-, and video-based communications that can be documented, shared, and archived for later retrieval or ongoing access. In this online course, a social networking environment called Ning <www.ning.com> was used as the central online learning environment or central meeting space to communicate, share resources, and archive content while the course was in progress (see Figure 3.2). Access to this virtual environment, including all of its web links, media, and digital content, was restricted to course members only and remains password-protected. All data contained in the online environment was archived and
saved indefinitely, and all communications and learner-generated content was considered for its value in serving as a rich data source for this study.

Figure 3.2

Screenshot of welcome page of the Ning social online learning environment used for the online graduate course

Throughout our participation in the course, social discussions based on the course content occurred among learners and myself as ideas and perspectives were articulated and shared. This was accomplished using text-based written postings in blogs and discussion threads as well as a variety of multimedia communication tools, including
podcasts, webcam videos, and audio- and video-generated comments using a tool called VoiceThread <www.voicethread.com>. These communications were created alternatively throughout the course using text, audio, or video and then posted or uploaded onto the Ning course website for others to read, listen to, or view. This act of posting is indicative of documenting and archiving digital communication content (artifacts) in the online learning environment. Data was collected from digital artifacts generated by the participants while the course was in progress and as they engaged in critical reflection and class discussions on the course content.

In addition to digital artifacts archived in the online learning environment while the course was in progress, several other qualitative data collection methods were used as a means of investigating the participants’ lived experience in more depth retrospectively, as well as to gather insights into the phenomenon from multiple and varied perspectives. These methods included an initial interview, a written lived experience description (van Manen, 1990, p. 63-66), a follow up interview, and digital artifacts from the researcher’s online bridling journal. As part of the systematic protocol in the research design, connections were made between the research questions and data sources (see Table 3.2) and these connections served to outline a data collection plan. Ongoing data collection continued through the researcher’s interactions with participants for eight months after the course concluded.
Table 3.2

*Connections Between Research Questions and Data Sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Q1**: What is it like to be an adult learner in online learning environments?            | • Transcripts from audio-recorded individual interviews conducted with participants in person or via online web conferencing  
• Participants’ written lived experience descriptions  
• Written, audio, and video artifacts shared by participants throughout the course on the online course website  
• Researcher’s online bridling journal |
| **Q2**: What is it like to experience engagement in online learning environments?          | • Transcripts from audio-recorded individual interviews conducted with participants in person or via online web conferencing  
• Participants’ written lived experience descriptions  
• Written, audio, and video narrative artifacts shared by participants throughout the course on the online course website  
• Researcher’s online bridling journal |
| **Q3**: How do various elements of learning online and dynamics of the learning environment influence adult learners’ feelings of engagement? | • Transcripts from audio-recorded individual interviews conducted with participants in person or via online web conferencing  
• Participants’ written lived experience descriptions  
• Written, audio, and video narrative artifacts shared by participants throughout the course on the online course website  
• Researcher’s online bridling journal |

Qualitative data was collected for eight months following the conclusion of the course to retrospectively probe research participants’ lived experiences. After the conclusion of the online course, all seventeen adult learners who were enrolled were asked via email to participate in the study, and six responded to the request and consented to participate. Initial screening interviews ranging from 1.5 to 2 hours in length were conducted with these six participants openly discussing their lived
experiences while learning online. These interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. Special attention was paid during the interview and during data analysis to whether each participant experienced the phenomenon of engagement particularly and if so, the level of intensity of the experiences and their ability to articulate these experiences through vivid personal accounts. Interviews were of longer duration for the four online learners who were determined to be rich sources of data for continued participation in the study based on indications of high levels of engagement according to the NSSE’s five critical factors (IUCPR, 2011). Audio recordings of each interview were then transcribed to text and I made regular entries to my online bridling journal during and after the transcription process, both as a reflexive project and as a means of analysis to determine excerpts of the account that were most illuminative and revealed tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement in context.

As a result of the initial phases of data analysis that were conducted concurrently with data collection and frequent bridling, I was struck by the narrative quality of the research participants’ accounts of their lived experiences as storied (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This insight was revealed as I wrote and talked through my perspectives following the initial screening interviews conducted with potential research participants. I reflexively analyzed my impressions of the participants’ accounts in written and audio-recorded entries in my bridling journal. The online learners’ vivid descriptions of their online learning experiences and what it was like to be engaged while learning online were each very unique; and they were compelling in that they had an ideographic, narrative resonance to them. They were often communicated as storied with themselves, other learners, and the instructor as influential characters; contingent
elements that comprised the context and the plot; and a sequence of events that unfolded over time.

After consulting Clandinin and Connelly’s narrative framework, I approached subsequent data collection with a particular sensitivity to this narrative dimension and “to be a good listener in the special way a story requires: [to] note the manner of presentation; the development of ... sequences; the emphasis accorded to one figure or another in the recital; and the degree of enthusiasm, of coherence the narrator gives to his or her account” (Coles, 1989, as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 23). I found that this approach was particularly valuable for gaining even greater access into the experience as it was lived and influenced by a variety of characters, representations, sequences, intentional relationships or connections, and meanings.

Following the initial interviews, the four research participants that were chosen were asked to write a description of their lived experience (van Manen, 1990, p. 63) while learning online. They were provided with writing prompts, which were based on the three research questions. These writing points focused on questions pertaining to what their experience of learning in an online environment was like, how it felt to experience the phenomenon of engagement while learning online, and what elements or dynamics of learning online they perceived to influence (i.e. contribute to and detract from) the intensity of their feeling of engagement while learning online (see Appendix C).

After each written lived experience description was collected, transcribed, and analyzed, a second follow-up interview ranging from 1 to 2 hours in length was conducted with each participant to address additional questions or areas requiring further
elaboration based on the previous data collected and the ongoing analysis of the data. Again, the audio recording of each interview was then transcribed to text and bridling entries were made as this data was further analyzed and considered against and along side other items of data.

While this second interview provided an opportunity for follow-up questioning and elaboration, it also included some dialogue between each participant and I about preliminary analysis of the data. This can be related to the idea of member checking, which is used in qualitative research as means to demonstrate internal validity and bolster credibility of the data (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). Merriam also describes member checking or respondent validation as “taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible” (p. 229) as a measure of accuracy. However, this poses some concerns for phenomenological inquiry that is not focused on revealing objective accuracy as much as revealing interpretive meanings; and it relies upon the infusion of the researcher’s interpretations as a significant layer of the data to do so. Therefore, this is also problematic for interpretive phenomenological research that does not assume objectivity nor a single objective understanding of experience.

It warrants noting that I was, however, concerned with ensuring that I portrayed the participants’ lived experiences in a way that would preserve as much of their voice as possible, in the interest of being dialogic and intersubjective in my inquiry and my writing. But even at that, hermeneutic and interpretive traditions in phenomenology honor the central role of the researcher and acknowledge that the researcher’s interpretation is another layer added to ‘accurate’ accounts and is a necessary component
to help make sense of the data and of the lived experience as told. During the second interview I conducted with each participant, I did share some of my phenomenological descriptions of their lived experience in my writing that were based on my interpretations throughout the analysis of data that had been collected from other sources (e.g. the initial interview, written lived experience description and digital artifacts from the online course activities). In the interview, I asked for the participant’s impression of what I had written and would later include in the research findings. There was never any disagreement or concern expressed with what I had interpreted or wrote; and, in fact, this often led to continued discussion and further explication of meaning as the participants elaborated on the aspect of their lived experience that was being highlighted in our discussion.

To supplement the narrative accounts shared through the interviews and written lived experience descriptions, select documents and artifacts were collected from various learning activities and communications from the online course when it was in progress. Artifacts were chosen to include as relevant data in which participants shared their perspectives, experiences, insights, and reflections through the multi-modal means that online technologies uniquely afford. Such media included text-based discussion postings, podcasts, webcam videos, audio and video discussion comments recorded with VoiceThread, summative reflection papers, and personal blog entries (see Figure 3.3). All of these artifacts had been created, generated, and shared by the learners during the course. Select audio and video recordings that referenced online learning experiences suggestive of the phenomenon of engagement were collected and transcribed to text. Additionally, I made regular bridling entries to my Tumblr online journal using audio, video, and text-based postings, and these were collected as a viable data source as well.
While metacognition is an essential element of true success for students in any learning environment, it is perhaps even more critical in the sphere of distance education. As students reflect on learning, they develop understanding for not only the skills and materials of the course, but also for their own developmental process, as a learner. Ideally, in the face-to-face classroom, learners have the opportunity to observe and reflect on the learning processes of those around them, and can respond to directed prompts from the instructor to reflect metacognitively.

In a distance learning environment, metacognition seems to take on an even more significant role in the learner’s experience. Even if the instructor has structured interaction and the student group becomes a true learning community, the individual learner must rely on some degree of self-motivation and persistence to achieve the highest possible level of success. Though my experience as an instructor has largely focused on the importance of metacognition in the classroom (a practice I committed to many years ago), my experience as a metacognitive student in this course has convinced me of its power. Indeed, as a result of this experience, I believe that metacognition is perhaps the single most important factor for students in maximizing the outcomes of distance learning.

As I reflect on my learning curve in this course (and it felt pretty steep for a while), I realize that I experienced a wide range of learning experiences. In this process, metacognition has spurred my thinking since the very first day. I didn’t turn to my classmate to process my learning like I might in a F2F class, but I looked inward, and even in my greatest moments of confusion and feelings of being overwhelmed, I calmed myself by returning to that metacognitive process, to analyze my reactions and move forward with the stages of my learning. I have not only learned new information, but I’ve learned new skills, understood HOW I’ve learned them, and connected my new learning to concepts I haven’t worked with closely in many years. Perhaps this was successful for me because I already trust the process, and I believe fully in the power of writing to help one articulate understanding (which at times, I haven’t felt successful with in this course, but there’s another topic for metacognitive reflection right there . . .).
Component D: Read and Write Through the Data in a Systematic, Responsive Manner

I continued to read through the data and write about it in a systematic, responsive manner as I intermittently returned to the former three components of the research process and as data was collected, gathered, analyzed, and synthesized (Vagle, 2010a). This fourth component in the post-intentional research design involved the implementation of a whole-parts-whole analysis plan (p. 18-20), complemented by thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) to illuminate tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement and then to identify themes of pedagogic significance that would serve as heuristic guides to unite them and present them in a way that was pedagogically meaningful. Additional details of the data analysis methods, as well as the outcomes of data analysis and research findings are all discussed at length in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation. The following is a brief overview.

Whole-Parts-Whole Data Analysis Plan. Consideration of the whole and the parts of the data was an ongoing process. Intermittently, I read through the corpus of data in its entirety to understand the larger scope of what had been shared by all participants. Then for each participant, each item of data was considered and a line-by-line analysis was conducted to note particulars as well as patterns across items of data. These patterns and particular narrative accounts revealing rich tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of interest as it was experienced were then compared back to the whole of the data to determine broader, experiential themes that held meaningful insight for pedagogy and instructional design.
As data was collected and recursively analyzed, an analytical focus was placed on the four adult learners’ lived experiences of engagement. Iterative cycles of a whole-parts-whole approach to phenomenological data analysis revealed many tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement and intentional relationships within the environment that were associated with this phenomenon. According to Vagle’s (2010a) post-intentional research design, these tentative manifestations provide valuable glimpses into how the phenomenon is experienced in changing and shifting ways and in different moments of time. These tentative manifestations were then thematically analyzed (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) to identify three themes deemed to be significantly insightful in their ability to contribute to pedagogic thoughtfulness (van Manen, 1990, p. 8) as well as responsive practice and informed practical reasoning (Brookfield, 2006). Thus, these themes were entitled, *themes of pedagogic significance* (van Manen, 1990, p. 159).

**Component E: Craft a Text Capturing and Illuminating the Tentative Manifestations of the Phenomenon in its Multiple, Partial, and Varied Contexts**

As a fifth component of the research process and as presented in detail in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, I strove to craft a text that captured tentative manifestations of the phenomenon in its multiple, partial, and varied contexts (Vagle, 2010a, p. 7) based on compelling narrative accounts of the experience of engagement in online learning environments collected from multiple data sources. In an attempt to transform lived experience into meaningful textual expression (van Manen, 1990, p. 36), Vagle suggests that the text should read coherently, identify and discuss tentative manifestations, reflect the researcher’s bridling process, ground itself in phenomenological philosophy, and situate itself in important scholarly issues within a particular field (p. 14).
The validity of such a crafted text lies in its ability to resonate with the reader (van Manen, 1990, p. 44) or, in the context of this study, with education professionals interested in online teaching and learning in higher education. Considering the conceptual framework and purpose of this study, the validity of the text also lies in its ability to enhance pedagogical thoughtfulness (van Manen, 1990, p. 8), responsive practice (Brookfield, 2006, p. 2), and informed practical reasoning (Brookfield, 2006, p. 6) for online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers. Practical implications also include the ability to provide educators with a profound sense of what it is like to experience engagement online from the perspective of the learner and what elements and dynamics may influence the learner’s feelings of engagement in virtual environments. Additionally, a design model based on this research data and findings is proposed in Chapter 6 that identifies pedagogical and instructional design guidelines that can help foster engaging online learning experiences.

Summary

The methodological approach to naturalistic inquiry that I have outlined in this chapter is based on a post-intentional phenomenological research design and is framed by a historical review of the research, theories, models, and practices related to learner engagement and online learning. As van Manen (1990) suggests, the pursuit of meaning was prioritized throughout this research process. Subsequently, qualitative methods for data collection and analysis were deliberately chosen for their ability to contribute to this pursuit, considering the unique context of online learning environments and the variety of forms of expression that online technologies and digital media afford. The five components of the research design were conducted, as discussed throughout this chapter,
systematically and reflexively in order to lend to the methodological rigor of the research in terms of trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) and to seek insight into adult learners’ experiences of engagement while learning in online learning environments.
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS OF DATA

In this chapter, I begin with an in depth accounting and explanation of the qualitative methods used for data analysis. Phenomenological data analysis included ongoing bridling throughout the study to ensure researcher reflexivity and iterative cycles of a whole-parts-whole analysis plan (Vagle, 2010a, p. 9) to reveal tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement as it was experienced by the research participants in online learning environments. This was followed by additional thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) to identify themes of pedagogic significance that served as heuristic guides to unite the tentative manifestations revealed in data analysis.

After discussing the details of the data analysis methods at length throughout this chapter, I end with a brief overview of the outcomes of data analysis and the research findings, including the tentative manifestations and themes of pedagogic significance that were identified.

Then, a more detailed, narrative representation of the research findings are presented in a separate chapter of this dissertation. Chapter 5 is organized thematically and the research findings are presented in the form of authentic and compelling narratives that most richly reveal the phenomenon of engagement and the associated intentional meanings as it was experienced by the research participants in online learning environments. It seems more appropriate to present the research participants’ first-hand narrative accounts that illuminate compelling phenomenological descriptions of their lived experiences of engagement while learning online in a separate chapter for the sake of clarity and as a way of honoring them in their full complexity.
Data Analysis Methods

Data was recursively collected and analyzed using a variety of qualitative methods for eight months following the conclusion of the course to retrospectively probe research participants’ lived experiences while learning online. The unit of analysis in the research design was the phenomenon of learner engagement as it was experienced within online learning environments. As such, an analytical focus was placed on the four adult learners’ lived experiences of engagement while they were learning online and enrolled in a completely online, four-week, graduate-level, university course. As data was collected, gathered, analyzed, and synthesized, I strove to craft a text that revealed the tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement and its intentional meanings in multiple, partial, and varied contexts (Vagle, 2010a, p. 20) throughout the participants’ online learning experiences while they were enrolled in the online graduate course.

Phenomenological data analysis using a whole-parts-whole approach was used to capture tentative manifestations (Vagle, 2010a, p. 7) of the intentional relationships, or intentional meanings, associated with the experience of engagement in online learning environments. These tentative manifestations provide valuable glimpses into how online learners experience engagement in changing and shifting ways and in different moments in time. Additional cycles of whole-parts-whole data analysis also illuminated dynamics within the online learning environment that significantly influenced the experience of engagement.

Tentative manifestations were further analyzed for overlapping units of meaning using thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) to identify experiential themes deemed to be significant for their ability to meaningfully contribute to pedagogic thoughtfulness.
(van Manen, 1990, p. 8) as well informed practical reasoning (Brookfield, 2006, p. 6) and responsive practice (p. 2). These themes were thereby collectively entitled, *themes of pedagogic significance* (van Manen, 1990, p. 159), and they were used as heuristic guides to give shape to the outcomes of data analysis and present the research findings in a way that is pedagogically meaningful.

*Reflexive Bridling as a Method of Data Analysis.* A commitment to bridling that began as a reflexive project at the initiation of the study continued throughout data collection and data analysis as well. Throughout the inquiry, I continued to read through the data and write about it in a systematic, responsive manner through bridling. I made regular entries to my bridling journal twice per week on average in the early and middle stages of the data collection, data analysis, and writing processes. I used a variety of multimedia, including text, audio, and video to document my bridling and uploaded entries to an online bridling journal using Tumblr. However, bridling through writing became an almost daily process in the latter stages of the research processes. In fact, sections of that writing later contributed to the development of this dissertation.

While analyzing data, I intermittently returned to the former three components of the research process to continue to guide and inform my writing. This allowed me to remain attentive and to ensure that the interpretations made during data analysis were committed to recursively setting aside my perspectives and assumptions to focus on the participants’ experiences *and then* bringing them into play to interpretively determine meaningfulness in the experiences by way of the phenomenological analysis methods that were employed. Intermittently, it was necessary to make every attempt to set my assumptions and perspectives aside as much as possible and move into the
phenomenological attitude and a heightened attentiveness to seek access to the phenomenon under investigation as it was experienced. I would then bring my perspectives and assumptions to bear again, using my experiential knowledge to gain greater access to the phenomenon as it was experienced by the research participants. This required that I negotiate the participants’ lived experiences with my experiential knowledge as the instructor and instructional designer of the online course and as the researcher.

As discussed previously, a significant portion of my bridling was spent on interrogating the five critical factors for engagement that were proposed by the NSSE: (1) a supportive environment, (2) interaction, (3) challenge, (4) active and collaborative learning opportunities, and (5) enriching educational experiences (IUCPR, 2011). Literature on these five potential dimensions of engagement was gathered during the partial literature review prior to collecting data, and I had used them as a reference to identify engagement as a phenomenon of critical interest to begin to frame the context of this research study. I had also referenced these five factors when I conducted the initial screening interviews. They were used as sensitive indicators to identify individuals who had experienced engagement particularly intensely while learning in the online graduate course. And although I acknowledge that this may seem antithetical to a phenomenological philosophical commitment to openness, I felt compelled to use these factors as a starting point to initiate the screening process of those online learners who had experienced engagement, and to very loosely frame the first data collection interview. Therefore, it was necessary for me to continue to bridle this. The challenge of interpretively evaluating data as potentially meaningful necessitated a balance between
exploring the participants’ narrative accounts of their lived experiences as their own
without the undue influence of my own prejudgements, biases, and experiential
knowledge of the issues at hand. Concomitantly, it was necessary to occasionally draw
upon my experiential knowledge of the issues as well in order to contextualize data and
its meaning from a pedagogical and instructional design perspective. Intentional
meanings were determined dialogically according to their meaningfulness for the
participants’, the researcher, and the readers, or those who stood to benefit from the
research findings. The ultimate aim of data analysis, toward which this bridling, meaning
making, reading, and writing served, was to reveal and illuminate the intentional
meanings associated with the research participants’ lived experiences of engagement as
this phenomenon was tentatively manifested in shifting and changing ways in online
learning environments.

*Whole-Parts-Whole Data Analysis.* Consideration of the data as a whole as well
as the individual parts was an ongoing process for phenomenological data analysis and
has been used by both van Manen (1990) and Vagle (2010a). This analytical approach
assumes that, in the interest of phenomenological unity, no one item of data should be
considered devoid of its relation to the whole. As data was collected, select multimedia
artifacts were transcribed and all text-based data was then printed. I chose to code the
data by hand in the analysis process rather than use a technology application to do so in
order to maintain a close human connection with the data and to be able to physically
mark it, annotate it, cut it out, move it, arrange and re-arrange it, and organize and re-
organize it. Considering the wealth of data that I had collected, it was also necessary for
me, at times, to physically (as much as intellectually) envision it in its entirety by laying
it all out and manually connecting items of data. This also afforded me a very literal view of the ‘whole,’ in order to be able to intermittently appreciate the data in its wholeness.

Moving back and forth between items of data and reading across data proved to be a joyful challenge, and I strove to balance data analysis by examining the data as a cohesive whole as well as an assemblage of parts. Through a considerable investment of time for data collection and analysis, I honored each of the individual parts before once again comparing it back against the whole. This data analysis process began at the onset of data collection, and I continually bridled my perspectives and assumptions as an overarching analytic method as well.

I continually read through each item of data as it was collected and compared it against others. For example, as I read through the printed transcript from an interview with a participant, I considered the inherent connections and intentional meanings within that data source as well as how they connected to a second interview with that same participant... or other data sources from that same participant... or with an interview with a different participant. And then I sought to connect it back to the whole of the data again, the research questions, and the overarching purpose of the research study. And this required several exhaustive cycles of readings as the collection of data grew. Through my lived experience of phenomenological data analysis, I came to understand very concretely Husserl’s argument that phenomenology is, indeed, an “infinite task” (Moran, 2000, p. 125)

The first reading of each data item for each participant was conducted without interjecting any notes or markings to get a general sense of meaning. Subsequently, I
then conducted several additional line-by-line readings and made annotations for follow-up questions and marked particular sections that contributed to a description of the phenomenon (Vagle, 2010a, p. 19). Excerpts were also noted that helped to identify manifestations of the intentional relations associated with the phenomenon of engagement as it was experienced while the research participant was learning in the online course.

The line-by-line readings also involved manually cutting out segments of the printed transcripts or excerpts of the narratives that provided vivid descriptions and then arranging them in clusters according to salient points. These points were salient in that they helped contributed to the description of the phenomenon and helped to reveal how the phenomenon of engagement was being manifested in meaningful ways in each participant’s lived experience. These manifestations were transient, however, and in fact, appeared to be elusive and to shift and transform depending upon influential factors and changes in context.

As I began to capture these tentative manifestations of engagement while learning online, I gave them preliminary titles (Vagle, 2010a, p. 20). Several additional cycles of line-by-line readings characterized by additional markings, highlights, margin notes, and annotations were conducted to continue to identify manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement and refine titles, and to more clearly articulate meaning.

Articulation of meaning proved to be a challenging process of constant negotiation of what could be considered “meaningful.” I grappled with questions of ‘meaning for whom?’ and ‘according to whom?’ I sought to balance what was potentially meaningful from the learners’ or research participants’ perspectives according to
to what they shared in their narrative accounts, and what was meaningful from my perspectives as the instructor and designer of the course and as the researcher. I was also moved to consider what was meaningful from the perspective of the readers of this dissertation or those who stood to benefit from the aims and purposes of this study, i.e. educators interested in the challenges and opportunities associated with online teaching and learning. Admittedly, my biggest difficulty in this endeavor working toward an articulation of meaning was remaining cognizant of the ethical responsibilities associated with the political nature of descriptions as interpretive acts (Lather, 1993). I was committed to remaining cautious of my presumptions in determining and then asserting what was “meaningful” for those who were impacting and being impacted by my phenomenological descriptions. To this end, Patton (2002) describes the imperative of reflexivity in interpretive inquiry as it requires the researcher “to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s one perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports” (p. 65). As this relates to phenomenological research texts more specifically, it is helpful to draw on van Manen’s (1990) discussion of phenomenological research as dialogic and intersubjective. He states, “the human science researcher needs the other (for example, the reader) in order to develop a dialogic relationship with the phenomenon and thus validate the phenomenon as described” (p. 11). Hence, the validity of a phenomenological text lies in its ability to resonate with the reader in this way.

As the whole-parts-whole approach to data analysis continued, I then read through the corpus of data in its entirety again as a cohesive whole to understand the larger scope
of what had been shared by all participants. This helped to ensure I was serving the overall purpose of the research and addressing the three research questions. In this continual reference to the whole, I also sought to ensure coherence among the constellation of meanings that were being articulated in my writing. This return to a broad overview of the data by attending to coherence and cohesion was in keeping with a fundamental phenomenological commitment to unity; each part was considered in its relation to the whole and the connections or intentional meanings that circulated through the inquiry were preserved.

*Thematic Data Analysis.* While a whole-parts-whole analysis plan was used throughout the study as a means to discover and reveal tentative manifestations (Vagle, 2010a) of the phenomenon of engagement, this was complemented by thematic analysis in order to then identify *experiential themes* (van Manen, 1990). According to van Manen, experiential themes are those that “recur as commonality or possible commonalities in the various descriptions [that are] gathered” (p. 93). Thus, “theme analysis refers then to the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work” (p. 78).

As I considered potential themes against a backdrop of the purpose of the research study, I was moved to consider how they meaningfully related to one another phenomenologically and pedagogically and from the perspectives of the readers, or those who stood to benefit from the research: educators and instructional designers. Moreover, as I looked ahead in my research plan and my aim to use the research findings to suggest pedagogical design principles for online learning environments, it was a significant challenge to base these principles exclusively on the multiple, partial, and complex
tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement that were revealed in such a vast variety of forms. Instead, I relied upon thematic analysis to provide “insight that permits [one] to make sense of the text ... and to be practically responsive, as author, to the text...” (p. 90). Themes serve as the bridge from tentative manifestations to principles for pedagogical design.

While Vagle does not necessarily refer to tentative manifestations in a thematic sense and although post-intentional phenomenology resists attempts to organize or center meanings (2010a, p. 21-22), my thematic approach to finding commonalities among the tentative manifestations revealed in this study was not necessarily a philosophical or a methodological move, but rather a pedagogical one, as van Manen (1990) suggests (p. 89). He contends that themes are useful in the sense that they serve as guides to help us make sense of complex data, to “give shape to the shapeless,” and can be used for phenomenological analysis during interpretation and the subsequent articulation of a text which requires a “process of insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure of meaning” (p. 88).

After capturing compelling tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement while learning online through data analysis, I went on to structure the data analysis thematically, searching “for a sense of organizational form and organic wholeness of the text consistent with the methodical emphasis of the research approach” (van Manen, 1990, p. 168). While considering the practical implications this research holds for the fields of Learning Technologies and Instructional Design, I used themes to organize my writing but became increasingly aware as I did so that “one theme always implicates the meaning dimensions of the other themes” (p. 168). This may be seen as
complex, but it is not problematic; there is a necessary cohesion and unity among themes in phenomenological inquiry that is reflective of its central philosophical commitment to intentionality.

After mindfully choosing to continue to analyze the tentative manifestations further based on my experiential knowledge, I felt compelled to identify themes that held pedagogical and practical insight. I believe that drawing from themes in order to suggest pedagogical design principles makes more practical sense than moving from tentative manifestations directly into design principles, especially since these tentative glimpses are so fleeting, transient, and therefore, difficult to pin down. Moreover, van Manen (1990) suggests that themes are appropriate for phenomenological inquiry in that they become “the hermeneutic tool by way of which the phenomenon under study can be meaningfully understood” (p. 170). I chose to use themes in this sense as a means to present the outcomes of data analysis in Chapter 5 in a way that would make sense and be pedagogically meaningful.

Identifying Themes. As described above, the identification of themes required a thematic approach to data analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) drawing upon the tentative manifestations that were captured in narrative excerpts from the research participants’ compelling accounts of their online learning experiences. I read through the narrative excerpts and arranged them into clusters according to phenomenological relationships, connections, and how things were unified from a pedagogical and instructional design perspective. I considered the relationships among tentative manifestations that served to identify how the phenomenon of engagement was manifested or experienced in different
ways that held intentional meanings or that could be meaningful in helping educators more deeply understand what those online learning experiences were like.

In this process I also used concept mapping to further articulate connections and refine what I began to hermeneutically refer to as *themes of pedagogic significance* (van Manen, 1990, p. 159). These themes were then further analyzed for meaningfulness and compared back to excerpts from the participants’ narrative accounts to examine their coherence with the whole of the data, the broader aims and purpose of the research study, and to consider alternative explanations. It is worth noting once again that bridling served as a very important analysis strategy throughout this endeavor as a means to reflexively maintain a balance or sense of clarity between the larger overarching issues and the research participants’ perspectives, while also infusing my own interpretations and perspectives.

With the benefit of bridling, I noted salient points in the data that held pedagogical significance, and I was compelled to continue to analyze for meaning for instructors and instructional designers in their practice. I also continued to seek strategies to articulate the research findings in ways that preserved their integrity and didn’t inappropriately reduce or oversimplify. Yet I wanted to ensure that they were communicated in a way that was accessible for practitioners. In my bridling entries during this process, I had to acknowledge that I am sensitive to the pedagogic significance of this work and its practical implications for design because of my experiential knowledge and practically-oriented work as an adult educator and instructional designer. Ultimately, considering the demands and expectations of the professional conversations being waged in the fields of Learning Technologies and
Instructional Design, I am convinced that it was appropriate and valuable to emphasize this pedagogic significance by identifying themes that could then be used to suggest principles for design. Throughout data analysis, writing and bridling, I considered how this work could communicate to practitioners, educators, and instructional designers in the fields of Learning Technologies and Instructional Design in a way that would be most valuable and relevant. Once again, I am moved by van Manen’s (1990) discussion of pedagogic thoughtfulness and competence as well as Brookfield’s advocacy for informed practical reasoning and responsive practice, and the rich potential phenomenology holds in this regard. Van Manen defines pedagogic competence as involving “the anticipatory and reflective capacity of fostering, shaping, and guiding the [learner’s] emancipatory growth” (p. 159) and argues that it manifests itself not only in concrete actions and situations, but it also in theorizing, when the “educator reflectively brings to speech the meaning of pedagogic situations” (p. 160). Identifying which things are pedagogically significant is difficult in any teaching practice, including online contexts, and it remained a continual challenge throughout the process of data analysis for this study.

Results of Data Analysis: Capturing and Illuminating Tentative Manifestations of Engagement in Glimpses and Moments

Based upon a whole-parts-whole approach to data analysis of participants’ shared narratives of their experience of engagement while learning online, I strove to capture data that showcased how the phenomenon appeared or manifested for the participants throughout the online course while it was in progress and from data collected after the course’s conclusion. As descriptions and embodied (or lived-out) manifestations of the phenomenon were sought, there was a tentative property to the intentional relationships...
associated with the phenomenon as it was being experienced. This tentative nature of
intentional relationships is a core assumption of a post-intentional research design (Vagle,
2010a), and this tentative property of intentionality was confirmed in the research
findings. Iterative cycles of phenomenological analysis of the data using multiple
methods revealed that there was not a singular meaning or core essence of the
phenomenon of engagement that could be described. The associated relationships and
interconnections were not stable and could not be centered. Experiences were multi-
dimensional and highly dynamic, continually transforming and changing in the online
learning environment according to variations in context and other influential factors.
This posed a profound challenge for presenting the results of data analysis and findings
insofar as my ability to craft a written text that would organize data in a way that read
logically and coherently, yet would not inappropriately abbreviate as excerpting often
does. I was also compelled to make every effort to preserve the richness and
multidimensionality of the narratives and personal accounts so as not to oversimplify
them. Phenomenologically speaking, the text must also be a reflection of the
multidimensional web of intentional threads that connect all things meaningfully in the
world. Thus, it seemed inappropriately reductive to “flatten” multi-dimensional data
drawn from the research participants’ multidimensional experiences and interconnections
onto static, unidimensional pages.

In order to mediate this challenge, the research findings are presented in the next
chapter of this dissertation as a means to honor the participants’ narratives in their full
complexity and as a means to preserve as much richness as possible without undue
abbreviation. In Chapter 5, I present the research findings in narrative accounts that most
richly serve to illuminate the tentative manifestations that were revealed as a result of phenomenological data analysis plan outlined in Component D of the post-intentional research design.

**Results of Data Analysis: Identifying Themes of Pedagogic Significance**

Thematic analysis was used to identify three themes of pedagogic significance (van Manen, 1990, p. 159) based on the four participants’ lived experiences of engagement in online learning environments and the tentative manifestations that were captured in the data. Data was collected from their personal narrative accounts that were shared verbally in individual interviews, in written lived experience descriptions (van Manen, 1990, p. 63-66), and in various media artifacts submitted during the online course. Data was also analyzed for dynamics that influenced how learners uniquely experienced engagement within virtual spaces as a means to provide insight and understanding that can help inform online learning facilitation and instructional design in order to foster engaging online learning experiences.

As described previously, a whole-parts-whole plan appropriate for phenomenological data analysis indicated salient points and unique facets of online learning, revealing tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement as it was experienced in shifting and changing ways in the online learning environment. Tentative manifestations are illuminated in the participants’ narratives in Chapter 5. These tentative manifestations were then further analyzed for overlapping units of meaning using thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) to identify experiential themes that would serve as heuristic tools (p. 170) to unite the tentative manifestations and present them in a way that is pedagogically meaningful. Thematic formulations emerged as a
result of reading across data and considering individual experiential accounts, while mining for meaning and pedagogical significance. Connections that were made between tentative manifestations and themes are presented in Table 4.1, with tentative manifestations listed according to the order that they are presented in Chapter 5.

Ultimately, three themes of pedagogic significance were identified: (1) unbounded-ness, (2) engagement as a form of praxis, and (3) the temporal nature of engagement.

Table 4.1

*Connections Between Tentative Manifestations and Themes of Pedagogic Significance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tentative Manifestations</th>
<th>Themes of Pedagogic Significance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Boundless</td>
<td><strong>Theme #1: Unbounded-ness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creative Wandering</td>
<td><em>The unbounded nature of learning online may significantly impact the overall learning experience, especially how engagement is experienced.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Purposeful Freedom</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Focused Chaos</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Choice</td>
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<td>• Organic</td>
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<td>• Natural</td>
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<td>• Authentic</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Immersive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reflective</td>
<td><strong>Theme #2: Engagement as a form of praxis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Active</td>
<td><em>Engagement may be experienced online as a form of praxis.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creative</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Emotion</td>
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<td>• Passion</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Self-Discovery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guided Design</td>
<td><strong>Theme #3: The temporal nature of engagement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Support</td>
<td><em>There is a temporal nature to engagement in online learning environments, suggesting that it may change over time and space, according to the influence of various dynamics.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Authentic Interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Natural</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Immediacy</td>
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</tbody>
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Summary

In this chapter, I explained the qualitative methods used for phenomenological data analysis, including reflexive bridling, iterative cycles of a whole-parts-whole analysis plan to capture tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement, and additional thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) to then unite the tentative manifestations and identify themes of pedagogic significance. In the next chapter, I describe the outcomes of data analysis in more depth according to these three themes, with tentative manifestations as subsets in each theme. Research findings, therefore, include three themes of pedagogic significance as well as compelling narratives from the research participants’ first-hand accounts that support and most richly illuminate tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement as it was experienced meaningfully and in context.
CHAPTER 5

NARRATIVE REPRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

“...it's the silences I listen for, the spaces between words where meaning is found.”
– from Ways of Knowing by Marilyn Walker, 1999

In this chapter, I present the outcomes of data analysis in detail. Multiple cycles of phenomenological data analysis using qualitative methods revealed tentative manifestations (Vagle, 2010a, p. 18-20) of the phenomenon of engagement as well as themes of pedagogic significance (van Manen, 1990, p. 159). The research findings are organized according to these themes and include authentic and compelling narratives that vividly illuminate tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement and the associated intentional meanings as it was experienced by the research participants in online learning environments. It seems most appropriate to present the participants’ narratives here in a separate chapter as a way to honor them in their full complexity without undue abbreviation. The pedagogic significance of the experiences and tentative manifestations are emphasized in the narrative text as a means to illuminate them in context. Later in Chapter 6 of this dissertation, I more directly and succinctly address the meaningfulness of the research findings and pedagogical insights from a practical design perspective in the conclusions and implications for the research findings.

Overview of the Research Study

This qualitative study utilized interpretive phenomenological methodology and a post-intentional phenomenological research design (Vagle, 2010a) to investigate four
adult learners’ lived experiences of engagement while enrolled in a completely online, four-week, graduate-level, university course. For eight months following the conclusion of the course, qualitative methods were used to collect data from the research participants’ personal narrative accounts shared through individual interviews, written lived experience descriptions (van Manen, 1990, p. 63-66), and other digital media artifacts created as part of the learning activities while the course was in progress. Iterative cycles of phenomenological data analysis using a whole-parts-whole approach captured tentative manifestations (Vagle, 2010a, p. 7) of the phenomenon of engagement as it was experienced in online learning environments and revealed in shifting and changing ways. Research findings also suggest particular dynamics that influenced the lived experience of engagement online. Thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990, p. 78) was also used to identify three themes of pedagogic significance: (1) The unbounded nature of learning online may significantly impact the overall learning experience, especially how engagement is experienced; (2) Engagement may be experienced online as a form of praxis; and (3) There is a temporal nature to engagement in online learning environments, suggesting that it changes over time and space, according to the influence of various dynamics.

Phenomenological data analysis revealed that as the participants shared compelling and evocative accounts of their experiences while learning online, they did so in narrative form as a way of expressing their lived experiences as storied (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). As such, it is befitting that the research findings be presented here as storied as well. A narrative framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is used to present the research findings by weaving the narratives into a coherent and meaningful
text. Clandinin and Connelly contend that experience is made up of “stories lived and told” (p. xxvi) and that we understand and make sense of the world narratively. And as such, narrative can be used as a way of understanding experience as well (p. 17). Citing Geertz (1995), Clandinin and Connelly (2000) contend that narratives serve as “hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things” (p. 6) in our lived experiences. Therefore, this framework is appropriate for phenomenological inquiry because it emphasizes connections and intentional relationships among narratives in the context of lived experience.

The research participants’ narrative accounts are shared here in excerpts and direct quotes, and the text additionally includes explanations to further elucidate the research findings. At times, length was preserved in the narrative excerpts in order to preserve the richness of the account and the experience in context. At other times, shorter excerpts were selected and accompanied by interpretive curating in order to expose a richer dimension of meaning and as a means to artfully weave these excerpts together and craft a text that more robustly captured the multidimensionality of the participants’ experiences while learning online. Efforts were also made to preserve as much of the participants’ narrative voice in the excerpts as possible. And I acknowledge my political position in this endeavor as I additionally interjected my voice as both researcher and curator of narratives in the writing. As Patton suggests (2002), “...voice is more than grammar. A credible authoritative, authentic, and trustworthy voice engages the reader through rich description, thoughtful sequencing, appropriate use of quotes, and contextual clarity so that the reader joins the inquirer in the search for meaning” (p. 65).
For clarity, the directly quoted narrative accounts of the research participants are differentiated from the rest of the chapter by using a different typeset. Throughout Chapter 5, my text, including my explanatory and transitional curating, is distinguished by the same font style, size, and formatting that is used throughout all other chapters of this dissertation. In contrast, direct quotes from the research participants’ narrative accounts are distinguished by a different font style, and block quotations are single-spaced.

Research Findings

Theme #1: Unbounded-ness. The unbounded nature of learning online may significantly impact the learner experience, especially how engagement is experienced. Learning in online spaces was described as feeling “boundless” with unlimited possibilities. Online learning affords a unique opportunity to lift limits and constraints on learning and thus, may lead to unbounded potential for learning according to new directions learners autonomously pursue as a process of exploration and discovery. Learner autonomy was suggested to be a pedagogically meaningful dimension of feeling unbounded while learning online and to significantly impact how online engagement is experienced. Research participants described this experience of autonomy and unboundedness as being a sense of “purposeful freedom,” “focused chaos,” and “creative wandering” while being engaged in online spaces.

Jessica began her written lived experience description by articulating what it is like to learn online, and she described it as “boundless” with unlimited possibilities. She
further described the experience as oscillating back and forth between feeling “overwhelming” and “exhilarating”:

When I’m learning in an online space it feels overwhelming sometimes – because on some level I know the possibilities are limitless and that my potential for learning and my growth and acquisition of understanding is boundless. It’s exhilarating.

_Tentative Manifestation: Boundless._

Jessica’s written description of online learning being “boundless” and “limitless” was quite compelling, so this was revisited during her second interview. She went on to discuss the differences between her learning experiences in online, virtual spaces comprised of digital resources and her learning experiences in traditional, physical spaces comprised of physical resources. I also inquired about any potential differences in what engagement felt like in these different spaces. She stated:

It feels different from being engaged with print text – more expansive. Somehow, I sense the possibility [and I’m compelled] to travel outside the immediate page and explore. In that regard, it feels adventurous and therefore, more self-directed. However, I also often wonder if I’m working as ‘hard’ cognitively, as I would be if I were simply tied to finite information. I think I ask this question mostly because the thinking feels different – almost easier? Perhaps it feels easier because of this ‘flow’ factor... that I’m in a greater state of bliss when my learning ability is unfettered by the geography of the static page. I feel more creative – more able to let my mind wander. When I was younger and read mostly in paperbound books, I could still let my mind wander, but the book still called me back, oftentimes requiring that I reread passages I has [sic] scanned but not processed. Now that the majority of my reading happens with online text, I find that I rarely have to reread. ... No, my wandering mind online seems to follow it’s seeking by accessing more information. ... To clarify, it isn’t that I don’t ‘have to’ reread in an online space... it’s just that I tend not to.

On the differences and uniqueness of engagement in online learning environments versus more traditional face-to-face learning environments, Jessica also wrote:
Being engaged when learning online both keeps me in and separates me from the present moment. I’m in a different learning zone.

In a subsequent interview, she also discussed that when she is deeply engaged online, she feels drawn in to the virtual environment and feels mindfully present, yet feels separated from the outside world and may not feel physically present.

*Tentative Manifestation: Creative Wandering.*

When asked in her second interview to elaborate further on differences in her experiences with physical learning spaces and online learning spaces, Jessica described the experience of being engaged while learning in online environments as “creative wandering” because of the freedom that online learning affords and the creativity that it incites. Related to the sense of boundlessness that she expressed in her written description, she also verbalized the feeling of engagement while learning online as “purposeful freedom” and “focused chaos” during her interviews.

In her first interview, she discussed specific learning experiences and processes in the online course that she would later refer to as a feeling of “purposeful freedom” in a subsequent interview:

I had a focus for that week and I had goals and outcomes that ... I knew I was working towards. But in getting to those outcomes, I still engaged in some of the same processes that I might even if I was directing my own learning. I was also allowed that freedom. In a given week in a module I would watch the video, which I think was incredibly important in terms of helping me to kind of frame the week overall. It helped me to feel connected in a personal way to the content, versus, say, looking at a list of outcomes. I think that watching the video, hearing the voice, seeing facial expressions and kind of absorbing the tone, that really helped me to become more like intrinsically motivated, I think. It definitely made it more personal.

*Tentative Manifestation: Purposeful Freedom.*
It is noteworthy that as Jessica had above, all four research participants identified “freedom” as a characteristic of online learning that powerfully influenced their experience of engagement. And although they each experienced this feeling of freedom differently in different moments, and their descriptions revealed it being manifested in different ways, they each used this term often. However, they rarely actually used the term “autonomy;” therefore, as the term autonomy is used in this text, it is most often my interpretation of the participants’ reference to learner “freedom” as I found it to be meaningful pedagogically.

In addition to her elaborations on the notion of “purposeful freedom,” Jessica’s description of her experience also spoke to the use of and purposes for multimedia as they are incorporated in the course design and ongoing facilitation. She saw the infusion of multimedia as a pedagogically meaningful strategy to (a) raise the interest levels of online learners, (b) draw them in and form personal connections to others and the content, and (c) encourage active participation in learning processes. In discussing the feeling of intense engagement while learning in online environments and relating it to how she had verbalized it in an interview as “focused chaos,” Jessica also wrote:

It's absolutely fascinating. However, it's also a sort of black hole, where I can get quite lost for hours, reading and checking my own understanding – but then I lose track of what I was originally looking for, or I can't quite find my way back to a certain point... even with the help of a breadcrumb trail. ... It's like focused chaos. At times, I feel very focused, but it's also really chaotic sometimes.

**Tentative Manifestation: Focused Chaos.**

On several occasions in multiple data sources, Jessica also articulated the necessity of balancing learner autonomy with course structure. She sought ways to do
this herself as a self-directed learner. However, because she is also a teacher by profession, she also discussed the pedagogical implications of this as being a major responsibility of educators as well. She described her overall online learning experience in the course as being a delicate balance of an appropriate amount of autonomy with an appropriate amount of structure. And she saw this as a way for educators to leverage the unbounded nature of online learning and the access to all the resources and connections it affords while also mediating learners’ feelings of being overwhelmed or lost by framing the content or learning objectives and guiding the learning activities.

Jessica expressed that one of the things she both “loved and hated” about being engaged while learning online was that she could easily get “lost” online for hours. While fully engaged, she would be exploring one thing that led to another, clicking link after link, endlessly pursuing connections that she referred to in one interview as entering “rabbit holes.” She also referred to this in her written lived experience description (excerpted above) as being consumed into a “black hole” or losing track of her original objective and not being able to find her way back out. And, again, she explained that this was at times both exhilarating and overwhelming.

Jessica went on to state during her second interview that her feeling of being engaged while learning online was most productive, positive, and comfortable when she felt or sensed a balance between purpose and freedom, focus and chaos, creative and aimless wandering in online environments. She described this balance during her first interview in this way:

I also think the slow revealing of information throughout the course was important. So everything wasn’t up for me to move through at my own pace, which thank goodness it wasn’t because I would've been
completely overwhelmed. ... So some structure was necessary. It was a combination of structure and freedom. There needs to be a balance between the different, you know, autonomy plus structure, and make, you know, student choice.

*Tentative Manifestation: Choice.*

Jessica also stated that having choices in the online course significantly contributed to engagement. She appreciated that while there was some structure in the course as it was designed and guided, she also had the freedom to make some decisions and design her own experiences as well as she completed the learning activities in her own way and in her own time. She also stated that felt encouraged to openly explore content beyond what was assigned according to her personal curiosities, personal passions, and goals. And she provided these examples to articulate the meaningfulness of choice, freedom, structure, and a balance between the three:

So then I could take a look at the actual update that was written in terms of what the expectations were for the week and start working through them. But also I was able to make choices about how I was going to go about that and, like, which I was going to do first. I was able to, I had freedom to prioritize it in terms of a couple things. In terms of managing my time, what I knew was going to take longer. Things that I would have to do first in order to understand later concepts. ... Structure in online learning environments is initially critical, but less so as comfort level and confidence increases and in fact, it begins to hinder if it is too pronounced as time goes on. [The instructor’s weekly] video [at the start of each new class session] helped to frame the direction for the week, yet there was much room for freedom and leeway to take things in new directions.

When discussing specific examples of how she had experienced engagement while learning in the online course, Jessica also referenced her engagement with a work related “wiki” that was being hosted by the organization for which she worked, and then populated and developed by employees. She talked about the knowledge sharing potential of this tool and described it as being another online learning environment in
which she found herself deeply engaged. Interestingly, Jessica connected to this example often when discussing her engagement in the online learning environment associated with the formal online course, and she described how the two were not actually experienced as separate entities and, therefore, could not be delineated in her experiences.

During her second interview, Jessica went on to state that while the wiki she used for her job could be abstractly conceptualized as a separate learning environment from the online graduate course in which she was enrolled, they way she concretely experienced the two it was much different. She found that her experiences in the online course and her experiences in other professional or informal online environments could not be distinguished as separate. Instead, they “blended together” and the lines between them were often blurred as they so readily connected to one another and informed one another. Therefore, the conceptual bounds that separated them seemed inappropriate, or to be an inaccurate conceptualization of how online learning experiences were really lived. Jessica also referred to these connections among learning environments significantly influencing her experiences of engagement online, and she described the feeling as “organic,” “natural,” and “evolving naturally.”

**Tentative Manifestations: Organic. Natural. Authentic.**

Graham also discussed in several data sources the significance of allowing engagement to develop naturally and organically without placing too much structure in the online course or “without constraining possibilities.” He described the increased potential for engagement in this type of online learning environment because it was “immersive” and “draws students in.” He also referred to the importance of allowing learners to design their own experiences in his second interview this way:
I’ll bet you I learned a lot in that course that you may not have intended by talking to [my peers in the course] through a VT or through a post or listening to their blog cast. And those are all things you designed, you initiated. I’ll bet I learned a lot that maybe you didn’t directly create or scaffold. But you created the space where that could happen. And that’s what happened. It was natural. Organic. Authentic. So to me, that’s what I think of when I think of immersive. It draws students in. And now you have this runaway process kind of going on. And off they go. And they can learn something. And that’s good... because you get some authentic learning experiences. It’s good for you. Now we’re doing it. And most importantly, you learn something novel, something deep.

It is interesting to note in Graham’s description here that, like Jessica, he dances between dual identities as he regards and refers to himself as a learner in this course, but also sees and experiences things through the lens of a teacher as well and regards and refers to himself this way, too. So as he describes facets of his experience while learning online, he intermittently changes between referencing “they,” “you,” and “we’re.”

Graham went on to contrast his experiences in this online course with another online course he had experienced in which the online learning environment was highly structured with content presented as more of a “checklist.” In that online environment, content and activities were organized in a very linear, sequential fashion that left little room for exploration away from what was being delivered by the instructor. He aptly stated, “Perhaps that works, but I think it’s more enjoyable to create a more immersive and organic environment as a learner.”

_Tentative Manifestation: Immersive._

As he had stated in the above quote, Graham very interestingly described the feeling of engagement while learning online as “immersive” in several other data sources as well. And when asked to elaborate on what he meant by this, he stated that immersive
online learning environments influence an immersive feeling. Graham described this feeling as “being drawn in” or “an invitation to step into the environment and there you are. You’re immersed.” He also articulated elements or dynamics of an immersive online environment that influenced this feeling, including pedagogical and instructional design efforts that made the environment feel “welcoming, complete, and believable.” Some examples that he shared included relevant content that could be immediately applied to life outside of the course and the integration of a variety of multimedia for different ways to interact and communicate. The forms of media that had a significant impact on his experience were audio communications using VoiceThread and podcasting, because they allowed him to hear others’ voices and then envision them and connect with them in a seemingly more tangible way. He also stated that sensing the instructor’s presence and authenticity in the weekly videos that were created to introduce each new class session also made the online learning experience feel more immersive.

José also referenced the significance of “immersive” environments in both of his interviews, which were held via an online video-conferencing tool called Skype <www.skype.com>, and in one of his video-based discussion postings. He described the immersive character of the environment as being highly significant to his feeling of engagement because it helped him feel like he was actually “in” the environment and an important part of it. Like Graham, José also described the role media (e.g. podcasts, VoiceThread, and the instructor’s weekly videos to introduce new class sessions) played in the immersive feeling of the environment that contributed to his experience of engagement, as he stated:
Well, I like visualizing things. So when you [as the instructor] would, you know, record an audio, or especially when you would record a video and we would watch it, I mean, that part of the facilitation helped me, you know, feel more in the environment. Really in. I mean, if I was just reading ... it would probably, it would feel more distant ... So I mean, having the mixed media helped me feel more engaged and immersed in it. So in that sense, it was present in your mind for that period of time ... and it had me thinking a lot.”

Jessica, as a creative writer and poet, was very metaphorical in her written lived experience description and offered this very vivid, embodied description of this immersive feeling as a character of online engagement, which she suggested is “singularly unique” and thus, tentatively manifested:

...understanding and learning as a result of online engagement is a little like pushing one’s hand into a barrel of rice. There is a minor vacuum effect around the hand [suggesting the sensation of innumerable forces pulling it in], the hand displaces the rice and fills a space that wasn’t even a space previously – the hand is surrounded and enveloped by innumerable forces pressing against it ... the experience is singularly unique.

Here, Jessica describes the immersive pull of engagement as being akin to a “vacuum effect” or the result of “innumerable forces” that Graham claims “draws students in.” Jessica later explained in her second interview that sometimes the immersive force is superficial and subtle, which is representative of engagement being subtle; and sometimes the immersive force is more pronounced and engagement reaches deeper.

Again, Graham was much more pragmatic in his descriptions of his online learning experiences as he offered practical examples to elucidate meaning. He offered several examples of how he experienced engagement during the online course while being a “quite literal distance learner” and participating in the online activities while temporarily residing several states away from the geographical location of the university.
affiliated with the course. Graham had commented that he felt more engaged in this online course than most other courses he had taken, including face-to-face courses. When asked during his initial screening interview how it felt to be engaged in online learning environments, he described the lengths he went to in order to participate in the online course because he was so engaged and invested in his experience:

It was immersive. Even though I was only five minutes from the beach, I actually did tune in here. ... When I took the course I was staying with my folks [several states away]. Really trying to take advantage of distance education. It worked well. I thought I was going to have issues [with being able to participate in the course while traveling], but the opposite was true. It was kind of nice, I could sit at the pool. I actually had to set up Wi-Fi so that I could sit at the pool to make that happen.

Another of Graham’s later and more general descriptions of an immersive online learning environment held pedagogical significance from an instructional design perspective:

[Instructors] being able to create an environment that is welcoming, complete, and believable, I think, really helps draw students in and make them want to take charge of their own learning and be more self-directed. That’s an immersive environment.

According to further elaboration during his second interview, this feeling of immersiveness is the captivating factor that draws learners in to the experience and moves them to take an active role in their learning and begin to direct their own experience, as Graham noted in the above quote. Educators’ efforts to create or design “an environment that is welcoming, complete, and believable” results in an experience that is authentic, immersive, and compelling, and it moves learners to then “want to take charge of their own learning.” The meaningfulness in Graham’s description here from an instructional design perspective is that this may be what moves students to be increasingly more self-directed and begin design their own experience.
Rebecca was impassioned as she discussed similar ideas during her second interview. She described the positive impact of the way the online learning environment was arranged with some structure, yet some freedom for learners to explore many different options according to their personal or professional interests and goals. She was very emphatic as she stated in her second interview:

> All the options when I logged in is what hooked me and drew me in. It was like a mystery I needed to solve. I was determined and I started digging in and playing around. So you can't design that experience for me. I have to design that experience myself, but you can help.

This further speaks to the meaningfulness of allowing learners to design their own experience. As Dewey contends, educators must acknowledge and exercise their responsibility in the learning environment and in the experience, but as Rebecca describes here, they must also realize their limitations in designing the experiences of others or in designing the experience as if they alone hold sole agency in the process.

**The Threshold Between Themes.** In her narratives, Jessica elaborated in beautiful ways how the experience of online learning affords greater time and space for active seeking that it is, tentatively and in different moments, both focused and chaotic, purposeful and freeing, generative and aimless, deep and superficial. She very eloquently described being unbound by time and space in online learning environments in this way:

> One of the bigger differences for online learners [is] that we are unbound by space. The portal of the Internet is so vast that we have the freedom to skip lightly from learning input to input. This results in that ‘sped up’ sensation and loss of time, but this speed of connection might also result in our missing certain details and forgetting to slow down and spend more time interacting with a given source.

And although she expressed some concerns associated with this such as missing details, Jessica also went on to discuss the impact of increased time and space while learning.
online on her feelings of engagement. She discussed the ways in which it increased her ability to reflect, which then increased her confidence in being able to effectively articulate her understanding and actively share it with others:

[While learning online,] my virtual communication is highly engaging in that I feel more confident in my ability to articulate and revise my thoughts before submitting them for the world to see.

In these two expressions, Jessica describes inhabiting the threshold space between unboundedness and active reflection. Herein lies the threshold between the themes of pedagogic significance that were identified during data analysis: moving from unboundedness into praxis as the result of increased time and space for active seeking and both cognitive and metacognitive processing. The experience of engagement in this sense, results in new understanding and action in the form of continuing to seek, connect, communicate, and create in online learning environments.

**Theme #2: Engagement as a Form of Praxis.** Engagement may be experienced online as a form of praxis. The “purposeful freedom” that online learning uniquely affords provides learners with unlimited access to resources as well as unlimited time to process and reflect, leading to new, action-sensitive understandings based on new connections that are made. This was described as a feeling of “creative wandering” in online learning spaces, accompanied by action-sensitive reflection.

Participants’ narrative accounts of their online learning experiences suggest that the unbounded-ness of online learning has the potential to significantly impact engagement as a form of praxis by enhancing the ease by which online learners can coordinate opportunities for reflection and action while they are engaged and interacting in online learning environments through a process of exploration and discovery. This is
due to greater access to increased time and space for active, generative pursuits and personal reflection. The potentially unbounded nature of online learning accompanied by the autonomy or “purposeful freedom,” the “focused chaos,” and the “creative wandering” that online learning uniquely affords may also provide learners with access to unlimited resources, connections, space, and time to explore and reflect on the learning process.

Like Jessica, José and Rebecca also discussed the profound impact that additional time for metacognitive processing and reflection had in the online learning environment and on their experiences of engagement. José stated that the “medium matters [as it] allows for increased time and space for dialogue.” As an example of the significant connections between online discussions and meaningful dialogue, he discussed the benefit of being able to think about and respond to discussions any time of day or night in online courses. And he contrasted this with the limits on time for reflection and discussion in a face-to-face course that only meets in a traditional classroom during a designated timeframe. José asserted, “it makes a big difference... and it would be better if you had the time to reflect and think about things.” José also stated that even online courses occasionally impose limits on time to reflect and that this can detract from engagement. He offered an example from this online course which was only four weeks long and condensed as he referred to instances when he perceived that new content was being introduced too quickly: “When the course was moving too fast and there was only a very limited amount of time to reflect, it would [negatively] affect my engagement.”
Rebecca explained that the increased “silence” associated with distance learning impacted her online learning experience by providing her with more time for quiet reflection:

On the other hand, the journaling or metacognitions were very important for my learning. It forced me to put into words some of the thoughts that were swirling around my head from the readings and activities. We often say that silence is your friend in the classroom as it gives the student time to think. Distance learning gives a lot of silence, so there is so much more time to think. But the action of putting it down in words is what solidifies it.

Jessica went on to state, rather ironically when contrasted with her prior assertions and discussions about active manifestations of engagement, that she also experiences a “passive kind of engagement” associated with online learning while she is contemplating or reflecting on what she is learning:

... understanding does not necessarily follow as a result of [active] pursuit. Understanding [sometimes] results from a very passive kind of engagement. The quiet engagement of reflection.

The unlimited access to resources and connections, as well as the increase in time and space that the research participants described are all dimensions of unboundedness in online learning environments that hold pedagogical meaning in their potential to influence the experience of engagement. Jessica, Graham, José, and Rebecca all described in different ways their experiences in the online learning environment that were transformed due to the absence of externally imposed limits. This was perceived as freedom or autonomy and it significantly impacted these participants’ level of engagement and how it was experienced.
**Tentative Manifestations: Reflective. Active. Creative.**

Jessica went on to describe the experience of engagement online as both reflective and generative, whereby “experiences, sensory associations, and memories” triggered by “the information I encounter in the online environment” influence the overall learning experience:

The experience of online learning, then, is ... reflective, in that by reflecting on one morsel of new understanding, I decide to pursue a new line of investigation and discovery. This ... learning process is influenced by things I am already familiar with and those experiences, sensory associations, and memories triggered by the information I encounter in the online environment.

She went on to describe active-reflective aspects associated with the experience of engagement while learning online during the processes of seeking and creating:

The rest of my work sort of falls away when I’m engaged in this kind of learning and investigation. I don’t really hear background music or voices; perhaps this is why coffee shops are a favorite spot for online learners. Sometimes [engagement] happens when I am creating my own [writing] products, whether they are academic, work-related, or creative in nature...[and] I have slightly more direction when I’m motivated [creatively to] discover new understandings, versus articulating understanding I already feel I’ve digested. [This emphasis appears in the original quote from Jessica’s lived experience description.]

Jessica aptly stated that in her experiences, “Writing is by its very nature a reflective process of discovery.” Here, and as Jessica elaborated further in her second interview as well as in several blog postings during the online course, she discussed the significance of opportunities to explore and discover new understandings through creative acts like writing. She explained that as a writer and poet, her creativity is expressed in written form and in her experience, generative writing leads to generating new understandings. Van Manen (1990) echoes this same sentiment in his advocacy for written lived
experience descriptions as a profoundly valuable phenomenological data source and data collection method (p. 63-66). Thus, the act of writing during online learning, as an action-oriented creative act, often becomes a reflective process of discovery. The engagement Jessica feels while she is learning online contributes to her motivation to create. Thus, it is in this creative process or these creative expressions as well as these reflection-filled, action-oriented pursuits of discovery in online learning environments that new understandings are generated through praxis.

While Jessica, as a creative writer, discussed creativity as it applied to engagement through writing, José and Rebecca discussed their increased engagement online through creating visual and audio media. José explained that he often created videos for course discussions because of his familiarity and comfort with visual media and as a means to incorporate variety. He also said that while he enjoys listening to podcasts, he was very engaged and experienced a great deal of gratification while creating a podcast for the first time in this online course:

I love listening to podcasts. But listening to podcasts and making one are a completely different experience. So I never made one before [this course]. So I really enjoyed that, having that opportunity to make one. And so I was like, well this is great. And in that sense, it was pretty useful to actually do it, not just talk about it.

Regarding additional opportunities to create while learning with technology, José also discussed the increased engagement he experienced while creating a website for one of the course projects. He stated that this creative process with technology was most engaging because he felt moved from being a consumer of content to being a producer of content. For example, “The more an assignment felt ‘hands on,’ the more I felt engaged.” He also described this manifestation of engagement as “fun” because “I also
took the time to experiment and play.” That is, in his experiences, creative activities were most engaging in online learning environments when there were elements of experimentation and play.

Rebecca also shared the powerful feelings of engagement and gratification that she experienced from using technology to create through experimentation and play. She initially had serious concerns about her ability to succeed in the online course because of her perceived lack of technical experience and low level of technological skill, despite being a highly educated, highly successful, and accomplished professional. In several accounts of her online learning experiences, she referred to the class introduction activity in which she created a self-narrated digital story about her life to share with the rest of the class. This project at the start of the class helped her begin to invest energy in the course and learn some of the new technologies that had originally seemed insurmountable and intimidating to her. Rebecca described this activity as a very empowering and transformative experience that was “fun” and even “phenomenal.” She exuded a sense of pride as she even posted it to a social networking site outside of the online course to share with family and friends with the caption, “I did my first assignment.”

Rebecca also stated that while she found the content of the course readings to be very relevant and immediately applicable to her professional work, the course activities she enjoyed the most were “trying out new technologies such as creating podcasts and VoiceThreads.” And she went on to state “These were challenging for me, but got me very engaged.” She explained that these creative projects were most engaging because they were rigorous, hands-on activities that required her full attention and she stated, “The hands-on activities where I created something I had not done before were very
engaging and satisfying.” She talked at length about the process of experimentation while learning new technologies and while learning in a formal online course for the first time. And like José, the increased time and space to “experiment and play” led to Rebecca’s willingness to try new things as long as she could revise when necessary.

So that was fun. I did like—even though they were very frustrating—it was intrinsically rewarding when you could finally get the different technologies to work, and have a product from that. ... I really loved that. I learned so much.

**Tentative Manifestations: Emotion. Passion.**

Jessica, Graham, José, and Rebecca also referenced emotional dimensions of the feeling of being engaged. For example, Jessica described engagement this way in her writing: “Engagement is a cognitive and emotional state of bliss, an ecstatic heightened awareness.” In a related example, she stated that online learning involves and even requires an “emotional energy” in order for the experience to be engaging. Graham and José both alluded to a similar enjoyable, emotional energy but described it as “passion.”

Further, both Jessica and Graham discussed that when there is a contagion of this emotional energy or passion, that is, if it is shared by the group, even if it is influenced or directed by different things for each person, it can have a significant impact on the experience of engagement online. And both Graham and José discussed the educator’s role in this, with Graham stating during an interview, “if the instructor is passionate, it’s going to radiate. It was obvious that you [as the instructor] cared. And that was a big deal.” José stated during his second interview, “sensing engagement from others makes you feel actively invested, too.”
Rebecca’s online learning experiences had an emotional resonance, too, but were tentatively manifested as fear, intimidation, and anxiety... and later as satisfaction, empowerment, and self-discovery. Interestingly, she described being highly engaged through them all—regardless of whether her emotions were positive when her experiences were comfortable or negative when she was uncomfortable. Rebecca had some trepidation about the unbounded features of the online learning environment and initially found the online course to be a very intimidating, uncomfortable, and unsettling experience. Because this was her first formal online course and because she believed she had a low level of technological skill with the tools being used, she was often unsure what to do and how to proceed. As she was confronted immediately with opportunities for freedom and autonomy in the course, in the environment, and in the learning process, it caused a great deal of anxiety, as she wrote:

Initially, I felt intimidated, confusion, and fear of failure. I did not feel I belonged and that my experience was completely different from everyone else. ... So this became more of a self-discovery journey. I was making meaning out of all of the various experiences that were assigned.

Although this was Rebecca’s first formal online course, she had had several former experiences with webinars or professional presentations delivered over the Internet. She described these as being informational and valuable to her professional knowledge, but a very different, passive kind of learning that was not interactive and often not engaging. She explained that she felt she needed kinesthetic activities in order to learn such as writing or creating a product, rather than simply listening to others. Yet she was used to more directed learning, so that when she had this new opportunity to lead
her own learning and be more interactive in the process, she admitted that she struggled a
great deal as she discussed in her first interview:

> It seemed harder. Because I didn’t know what to do ... I didn’t know who
to ask or how to proceed with that. ... So [I had] to try to figure it out. What
do I do? What do I do? So I really felt, I really felt dumb starting out. I
was like ashamed; my instructor’s going to think I really don’t know
anything. And I thought, well, I don’t. Let me just, you know, be frank
about that.

When asked how long these feelings of discomfort and confusion lasted, she
explained that it took approximately two weeks to begin to feel comfortable and she
described it as a “discovery process”:

> It was a discovery process. It was just something I came to, and started
feeling like, well, I don’t care if these people think I’m stupid. You know,
this is about what I’m getting out of this.

**Tentative Manifestation: Self-Discovery**

Rebecca went on to explain that the instructor’s videos introducing new content
and learning activities at the beginning of every class session was most influential in
helping her to feel comfortable. And they greatly aided her as she familiarized herself
with the processes associated with online learning. When asked to share more about this,
she explained during an interview:

> Because it was comforting and supportive and familiar. I’m just used to
the instructor telling me, really telling me verbally and visually in front of
me what to do or how to do something. ... You know, that was like I could
see you. I was like, oh, what’s she going to say this time? ... So that was
helpful. And you explained the directions. Because even though
everything was there, I wasn’t particularly comfortable, nor did I know I
should click around. ... Like, you know, I saw these links on the side [of
the course website], the syllabus and things. It never dawned on me to
click on it. You know, until you said so.
As the online course progressed, Rebecca negotiated the discomfort and disorientation she felt by looking for things that were familiar to anchor her understanding and increase her confidence. She discussed that as the course went on, she realized that she needed to be autonomous and self-directed to succeed:

It took me a couple weeks to really understand that this course depended on me to [direct] my own learning. That was a very different concept for me. Once I understood that part of the process, I relaxed and could concentrate on learning—not just on trying to get all the assignments in on time.

And in doing so, Rebecca stated that she began to feel this could be very enjoyable as well as valuable:

And that was, well that’s just not the way that we are brought up as students. It’s about what the teacher wants to tell you. And so, once I understood that and got more comfortable, it was just—it was fun.

Her experience of engagement was then more often manifested as satisfying and positive:

And then ... what I was noticing about myself was how obsessed I was. I talked about it to everyone, and I talked about different aspects of it. And that’s how I incorporate into my own life and my own thinking, and by kind of [explaining it] to somebody else. ... It was fatiguing for me... Because I was so absorbed in it every waking moment just about.

Rebecca’s online learning experiences, and her deep level of engagement in them, genuinely became a transformative process of self-discovery and self-empowerment. Through an active-reflective process of exploration and discovery, both of learning resources and of self, her online learning experiences became more autonomous as she came to realize that she did not need to be dependent on external influences to direct and motivate her learning as she stated, “this is about me.”
It was a very fascinating experience, and I learned a lot. But it was uncomfortable. It was uncomfortable for me, because I felt a little intimidated. And I wasn’t sure what was expected, but kind of could figure that out. I just kind of jumped in—I mean, that’s what you have to do. And it wasn’t until [two weeks into the course] that I thought, oh, I get this now. I’m supposed to be in charge of my learning here. I’m supposed to be the one who is figuring out what they want to learn and what they don’t. It doesn’t matter what the other students are trying to get out of this. And I don’t know exactly what it was that got me thinking; but all of a sudden, I was like, oh, I get this. This is about me.

**The Threshold Between Themes.** According to the research participants’ accounts and descriptions of their lived experiences while learning online, engagement in online learning environments may be experienced as praxis due to boundless potential for active reflection, exploration and discovery. In addition to discovering content, resources and connections while learning online, experiencing deeper levels of engagement may also precipitate a process of self-discovery.

Experiences of engagement and active reflection were at times very profound and had far-reaching implications beyond the online course. Moreover, engagement as praxis can apply very generally to active participation in the world, as Jessica eloquently stated:

> Engagement for me is all about living. ...Regardless of whether it’s online or physical. ... To engage is to live. To engage is to observe one’s surroundings with a special, appreciative awareness. ... engagement is all about absorbing the facets of experience, reflecting on them, and storing them for future use. Even in the moment of engagement we are reflecting. They happen simultaneously, and as the reflection occurs, likely on a subconscious level, we react to (learning from?) the initial engagement. ... Engagement, then, is about consuming and digesting experience ... over time.

Participants indicated that increased time and space were dimensions of online learning environments that contributed to feelings of purposeful freedom and unboundedness in the experience of engagement. This suggests a temporal nature to
online engagement, which places it in the context of time and space. Herein lies the threshold between the themes of pedagogic significance that were identified during data analysis: moving from unboundedness and praxis into the temporal nature of engagement as the result of increased time and space for active reflection. The experience of engagement in this sense relates to action-sensitive reflection associated with connecting, collaborating, and creating in online learning environments. Research findings indicated online engagement required increased time and space to develop naturally or organically, and that it could not be forced or artificially imposed, as Jessica discussed. Additionally, participants suggested that engagement associated with praxis was fragile and easily influenced. And they discussed several influential dynamics in their experiences that helped enhance or support it as well as those that detracted from it.

**Theme #3: The Temporal Nature of Engagement.** Online engagement moves and changes over time and space, indicating that it was experienced by the participants temporally along a boundless, multidirectional continuum of time and space by following different directions and moving into different online spaces. Movement within, through, and along the continuum was influenced by variations of dynamics in context.

When discussing her experience of engagement online, Jessica again discussed the paradox in her sense of time, whereas “learning feels slowed down... yet the clock seems to speed up” which is “exhilarating” and intensely engaging, yet at times can lead to feelings of anxiety. She alluded to the pedagogic significance of guided design efforts to enhance engagement while mediating anxiety by balancing autonomy with structure, or the learners’ freedom to explore with the instructor’s guidance as she wrote:
When learning online, time passes more quickly in reality than it seems to when I'm learning in other settings. The learning feels slowed down, and yet the clock seems to speed up. It feels exciting and exhilarating mostly when I'm uncovering new information for myself rather than following some prescribed learning plan. I do, however, experience less anxiety if I have a kind of ‘road map’ for my learning – but if it’s too structured, I feel a little stifled.

_**Tentative Manifestations: Guided Design. Support.**_

Jessica also discussed the way guided design and consistent feedback and support from the instructor influenced the way she felt and how she experienced engagement in the online space:

> When I am engaged in an online space, I feel safe. I don't have any fears of failure because I know that I am surrounded by resources that will help me achieve success. I don't feel isolated because of my dependence ... on technology – rather, I feel comforted by its reassuring and constant support.

Rebecca discussed the importance of balancing challenge with support in her narrative accounts as well. Whereas Jessica described feeling safe to take risks, Rebecca expressed frequent feelings of fear and frustration as a result of the tension associated with being new to online learning and a perceived lack of technological skill. As a means to help mediate these fears and frustrations, she referred to the positive impact that a growing sense of balance between challenge and support began to have on her experiences. And as a result, she explained that her experiences “shifted from being overwhelming and intimidating to exciting and empowering.” She also described the instructor’s responsibility and agency in the development of engagement by balancing challenge with support:

> Studying the way that you [as the instructor] designed this course was as instructive as any reading assignment you gave us. The best way you kept me engaged was by providing both challenge and support. The
challenge helped me to grow and learn, and the support you gave kept me motivated.

José also discussed guided design efforts that positively influenced how he experienced engagement while learning in the online course, including the instructor’s responsiveness and support. When asked during an interview for examples of this, he described the motivation he felt after receiving feedback and personalized comments from the instructor in discussion activities and in summative assessments of course projects. He also talked about the impact of shared-decision making and having agency in co-designing personally relevant and meaningful content and activities: “The way I experience engagement relates to having a task to complete that was designed with me in mind, a task that is personal and requires me or [moves] me to participate.” José enjoyed being able to explore topics related to his personal interests in class discussions and other projects, and he mentioned that on many occasions he sought and shared additional readings on his own above the readings that were assigned.

When asked for specific examples of elements within the online learning environment that influenced his feelings of engagement, Graham also described the importance of instructor presence and support in his second interview by stating:

You [as the instructor] made yourself available. You were present in the class and highly visible in the class through videos and postings and things ... participating with us in discussions. ... I felt very comfortable contacting you with questions.

In his final reflection paper at the conclusion of the online course as well as in both of his interviews, Graham also discussed the influence of guided online course design. His descriptions were consistently very practically and pedagogically oriented and, like José,
he often focused on how direct correlations between the content and learning activities and the personal relevance of them positively influenced his experience of engagement.

Echoing Dewey’s assertions about the value in continuity of experience, Graham described guided design as an artful weaving of relevant content and learning activities that progressively build.

I can definitely say that [this] class was very different from other online classes that I have taken. It was obvious to me that [a great deal of time was spent in design,] thinking about the culture, the atmosphere, the environment in which this was taking place so it didn’t end up being just a bunch of assignments and nothing more than checking the calendar and seeing ok here’s the link to what I need. Um, it really did feel like, as I told some people, I actually felt more engaged in [this] class than in many face-to-face classes...

All four participants discussed the importance of prompts and scaffolding in guided course design to help support, provoke critical thinking, and to help learners make meaningful personal connections with the content. José commented that his level of engagement increased significantly “when there were forum questions that asked for my personal opinions.” Graham also referred to the importance of relevant prompts to invite learners into a discussion. And he described weaving content and learning activities together to create an experience that is interconnected:

I think the prompts that you [as the instructor] gave us actually was the most, was the most useful as a launching off point entering into a discussion, so and of course reading the text made your prompts make more sense. But even, it wasn’t necessarily that I read the text and I thought you know oh ok that’s absolutely fascinating, although there were many articles like that. What was more interesting is how you extended that and maybe related it to another topic that we were discussing. It made it instead of set pieces, you very well kind of wrap it all together. In order to answer a question about article A here, I could bring in stuff from B, C, D. So I think it was the way you designed the prompts that above all else got me engaged with the content and I would assume got my
fellow students engaged as well because I could see their responses coming in and I would key off that.

Graham also went on to discuss authenticity as it relates to pedagogy, design, engagement, content, and online learning, and he depicted it as a combination of content that naturally encourages learners to go deeper and generate inquiry related to real world problems. A challenging responsibility for educators, then, is designing for experiences that are interconnected or “seamless,” and that have immediate, authentic applicability while encouraging deeper levels of inquiry as Graham described here:

So I think it was a combination of seamless content with the ability to go deeper, the ability to generate real inquiry. ... to create an environment where inquiry is not only rewarded but encouraged almost naturally with the way you have to answer the prompt or question.

When asked to talk a bit more about what he meant by “reward,” Graham replied:

I think as teachers, the biggest thing we have control over is extrinsic rewards. ...intrinsic rewards should come from the student but get them more engaged naturally. We can’t force intrinsic rewards. ... Just as we cannot force engagement.

Rebecca echoed this sentiment regarding the importance of authentic, intrinsic motivation as she stated, “To engage someone, you have to grab them from where they are.” She went on to discuss pedagogical strategies related to reaching learners “where they are” by leveraging personal interests and relevant content that could be anchored in the learner’s wealth of experience:

To me, engagement is paying attention, when you’ve really got someone’s attention. And I don’t think you learn very well unless they have your full attention. And so I was so present. That’s what engagement is, is really being there. You’re really listening, you’re trying to understand what’s going on. And I think particularly for adults, its about, okay, how do I fit this into my own experiences or my own thoughts. ... You can’t help but every second think, how does this apply? How does this apply? How can I apply this? How does this apply for
me? And so that's an important part of engagement for me. The application part is engagement, is part of it. ... You’re paying attention, but you’re [also] being able to connect it with something that's relevant to you. If I were to take a class on [something I wasn’t interested in doing], I mean, I might learn some fact, but there’s no experience for me to put that in. ... It is that whole integrating it into your experience and the relevancy.

Rebecca’s shared additional experiences that spoke to the necessity of guided support in negotiating differences in interests, goals, skills, and experiences among a diverse group of adult learners. Several data sources indicated her experiences of feeling different, a fear of failure, and even “ashamed” about her perceived lack of technological skills. She often articulated that she experienced a great deal of anxiety and discomfort at the beginning of the course because she felt intimidated and very different from her peers:

...I really felt, I really felt dumb starting out. I was like ashamed ... Initially, I felt intimidated, confusion, and fear of failure. I did not feel I belonged and that my experience was completely different from everyone else.

Rebecca discussed the benefits of the interactive class introduction activities at the start of the class as they helped her begin to invest in the course and learn how to interact with some of the new technologies and her peers in the online learning environment. However, she additionally revealed that this was also a point at which she began to realize just how different she was. And she sensed this as a shortcoming or an unfortunate liability, which she initially believed put her at a disadvantage in the online learning environment:

Unfortunately, it also made me realize right away that I was coming from a different place than most of the students. I work full time and have not been in academia for awhile. I made a quick judgment that I couldn’t
learn much from the other students because their focus seemed to be [different than mine] and [unlike me, they were] working towards a degree [whereas I was learning for professional development]. It was somewhat discouraging to realize that.

Rebecca went on to state that she benefited from consistent support, guidance, and reassurance to help her feel comfortable and to appreciate diversity as valuable among learners who can share multiple perspectives and experiences. Her experiences illuminated the pedagogical significance of negotiating the opportunities and challenges associated the diverse needs, interests, goals, experiences, and skill levels among a community of adult learners in an online course. This requires a great deal of instructor support in order to discern and acknowledge what the differences and commonalities are among the group and help learners find opportunities for collaboration rather than competition.

Jessica, Graham, and José all stated in several data sources, including interviews, blog posts and VoiceThread audio and video recordings, that social dimensions of online learning, in the form of interactions with peers and interactions with the instructor, reflected positively on their online learning experiences and increased their feelings of engagement in most instances. José alluded to the intentional relationship between meaningful dialogue and his experience of engagement online. He described dialogue as social interactions that are “authentic, meaningful, and productive.” Jessica and Graham also referred to this meaningful, inclusive dialogue as “authentic” interaction.

**Tentative Manifestation: Authentic Interaction**

José discussed the impact of unbounded dimensions of time and space on this dialogue as he experienced it and as it can occur in online learning environments. The
boundlessness of the online learning space led José to perceive a freedom of expression and fewer constraints on his willingness to share ideas in dialogue with his peers. The intentional meanings revealed in his descriptions of his online learning experiences reveal the intentional relationships between increased time and space and increased dialogue or meaningful interactions in online learning environments. This has pedagogical significance in its potential to increase engagement for learners who may be reluctant to share their ideas openly in a face-to-face classroom. The increased time and space afforded by online learning may help them feel more free and comfortable to engage in dialogue with peers online. José offered this rich description of the impact online technologies can have on promoting dialogue or authentic interaction:

...there’s dialogue—interaction and conversation. So, that can make you feel like you’re not just completing an assignment but [also] bouncing off ideas. ... You feel more engaged if all of a sudden you say something. And a class member has a different opinion or differs from how you may be seeing things. You should maybe take into consideration other things, too. And that to me is one of the benefits of an online discussion. ... if another person really wants to interact with that comment [online], they can. ... It’s the medium, the medium itself does make a difference because it allows this dialogue. Maybe more than in a face-to-face classroom where only outspoken people feel comfortable talking. And others may not want to say what they’re thinking. Technology can have an effect. I mean sometimes we get to a place like that because of technology.

Relating to the meaningful and engaging dialogue that may be experienced in online learning environments, Graham actually described how his conceptions of interaction in online learning environments changed over time and were disrupted as a result of his experiences in this particular online course. He also discussed feelings of inclusiveness as the result of peer interactions that felt “more real” as conversations were
created online. These dynamics were significant influential factors in his online learning experience and led to deeper levels of intrinsic motivation and engagement in the learning process. And Graham stated that this helped him move from perceiving online learning as more than simply a structured process of “checking the box” as items on a list of tasks was completed. He now saw online learning as an authentic, interactive, social experience in which he had ownership:

I’d taken online courses before, but there were a lot of factors at work in this course that challenged what I understood interaction to be. ... Many students who prefer a face-to-face environment may struggle with the seemingly distant nature of an online classroom. I personally enjoy a lively discussion, and this is most easily facilitated by everyone being physically present in the room. However, some techniques that were employed [in this online course] helped foster this same atmosphere in a purely online environment. For example, the use of VoiceThread, a way to post comments in audio format, was a simple but highly engaging technique that helped the class conversation feel more real. Not just checking a box. Reading through [purely text-based] forum or discussion posts, while informative, can make me feel disconnected from the classroom, as if I’m observing some other class and not my own.

According to three of the research participants, there was also a pedagogically significant intentional relationship between engagement in the online learning environment and the use of multimedia to interact and build social presence over time. Interaction among learners and interaction with the instructor were dynamics that significantly influenced engagement according to the research participants narrative accounts of their online learning experiences. Related to the use of audio- and video-mediated interactions among learners, Graham stated in his second interview:

The use of VoiceThread, however, literally put a voice to my peers and provided a piece of that face-to-face environment. ... The conversation is still asynchronous, but as I listen to the conversation as a whole, I can imagine my peers in a room together talking it out.
And he was emphatic about the importance of a variety of multimedia for interaction:

I think the number one thing that made this online learning experience more engaging than my prior online learning experiences is interactions with other students. For sure. ... There were a lot of activities that promoted or required or even encouraged interaction with other students.

He stated that VoiceThread was a new technology that he had to learn, but he described the ease of use and how it helped promote authentic and immediate interactions. When probed about what he meant by authentic or immediate, he went on to state:

[VoiceThread] is not that much different from a forum, like on Moodle or something like that. And yet for me it seemed much more authentic and immediate. Maybe just because I was hearing their voices, it felt more like a conversation. It seemed a little bit more visceral to me.

He went on to explain that authentic also meant that the medium aligned with the learner’s learning style and preferred mode of communication and expression (e.g. written, verbal, etc.):

Just being able to employ a different medium to communication [is authentic]. There were a number of different tools that were used. It wasn’t all full-on posts. It wasn’t all written response. We had written responses, we had VoiceThreads, we had the podcasts. Those were great too. I think it was rotating those different styles that kept me from getting burned out on one or feeling that one was passé or overused. It managed to keep things fresh. ... keeping it fresh, employing different learning styles, different modes of interaction, I think increases engagement. I have seen it as a teacher in my students and I have experienced it myself. ... [Instructors should] offer students different means of interaction.

Jessica echoed this sentiment and articulated it concisely this way:

Give students the opportunity to shine the way they feel their strengths lie. I think that was the biggest thing in this class. You could tell who liked to form [text-based] posts, and who liked to do the podcast, and who liked sharing pictures, so there was something for everybody and I think that made people feel more at home.
José also described the impact of social interaction in the online learning environment, but stated that because the course was only four weeks long, he felt that time to socialize on a personal level was very limited. However, he did describe many valuable interactions he experienced in class discussions and in a group project with peers. José stated that the use of video and audio media to communicate in the course was engaging due to the “novelty” as well as the variety in forms of expression and, like Graham, he said that being able to see and hear his classmates enhanced social presence in the online learning experience.

José and Rebecca also discussed the significant impact of the ability to see and hear the instructor in the online learning environment as well. José commented on the value he found in the personalized content of the instructor’s weekly video as he wrote:

...the videos from the instructor were very helpful. Particularly when she would mention the aspects of the discussion that caught her attention from the [discussion] forum. Her comments to my work were very detailed. ... if the comments the instructor makes are more personalized, then I am more likely to feel engaged.

Rebecca maintained in several data sources, including both interviews and her written lived experience description, that these videos profoundly impacted her online learning experience and made it feel more personal. She also described how the videos enhanced the instructor’s online presence and made her online learning experience feel more “human and personalized.” In fact, when asked about elements in the environment that had the greatest impact on her feelings of engagement, she stated:

...the part of the course that was most helpful to me in becoming engaged was the videos of the instructor at the beginning of each module. ...I looked forward to the videos at the beginning of the module. The videos were extremely effective in making the course feel human and personalized. It was good to actually see the instructor and have her
comment on what we had done in the previous module, and tell us what we were going to do this week. It made the class feel familiar—because I am used to having a teacher standing up in front of the room talking to me. These videos added to the information, gave feedback and humanized the experience.

Interestingly, José described how some social interactions online in general can feel even more personal than in a face-to-face course. For example, he pointed to the introduction activities at the beginning of the class as one example of how social media can be used in online learning environments to develop social presence and make the experience feel more personal:

... building a profile, seeing pictures, their family, what they like to do. ... you actually get to know a little more about everybody that you definitely wouldn't in a face-to-face environment. You won't get to know everybody as to what they do, what they like, what, how, what's their family like, etc. So you do get more personal.

All research participants discussed tentative manifestations of the experience of engagement in online learning environments as it was positively impacted by authentic interaction, multimedia, and a variety of forms of communication. Graham and Jessica emphasized that social interaction enhanced their experience of engagement only when it felt “authentic” or “organic.” Whereas Graham described authentic interaction in the sense of being authentically aligned with learning styles and modes of expression that might typically be used in traditional face-to-face courses, authentic interaction was manifested differently for Jessica.

She also frequently used the term authentic to describe her experience of engagement in online learning environments, but explained it as relating to relevance. For example, authentic interaction is based on relevant content and has relevant
applicability to the learner’s interests or goals. Jessica also described authentic interaction as being “purposeful, not forced.” In her online learning experiences, if interaction seemed forced, artificial, or inauthentic, then it actually impeded her engagement. During her first interview, she revealed that in her experience of engagement while learning online, authentic social interactions in online environments must be allowed to emerge over time as learners become more acclimated, familiar, and comfortable with one another, with the instructor, and with the social media tools. And as a result of this type of authenticity, her experience of engagement “felt like it was a lot more organic and my ideas were not constrained and were more natural and free.”

[As I was planning, I also had to keep in mind] the interactions with other students. And I think that was the thing, the interaction with other students and with you [as the instructor], that was the most different for me and the most uncomfortable for me initially was the interacting with other students. I am more comfortable just completing an assignment, as many students are. And so it was interesting to me to, say, engage in the VoiceThread exercises, which initially I was like ‘oh no.’ I was dreading it a little bit. And then it, the VoiceThread interactions became my favorite part of the course in terms of interaction. I ended up preferring that to the posting of discussion comments and replies [in written text], which for me the written expression is typically most natural and comfortable. And I like to be able to revise and look back at my work and really plan what I’m going to say. And the VoiceThread, initially I would type out what I was going to say and like record it. But then it became better for me to just talk off the cuff. Because I felt like it was a lot more organic and my ideas were not constrained and were more natural and free.

In her interviews, Jessica also discussed the significance of a variety of multimedia to communicate her ideas and interact socially with peers in online learning environments, and described how this influenced her experience. She also stated that her comfort level increased dramatically over time, allowing her confidence in her speaking abilities to evolve. This was important to her because she usually had more confidence in her writing ability than in her speaking ability in the online course.
Particularly notable were Jessica’s descriptions of the impact that revisions, “do-overs,” and the ability to make mistakes and try again had on her feelings of engagement. She also described engagement manifested as a feeling of safety, resulting in an increased willingness to take risks and try new things as long as there was the opportunity for revision when necessary. She asserted that these social media tools also increased her cognitive and communication skills by improving her ability to connect and synthesize information, as well as express her thoughts verbally and speak more naturally or “more organically”:

Not just the VoiceThread but even the podcasting, the podcast pontifications. Same thing happened with that. Like it became easier as I did them ... I think me becoming more comfortable with them allowed me to like loosen up a little bit. And so it allowed for like my thoughts to just link to one another a little bit more organically versus coming at it from such a structure, you know, categorizing what I was going to talk about, the details and what examples I would use. The other thing, too, that helped with both of those, the VoiceThread and the podcast, is that I could re-record them. There were several times where I would be recording and I would just stop and start again. There’s do-overs, you know? Which in a way made me go, oh, it is like a revision. So that was helpful.

Descriptions of organic and authentic elements of online learning experiences and the pedagogic significance of allowing engagement to emerge naturally appeared in several participants’ descriptions. It was discussed again this way as Graham wrote about the influence of organic interaction that evolves naturally over time and intrinsically draws students into conversations:

I feel engaged online when the character of the class changes from a ‘check in and submit’ model to something that feels more organic. Even the actions being performed are, at the heart, the same. The design of the activities can make interaction more inviting ... and accessible. If this is done successfully, it's easy to get drawn in to the discussion and experiences within the class.

When asked to elaborate on this idea of a structured “check in and submit model” for online learning environments versus one that “feels more organic,” Graham discussed his own online learning experiences and revealed his general approach to learning tasks in online learning environments. Conceding that even in online courses that are designed with less structure and promote learner autonomy and freedom, he tends to “check in and submit” and then “wander” only after the “real work is done.” And he attributes this to the formal nature of his personal and professional learning style:

The physicist in me tends to think more formally ... For me, my initial process goes something like this: 1. Log in. 2. Check the calendar to see what’s due. 3. Do it and submit it. 4. Wander the website a bit after the ‘real work’ is done, if time permits. This kind of approach is very goal-oriented, pragmatic, and frankly necessary for the student juggling many tasks. However, as a teacher, I would hope to build a community where engagement flows naturally - students read comments made by their peers, an idea emerges, the assignment reflects the student’s interest, and a conversation moves forward. How this is enacted in an online environment ... is half science, half art.

When asked during follow-up questioning in his second interview why, despite his tendencies, the latter approach to building community through the natural and unimposing development of engagement would be preferable, Graham went on:

A critical component to my engagement, even if it’s not the whole thing, is intrinsic motivation... if you can affect that intrinsic motivation it’s easier to get students engaged. ... For me, [it is relates to] how much I felt I was a part of an enterprise instead of or maybe in addition to just showing up and completing assignments or checking the box.

The benefits of social interactions online and building community, or feeling “part of an enterprise” as Graham had articulated it, was challenged by Rebecca. When describing the influence that social interactions had on her experience of engagement
while learning online, she explained that interaction with her peers often made her feel different, which was intimidating for her and negatively impacted her levels of engagement.

When asked about elements of the online learning environment that may have decreased or detracted from her engagement, as discussed earlier in this chapter, Rebecca said that interaction with peers did not positively impact her experience of engagement. Instead, it made her feel more distanced from them, as she was sensitive to differences in professional or academic motives for being in the course and differences in perspectives on the issues being explored. She described how it made her feel different and distanced this way:

> I personally did not find the chat discussions very useful. I couldn't always follow what people were saying and most of the time it didn't seem to resonate with what I was thinking or feeling. If we would have been discussing face-to-face, I think I would have had more to say. It was new and not easy for me...

Rebecca also described how she found it difficult to connect with her peers because she perceived her professional goals as being drastically different. As a result of these differences, she also found it difficult to relate to others in the discussion activities. In a private blog posting she revealed, “I'm just not feeling like I'm connecting with anybody here.” She went on to explain further in her second interview:

> I wasn't getting a whole lot out of what other people were saying. But that was not particularly engaging. It just wasn't what I was getting out of it. I was getting a lot out of doing it myself, the readings, and the other little assignments where I had to try out different technologies, all of that was what really pushed me forward.
Rebecca discussed how long lapses in responses from peers led to disappointment and some distrust of interaction:

I would write something, not necessarily in my blog, but just little comments [in the discussion forum] here and there; and it would be interesting because I’m so waiting for somebody to respond, and nobody responded. And it would be like, ‘oh.’ [physical gesture indicating embodied disappointment] I mean that was my perception at the time. Of course, people responded at different times later. But it would be, I was so anxious for that. And so, not getting something relatively quick feedback from my co-students. ... You want something back. ... And when I didn’t get it, it...you know... was just a little deflating.

She then went on to describe how her experience of engagement was tentatively manifested in emotion:

Engagement also means emotion. Because it was my disappointment. So then I want to write something better. So even a negative emotion ... that can be motivating. Not always. But sometimes.

José experienced a similar decrease in engagement related to online interactions with peers as he described the lack of immediacy in responses in discussion activities or while collaborating on a group project. The “silence” associated with waiting for a response was interpreted negatively at times and the disappointment he felt with this lack of immediacy in interactions was tentatively manifested in his experience this way:

If I sent a question to a few group members and no one would take time to respond, it would negatively impact my level of engagement ... I sometimes interpreted the silence as minor disagreements.

Tentative Manifestation: Immediacy.

Graham also referenced a pedagogically meaningful connection to immediacy in his online learning experiences as well, but in a different context. He used the term “immediate” to describe his experience of engagement in online learning environments as he discussed how learning online differs from learning in traditional, physical learning.
environments. In his second interview, he explained that immediate in this sense referred to more immediate access, or the ability to directly and more readily connect. He discussed that this immediacy that online learning affords is mediated by the variety of forms of communication that are made possible through the use of multimedia which can be used to increase social presence in online learning environments. This increased social presence can positively impact engagement and the meaningfulness of the online learning experience, and this was Graham’s experience:

It means that it puts my mind at a more immediate frame of reference. ... Here’s an example. I think when it comes down to it, there’s no concrete difference between reading someone’s thoughts on a page versus hearing them. But to me, it called me to it more immediately, actually practicing it. There was a very different attitude that I think I had once it was happening. Maybe it was just a delivery method. But for me, being able to hear their voice, I would say there’s something more being communicated there than just their ideas. And... I think I’m hearing a person now. And everything that comes with that I think supports the idea that they’re trying to communicate. I could read their words on a page and someone is going to read your words you put on the page for this research... But I think people will get more meaning when they hear you share your story. They’re going to see you. They’re going to hear you. There’s ... something about that mode of communication that is more a hook than just reading it. VoiceThread was one of the more fascinating parts of our course, even if it was one of the simplest. And it wasn’t just a tool that was being used. But I’m actually hearing these people talk. It sounds like a conversation. Especially when I would let it play and I was going to hear a certain person’s comment. And I zoomed in and I clicked their face and heard their comment. And I could hear someone else chime in. And now I’m hearing someone else talk. And now I just sit back and I listen to this, what seems to be a conversation. I could do that just reading through a forum, but maybe, maybe you tune out. You’re just reading lifeless threads.

Jessica also discussed the importance of immediacy in her first interview, but described the meaningfulness of immediacy in her experience as it related to immediate application of the content:
It was just such a highly, highly demanding course. And I say to people all the time that it was the hardest class I've ever taken and yet one of the most rewarding courses I've ever taken. And it wasn't hard in that the content was really hard, but it was demanding in terms of my time. And I never felt like I had to-- I knew all the time that I didn't have to be putting so much time into it, and yet I would put a lot of time into it. I wanted to. ... [I was] making that decision ... no one was tying me to my chair and making me read and making me respond. I did it because I wanted to. [Regarding what it was that continued to draw her in]... I think it was a couple of things. The content. The content being that it was about online learning. It as to me highly engaging to learn about concepts related to online learning and then practice them. [And this was important to me] because I was applying exactly what I was learning right then. So even though I could kind of project and say, well, how would I use this in my classroom, I also had opportunities to practice it just in the context of the course. I could immediately see the effects. I could immediately see my learning kind of right in front of me. Which I'm like, now I'm like, well, would that happen with other content? Or the fact that this was about online learning in the context of online learning. So that was one thing. Like applying it right away. I mean, I was definitely always also making a connection to how I was going to use it in the future. That was a big part of it. I was also using it immediately in my work. I was teaching ... and I created a Ning page. Not during our course, but immediately following the course. ... And the Ning page I created for my course, it was structured almost exactly the way that ours was. Just because it was like my model, you know? ... so yeah, I was applying it for my work immediately.

Jessica also explained that immediately after the course concluded she facilitated a summer writing institute for other adults interested in literacy. As a result of her learning in the course and the value she saw that certain technology tools held for learning and sharing, she incorporated some digital storytelling activities for the institute participants using the technologies that we had used in the online course. As Jessica was connecting what she had learned and the tools she had used in our course with her facilitation efforts in the summer institute, she discussed some frustrations related to struggling with the technologies while introducing them to others. But she explained that her experience of engagement in the online course was eventually manifested in
increased confidence. She reached a level of comfort with being a novice to new technology tools and new learning spaces, and she gained an “intrinsic desire” to continue to explore these spaces and follow them in new directions:

And I think that's the other thing that led to my intrinsic desire to want to keep coming back, too, was that it definitely felt like I could experiment with things. I felt safe to do so like I was encouraged to do so and that it would be ok. And I did not feel like I had to be an expert at it, you know? Because ... like how can you ever, is anyone ever an expert at what they do? I always say you're a novice at anything you do any time you encounter something new. ... In our course I was a novice with a lot of the technology. And I kept thinking about that. And some of the theories were new to me. But feeling reassured that it was ok that I was a novice and that this was new to me helped keep me engaged. And so I knew that being engaged in the class and just diving in to using the technology was really important. That actually helped keep me engaged.

Summary

In this chapter I used a narrative framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to present the research findings by weaving authentic, compelling narratives from the research participants’ lived experiences in online learning environments and craft a text that captured the tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of learner engagement in its multiple, partial and varied contexts (Vagle, 2010a, p. 7). The pedagogic significance of the experiences and tentative manifestations was also discussed throughout the text as a means to emphasize it these contexts. Next, in Chapter 6, I discuss conclusions and implications for these research findings by highlighting the pedagogical insights that hold particular relevance for addressing the challenges and opportunities associated with engagement in online learning environments. The insights gained from this study are used to propose a flexible online engagement model that suggests research-based
pedagogical design principles to help promote and foster engaging online learning experiences.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I first present a brief overview of the research study and a summary of the research findings as they relate to each of the three research questions that guided the inquiry. I also discuss the implications for the research findings, which include insights gained from the research participants’ lived experiences that help inform practical suggestions for addressing the challenges and opportunities associated with engagement in online environments. These findings are also be used to propose a flexible online engagement model that suggests research-based pedagogical design principles to promote and foster engaging online learning experiences. And finally, I end the chapter by addressing the limitations of the study and exposing future directions for further inquiry.

Summary of the Research Study

This post-intentional phenomenological research study explored the lived experiences of adult learners while learning online in order to better understand the human-centered nature of learning with technology and some of the ongoing, dynamic tensions within online learning environments. Tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of learner engagement were pursued in order to reveal the shifting, changing nature of this phenomenon and the intentional relationships or meaningful connections that are associated with it. Narrative accounts from the research participants’ lived experiences while they were engaged in online learning environments were collected and analyzed to provide insight into the learner experience and contribute to pedagogical thoughtfulness (van Manen, 1990, p. 8), informed practical reasoning.
(Brookfield, 2006, p. 6), and responsive practice (p. 2) for educators interested in online teaching and learning.

This study began with an exploration of the holistic experience of online learning more broadly and led to a more focused investigation of the phenomenon of engagement specifically. An interpretive phenomenological methodology using qualitative methods was used to investigate four adult learners’ lived experiences of engagement in a naturalistic setting while they were enrolled in a completely online, four-week, graduate-level, university course. A systematic but flexible post-intentional research design was used to collect and analyze data in accordance with core phenomenological philosophical commitments, including a post-structural framing of Husserl’s theory of intentionality. The aim of the inquiry was to capture tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement and associated intentional relationships as they were revealed in different ways in the research participants’ experiences.

The purpose of the study is to help online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers in postsecondary and higher education contexts better understand how learners experience engagement while learning online by specifically addressing the following research questions: (1) What is it like to be an adult learner in online learning environments? (2) What is it like to experience engagement in online learning environments? and (3) How do various elements of learning online and dynamics of the learning environment influence adult learners’ feelings of engagement?

**Summary of the Research Findings**

Research findings were presented as narrative accounts of lived experiences that illuminate meaningful dimensions of the experience of engagement in online learning
environments, including several different ways in which this phenomenon was tentatively manifested. According to the participants’ narratives, online engagement was experienced episodically as purposeful freedom, focused chaos, creative wandering, boundless, organic, natural, authentic, and immersive. Engagement in online learning environments was also revealed as reflective, active, and creative; significantly influenced by personal passions and natural curiosity; and often involved an emotional response. At times it was experienced as transitory, fleeting, and evanescent in the moment; at other times it was experienced as sustained, deeper, and more immersive.

Sustained engagement over time in the online environment also had the potential to be a profound process of self-discovery. Guided design and authentic interaction were found to be critical components of engagement online, and engagement levels increased when content and learning activities were immediately applicable or had personal relevance for the learner. Immediate access to resources and communication exchanges with others in class discussions was also found to positively impact the experience.

Three themes were identified based on the pedagogic significance of the tentative manifestations of engagement that were revealed in the data. Collectively, these findings address the three research questions (Q1, Q2, Q3) that guided the inquiry:

Q1: *What is it like to be an adult learner in online learning environments?* The participants’ narrative accounts of their lived experiences while learning online suggest learning in online environments may feel “boundless” with unlimited possibilities. And the unbounded nature of learning online may significantly impact the learner experience, especially how engagement is experienced (*Theme #1: unbounded-ness*). Online learning affords a unique opportunity to lift limits and constraints on learning and thus, may lead
to unbounded potential for learning according to new directions learners autonomously pursue as a process of guided exploration and discovery. Learner autonomy or “freedom” was suggested to be a pedagogically meaningful dimension of feeling unbounded and to significantly impact how online engagement is experienced. One research participant articulated that online learning was an experience of “purposeful freedom” and “focused chaos,” while engaged in pursuing new lines of inquiry and freely exploring resources and connections in online spaces. This dimension of unboundedness also held the potential to be overwhelming, intimidating and anxiety-laden at times, however, warranting the necessity of guided course design and sustained instructor support.

Q2: What is it like to experience engagement in online learning environments?

According to the participants’ narrative accounts of their lived experiences while learning online, the experience of engagement is tentatively manifested in a variety of ways that shift and transform over time and often appear in fleeting moments. Thus, the phenomenon of engagement and the experience of this phenomenon cannot be centered or singularly defined. However, the participants’ narratives did suggest that engagement may be experienced in online environments as a form of praxis (Theme #2: engagement as a form of praxis). This is due to the multitude of ways in which it was manifested differently as action-oriented, reflective, and creative with a potential for self-empowerment and self-discovery. The “purposeful freedom” that online learning uniquely affords provides learners with unlimited access to a wealth of resources as well as relatively unlimited time to process and reflect, leading to new understandings based on new connections that are made. According to the research findings, engagement may
also be experienced as “creative wandering” in online learning spaces, accompanied by action-sensitive reflection.

Q3: How do various elements of learning online and dynamics of the learning environment influence adult learners’ feelings of engagement? The research findings suggest the experience of engagement was influenced in different ways at different moments according to the influence of various dynamics, including learner interest, curiosity, and autonomy; shared decision-making; authentic, social interactions; and opportunities to create with multimedia. The participants’ narratives also indicate that online engagement moves and changes over time and space, suggesting that it was experienced temporally (Theme #3: the temporal nature of engagement). This temporal nature of engagement places it in the context of time and space in online learning environments, and both of these dimensions were described by the participants to relate strongly to their experience of unbounded-ness while learning online. That is, online engagement was experienced by the participants temporally along a boundless, multidirectional continuum of time and space by following different directions and moving into different online spaces. Findings also suggest a pedagogically significant distinction between transitory engagement in the moment and sustained engagement over time. The experience of engagement was not stable and could not be forced or controlled. However, it was easily influenced and exhibited an evanescent quality, whereas it would be felt and then dissipate without notice. It was most often sustained when constraints and limits within the environment were lifted so that online learners were afforded ample time and space to purposefully connect, collaborate, and create.
Conclusions

In order to facilitate and enhance engagement as a critical factor for meaningful learning experiences within online environments, educators must consider how engagement is experienced by the online learner and then responsively design from the learner’s perspective. They must also acknowledge and appreciate the unique opportunities and challenges that online environments present for teaching and learning, and therefore the unique pedagogical design approaches that are essential to support it. General opportunities and challenges are described here, but more specific examples can be read in context in the narrative excerpts from participants’ accounts of their experiences in Chapter 5.

The research findings can be used to suggest pedagogical approaches and design principles for engagement in online learning environments to address opportunities and challenges and impact dynamics that can have a positive influence on learners’ experiences of engagement. To this end and based on these findings, I advocate for constructivist strategies that balance learner autonomy with guided support and flexible structure, phenomenological pedagogical practice, and dialogic design of online learning experiences.

Constructivist Strategies, Learner Autonomy, and Guided Support. Contemporary educational efforts in online learning environments in postsecondary and higher education require a pedagogical shift toward constructivist approaches and increased learner autonomy. This is not only because the success of today’s learners requires different skills with regard to accessing and critically evaluating a wealth of available digital information, but additionally because future employers will be seeking graduates
who are active and adaptive learners. I am in agreement with Spence’s (2001) assertions related to this shift, and I contend that online teaching and learning pushes us even further to consider that, “We won’t meet the needs for more and better higher education until professors become designers of learning experiences and not teachers” (p. 10). Spence argues that the knowledge dispensing, behaviorist pedagogical approaches borne of the Industrial Age in U.S. education are no longer appropriate for the modern Information Age that requires critical thinking and creative problem solving. Today we are surrounded by increasing technology integration in education, networked collaborations, and the ability to access a wealth of resources and unlimited stores of data as a result of innovations like the Internet. Forecasts of continued exponential growth in online courses and programs accentuate the urgency of these issues for the future trajectory of higher education, imploring adult education professionals to address them promptly.

As educators prepare for the challenges and opportunities associated with innovations in online teaching and learning, it must be acknowledged that integrating technology under traditional behaviorist paradigms may not be effective. The expansive access to resources and the increasing capabilities that online technologies afford requires alternative pedagogies and approaches to instructional design that are specifically tailored to support them if these new tools are to reach their transformative potential. And I believe this begins on a philosophical, ontological level with disrupting formerly held assumptions and practices relating to ways of being in learning environments, namely the roles of autocratic teachers and passive students. It also requires rethinking content delivery as the primary objective of educators and, instead, places designing experiences at the forefront.
The primary responsibility of online instructors and instructional designers can no longer be seen as simply delivering “canned,” formulaic, highly structured, standardized courses or a bundle of static, pre-formatted modules. Instead, throughout the design process, they must focus their efforts on customizing or arranging features of the environment dynamically according to how this impacts the learner experience.

Educators must provide and design for engaging online learning experiences. Thus, in addition to integrating constructivist strategies that shift from a *teacher-centered* approach to a *learner-centered* approach, I believe we also need to move from the traditional *content-centered delivery* to more contemporary *learning-centered collaborations* in online courses. In other words, we must focus less on delivering content and place more emphasis on designing online learning experiences and collaborations in order to engage learners in authentic and meaningful ways.

I propose that if we focus on learning, and the learning experience, content can then be dialogically developed. To be clear, this does not imply that content is unimportant. Indeed, it is critical. Much of adult learners’ motivation to seek education is related to the relevant content and skills necessary to be engaged citizens and to contribute to personal development or to pursue career goals. And so it is, in fact, with these purposes of education in mind that I argue by focusing on the learner experience in our design efforts, the most relevant content for the unique interests and goals of individual learners will be tailored and created *by them* in collaboration with their peers; and the knowledge they need will be collectively and socially constructed.

Ultimately, this ontological shift in ways of being, roles, and modes of practice in educational environments will require instructors to relinquish control and honor the
learners’ agency and afford them a voice in decision making with the freedom to make choices. Strategies to leverage the opportunities and embrace the possibilities that online learning environments hold will positively impact online learners’ experiences and engage them in the learning process. As the research findings from this study suggest, online learning environments are in a constant flux of change across time and space due to their unbounded nature, and they can be relatively unpredictable. In light of this, the instructor and the learners must dialogically co-design the experience together and continue to co-create it spontaneously as it evolves.

*Phenomenological Pedagogical Practice.* I also advocate a phenomenological approach to online pedagogy. Van Manen (1990) maintains that effective pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to the experiences of learners and to connections, relationships, and unity in educational environments (p. 2). To support this sensitivity, van Manen and Li (2002) promote the pathic aspects of pedagogy, or the affective, sensed, felt, experiential and relational aspects of teaching that inform and animate our pedagogical practices. Pathic knowledge helps educators to cultivate the pedagogical thoughtfulness they need to be practically competent. Drawing on the research findings and my experiential knowledge from over thirteen years of experience as an educator and instructional designer in both face-to-face and online learning environments, I would argue that online learning requires an even greater phenomenological sensitivity and pathic sensibility to mediate increased transactional distance (Moore, 2007, p. 91) among learners and the instructor in virtual environments. Phenomenological pedagogical practice can also be beneficial for addressing the boundless nature of online learning, which necessitates sensitive and flexible guidance and support.
Because of the increased physical distance among stakeholders and the boundless dimensions of time and spaces afforded by virtual learning environments, it takes a greater effort on the part of the instructor to be responsive and attentive to the needs of online learners and negotiate the myriad dynamics of influence in online learning environments. As the research participants’ narratives suggested, engaged online learning may be experienced as purposeful freedom, focused chaos, or creative wandering. Phenomenologically, the intentional relationships or meaningful connections in these experiential descriptions are vibrant. Online educators have the responsibilities of guiding and supporting a balance between purpose and freedom, focus and chaos, and aimless and creative wandering. And a phenomenological approach to pedagogy may provide the sensitivity and sensibility that is needed to reach that aim.

As a result of perceptual and philosophical sensitivity to the human-centered nature of learning with technology and a phenomenological sensitivity to how learner’s experience various phenomena associated with online learning, educators can be better prepared to then sensibly improvise as needed to meet the regularly spontaneous demands of teaching, as Brookfield advocates in his notions of responsive practice and informed practical reasoning. As educators very devoted to our practice, we tend to approach educational challenges with a technical and practical mindset, and online and teaching is a viable example. However, I would argue that we also need to be more mindful and philosophical in order to inform our technical practice. We cannot be singularly focused on merely the practical methods, or the how of online pedagogy and instructional design; we must also philosophically examine and understand the why of what we do to be able to justify sound pedagogical decisions. It is also important to clarify that rather than
designing the learner experience, we must design for the learner experience, recognizing that we do not have sole agency in the endeavor; but rather, that it is a dialogic process.

*Dialogic Design of Online Learning Experiences.* Dialogic teaching and learning is emphasized in the Freirean approach to democratic educational practice in adult learning environments. It is practiced with an assumption of equality and it involves the voice of all participants and stakeholders in the learning environment, including learners and instructors. Thus, online learning environments can be considered intersubjective as dialogic conversations take place and participants co-design learning experiences that emerge and evolve over time. Guilar (2006) explains the value of intersubjective learning environments in which a community of learners act as co-creators:

> An educational community is intersubjective in nature when all parties relate to one another as having a sense of agency and a unique perspective. ... Students’ roles change from being passive learners to becoming co-creators. In expressing his or her perspective, a student co-creates along with other students and the teacher a shared world in which difference is expressed and respected. Power is shared mutually in this co-created community” (p. 15).

The benefits of dialogic educational practices include the engagement of learners and instructors, the emergence of relevant content, the infusion of democratic values in the educational process, and the establishment of an educational community (Guilar, 2006). These benefits hold profound significance for designing online learning experiences.
A dialogic approach to online pedagogy and instructional design leverages the intentional relationships that flow among and through unbounded online learning spaces, the instructor, the learners, and the content. And the intentional meanings or the meaningfulness of these connections don’t simply occur within the online environment. As the research participants’ experiences suggest, they also hold the potential to extend beyond, to impact other aspects of the learners’ lives and prepare them for other environments and similar challenges in which they find themselves in the world.

The Risk of Relinquishing Control. It must be acknowledged that what I have suggested here does not come without risk, nor will it be an easy or straightforward task. Learner autonomy, relinquishing control, and displacing content delivery as paramount can seem nebulous, tenuous, ambiguous, and, frankly, very risky for educators fearful about learners not meeting curricular objectives, veering off track of established learning outcomes, or simply losing their way and getting lost in the learning process. These are very valid concerns that must be addressed.

First, it must be made clear that relinquishing control does not imply relinquishing responsibility. Dialogic design requires ongoing negotiation and mediation, and the instructor’s close guidance and support. As Dewey (1938) contends, learner freedom does not equal “planless improvisation” (p. 28), and he discusses the educator’s critical responsibility in the environment to help plan and arrange the conditions necessary for educative experiences. The research participants’ lived experiences indicate that guided design efforts, instructor support and scaffolding, and balancing learner autonomy with structure can be profoundly influential, and critically necessary, for engaging experiences in online learning environments. Several participants’ indicated that freedom and
boundlessness in online learning environments was, at times, intimidating, frustrating, and caused a great deal of anxiety. These feelings can very quickly turn to disengagement and disinterest if care isn’t taken to help resolve them.

Thus, constructivist pedagogical and instructional design strategies that balance learner autonomy with guided support and flexible structure, phenomenological pedagogical practice, and dialogic design of online learning experiences can help mediate challenges and significantly diminish risks associated with online learning. Again, guided support is critical. I emphatically disagree with Knowles’ (1973) assumption that all adult learners are self-directed; and in fact, I believe that making this assumption can have dire consequences in the context of online learning or learning with new technologies. Perhaps adult learners eventually should be self-directed in order to ultimately attain the skills necessary to pursue self-directed, lifelong and lifewide learning. However, as Rebecca discussed, learners may be conditioned throughout their education from childhood to be told explicitly what to do and how to do it. They may experience frustration and disorientation, then, when this direct instruction is abruptly missing. And this assumption or expectation of self-direction, I believe, is an unfair position in which to place learners. The research participants’ narratives of their experiences can be seen as pedagogical parables, and Rebecca’s accounts are cautionary tales in this regard. Some online learners may lack familiarity with the technological tools or with online learning in general, and thus, may not feel adequately prepared to direct their learning or confident about autonomous exploration despite being highly engaged, committed, and motivated to succeed. Rather, these learners require additional guidance, support, and scaffolding initially in order to help them perceive a level of
comfort and gain confidence to then begin to slowly take on more responsibility and take
the lead. Rebecca’s experience is a testament of how this confidence can emerge over
time through a profound process of self-empowerment and self-discovery.

In order to help mediate risks and embrace possibilities associated with dialogic
design of engaging experiences and leveraging the unbounded nature of online learning,
the research participants’ compelling narrative accounts of their experiences presented in
Chapter 5 can help provide pedagogical insights in context. It may also be helpful to
frame the implications for the research findings theoretically in terms of chaos theory,
imaginatively with what Massumi (2003) refers to as joyful digressions, and practically
with flexible design principles. The following suggestions can help educators feel better
prepared to make the ontological and pedagogical shift in their practice that online
learning requires and to begin to co-design engaging online learning experiences with the
adult learners they work with.

*Chaos Theory.* Engagement in online learning environments was described by one
of the research participants as “focused chaos.” And she associated this with the
boundlessness of online learning and unlimited possibilities (and risks) in online learning
environments that other participants had experienced as well. There may be some
concerns associated with uncertainty and unpredictability in allowing learners to lead and
with the “chaos” that can potentially ensue as learners freely explore new directions
along the multidirectional continuum of time and space that characterizes online learning
environments. However, online educators may be reassured by the assumptions of chaos
time, which suggests that there is actually discernable order in chaos and that chaotic
systems hold fundamental, identifiable values, similarities, direction, and patterns that
can be used to ground pedagogical and design efforts and ensure that learning objectives are being met.

Chaos theory originated in the natural sciences and mathematics as a way of describing the paradox of order in chaos by addressing both the unpredictability and the order that exists in natural systems. The term chaos as it is used in the context of theory and as a way of observing dynamic, complex systems does not denote total disorder, complete disarray, or pandemonium as it is often used in common language. Rather, it refers to a certain kind of order that is a feature of a chaotic system (Reigeluth, 2008), and it assumes there is actually underlying order in chaos, even if it is unpredictable. This troubles the notion of predictability and control typically enacted in traditional, behaviorist learning environments, and it challenges pedagogical tendencies to attempt to control the resources presented to students, the activities they engage in, and the direction of learning. On the contrary, the research findings suggest that the general notion of control is disrupted by learning technologies and online learning environments, which may be experienced as boundless as such limits and constraints are lifted.

Carr-Chellman (2000) contends that chaos theory holds relevance for understanding the unpredictability and complexities associated with educational systems, and she advocates the practice of flexible instructional design as a means to disrupt rigid structures within educational systems. She refers to systemic change generally within the educational system on a macro level, but she also goes on to discuss shared values in chaotic, complex systems that can be applied directly to “the design and creation of human learning environments that meet community [or stakeholders’] expectations” (p. 28). I believe this also holds relevance more pointedly for instructional design practice in
online learning environments as well, particularly when used as a qualitative lens to understand the nature of complex systems and designing environments that take into account experiences, intentional relationships, and other dynamics.

As a way of making sense of unpredictability, or understanding the order in chaos, chaos theory offers the principle of fractals, or common features among items in real-world systems that are similar and, therefore, recognizable. Fractals draw attention to patterns among seemingly dissimilar items at all levels of a system (Reigeluth, 2008, p. 28). Examples of dissimilar “items” in the context of this research study may be unique online learning experiences, tentative manifestations of the phenomenon of engagement, or diverse, autonomous lines of inquiry among a group of learners. In terms of the online course in this study, there were similarities or recognizable patterns that can be framed as fractals in each of these examples as well. All learners were learning about the topic of distance education and various distance education theories in the online course.

Moreover, the curricular objectives that were established in the course were shared and met by all learners. The key values inherent in the course premise and the course objectives can be considered fractals, as they are identifiable patterns that can provide a shared direction.

Chaos theory also asserts that while all systems have chaotic patterns, small changes in initial conditions can contribute to significant and unexpected results. This aligns with the research participants’ online learning experiences that were shared in the data. Patterns may have recognizable similarities, but have different iterations or manifestations. In light of chaos theory, it must always be assumed and accepted that if it were possible to plot each learner’s starting point at the beginning of an online course,
each may have remarkably different trajectories. Thus, although different learners may learn about different facets of the course premise and take their learning in different directions than their peers, there can still be order in diversity. Shared learning objectives can be framed as the common ground, providing some sense of order or regularity among the irregularities inherent in supplementary and unique, learner-led inquiry.

*Joyful Digressions.* In the context of designing and facilitating online learning environments and avoiding constraints and overly structured content, it is also valuable to consider Massumi’s (2003) assertions about embracing unpredictability and pursuing digressions as generative. Adults often encounter distractions that they regard as competing with the productive dimensions of their lives, as these distractions vie for time and attention. I see this as particularly appropriate for adult learners with competing life demands such as professional, personal, and academic obligations. I also see it as appropriate for online learning environments with unlimited distractions that may pull learners’ attention in different directions and away from a pre-determined task at hand. However, Massumi argues that we must step back and hold these distractions up to the light in order to begin to see them, instead, as potentially very generative, creative pursuits. Similarly, Dörk, Bennett, and Davies (2013) discuss the fruitful nature of slowing down to seek and explore information and the value in what can be discovered and revealed by taking time to do so. They describe ludic or playful searching as an often very fruitful digression. When learners are afforded freedom from constraints, including constraints on time and space, they can be encouraged to pursue such joyful digressions and creative wanderings as they connect, collaborate, and create in online learning spaces. Additionally, this may be an opportunity for learners to exercise skills in
independent thinking and problem solving, and in doing so, they also develop the self-direction necessary for self-guided and self-directed lifelong and lifewide learning.

Framing joyful digressions in this way is very applicable to the risks or challenges associated with distractions in the online environment, such as the “rabbit holes” or the “black hole” that learners may be drawn into and away from the original purpose of their online pursuits. These distractions may compete for learners’ attention and new lines of inquiry may even compete with the pre-determined curricular objectives. However, perhaps there are times when both educators and learners should also embrace the creative and playful wandering that leads to creative and playful wondering, resulting in valuable and generative inquiry in online spaces.

Rather than trying to control or harness learners’ activities in online environments, we are urged to take a leap of faith, be willing to take risks, and encourage learners to lead and explore new directions. Both educators and learners must embrace some of the distractions in online learning environments and, instead, regard them as joyful digressions into unexplored areas and new online spaces that can potentially hold wondrous sparks of creativity and innovation. We are often concerned with the distractions we believe are getting in the way of attending to immediate goals or the immediate tasks we are attempting to accomplish. And as such, we then try to close them off or shut them down. What if we instead put a constructive spin on such distractions and connote them as digressions... joyful digressions that hold an epistemology of possibilities? Yet, again, this is not to say educators are released from responsibility in this process. As Dewey suggests, educators must always acknowledge and enact their responsibility in helping to guide and scaffold educative experiences by arranging the
environmental conditions they believe to be conducive to learning.

**Practical Implications: Principles for Design**

In addition to providing philosophical pedagogical insight into the learner experience, the research findings also hold significant practical implications for online teaching and learning in higher education. The tentative manifestations and themes of pedagogic significance that were identified in the participants’ narrative accounts can be used to suggest flexible pedagogical design principles to help foster engaging online learning experiences according to how adult learners may experience engagement within virtual learning spaces (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1

*Connections Between Design Principles, Themes of Pedagogic Significance, and Tentative Manifestations*

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<th>Associated Tentative Manifestations</th>
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<td>Tap into learners’ personal interests and passions; leverage natural curiosity.</td>
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- **Boundless**
- **Creative Wandering**
- **Purposeful Freedom**
- **Focused Chaos**
- **Choice**
- **Organic**
- **Natural**
- **Authentic**
- **Immersive**
- **Reflective**
- **Active**
- **Creative**
- **Emotion**
- **Passion**
- **Self-Discovery**
- **Guided Design**
- **Immediacy**

**Unbounded-ness**

**Engagement as a form of praxis**

**The temporal nature of engagement**

- **Boundless**
- **Creative Wandering**
- **Purposeful Freedom**
- **Focused Chaos**
- **Choice**
- **Organic**
- **Natural**
- **Authentic**
- **Immersive**
- **Reflective**
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- **Guided Design**
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- **Active**
- **Creative**
- **Guided Design**
- **Immediacy**

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<th>8</th>
<th>Provide ample time for cognitive and metacognitive processing and reflection.</th>
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<td>Be supportive and patient; allow for comfort, authentic interaction, and engagement to emerge and evolve naturally.</td>
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<td>Allow space for playful experimentation; include room for failure and the option of revision; appreciate that everyone is at once both novice and expert.</td>
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**Design from the learner’s perspective.**

**Online Engagement Model**

Gustafson and Branch (1997) suggest that instructional design models serve to conceptualize representations of ideas or theories, and they define a model as a “simple representation of more complex forms, processes, and functions of ... phenomena or ideas” (p. 17). According to Gros, Elen, Kerres, van Merriënboer, and Spector (1997), instructional design models may also “provide a link between learning theories and the practice of building instructional systems” (p. 48). Models are operational tools that help to bridge philosophical understanding with practice and hold implications for putting new
understandings and insights revealed by research into action. An online engagement
model based upon the findings of this phenomenological research study would serve to
bridge the pedagogical insights revealed in the participants’ lived experiences of
engagement with the practice of building engaging online learning environments in
postsecondary and higher education. However, such a model places this practical
orientation in tension with key phenomenological commitments.

Phenomenological research methodology is informed and guided by the
foundations of phenomenological philosophy, including a fundamental commitment to
openness in order to gain insight and understanding into a phenomenon as it is
consciously experienced or concretely lived (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008;
Sokolowski, 2000; Vagle, 2010b; van Manen, 1990). Due to this openness with the
primary aim of providing insight, it is not traditionally the work of phenomenology to
then use the insight or understanding reached by such open exploration into lived
experience to then assert conclusive findings or practical prescriptions. For example, in
the context of online teaching and learning, models or guidelines for educational practice
would typically not be appropriate conclusions to draw from phenomenological research
designs. However, contemporary phenomenologists such as Dahlberg (2006), van
Manen (1997), Vagle (2010b), and others propose that in order for phenomenology to
hold modern relevance and to increase its utility as a viable modern qualitative research
methodology, the insight gained from the research process can then be put into dialogue
with the traditions of academic disciplines or professional fields according to what is
particularly meaningful and valued within them. This online engagement model is my
attempt to put phenomenology into dialogue with educational practice and instructional design.

The Instructional Design field within the academic discipline of Learning Technologies has a very strong practical orientation (Reiser & Dempsey, 2007) and, thus, places emphasis on bridging philosophy and practice. It relies heavily upon theoretically-grounded, practical models to inform the work and future directions of the field. This problematizes the assumptions and aims of traditional phenomenological research approaches if they are to be put into dialogue with the practical values of the field. However, I believe the phenomenological research presented in this dissertation holds greater practical significance if it is then animated, or brought to life, in the form of a flexible pedagogical design model suggesting principles for fostering engagement in adult online learning environments based on the tentative manifestations and themes of pedagogic significance identified in the study.

The purpose of this study is to inform online pedagogy and instructional design; therefore, the model I propose here holds relevance for instructional design processes but also places a great deal of emphasis on pedagogical practices. It can provide educators with a “conceptual and communications tool” (Gustafson & Branch, 1997, p. 13) as it “explains ways of doing” (p. 3). It is not meant to be a prescriptive sequence of events, but rather, a framework for enhancing qualities of the experience that may lead to engagement. Remaining open and suggestive in proposing experientially-based design principles while avoiding conclusive prescriptions keeps the implications of this research more humbly aligned and in harmony with the aims of phenomenology to lend insight and understanding about online learners lived experiences in concrete ways, rather than
being abstractly and prescriptively bound. I draw upon the insights gained from this phenomenological study to propose a flexible online engagement model (see Figure 6.1) that suggests ten research-based pedagogical design principles for the responsive practice necessary to promote and foster engaging online learning experiences.

Figure 6.1

Proposed pedagogical design model to foster engaging online learning experiences

The overarching objective of this model is to design from the perspective of the learner, and the following ten principles provide flexible suggestions for doing so: (1) Create time and space for exploration and discovery by providing opportunities for learners to pursue new lines of investigation, (2) Encourage learners to lead, make choices, and share a role in decision-making; build a “road map” with co-determined
goals and outcomes, (3) Tap into learners’ personal interests and passions; leverage natural curiosity, (4) Balance structure with learner autonomy; guide but do not overly structure, (5) Leverage interaction in a Deweyian sense with opportunities for social interactions and learning activities that encourage learners to create, (6) Integrate social media and a variety of forms of communication (i.e. text, audio, and video), (7) Ensure content and learning activities have immediate application and relevance, (8) Provide ample time for cognitive and metacognitive processing and reflection, (9) Be supportive and patient; allow for comfort, authentic interaction, and engagement to emerge and evolve naturally, (10) Allow space for playful experimentation; include room for failure and the option of revision; appreciate that everyone is at once both novice and expert.

It is my hope that, as van Manen (1990) suggests, the phenomenological questioning contained in this study moves the reader “...to wonder, to question deeply the very thing that is being questioned by the question” (p. 44). I would like this work to move educators to begin to question deeply the human-centered nature of learning with technology and the associated issues of complexity more holistically to promote understanding of leaners’ experiences in online learning environments on both philosophical and practical levels.

It is also my hope that the insights gained from this research will help online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers in post-secondary and higher education enact learner-centered pedagogical practices and responsive online course design by fusing innovative tools with innovative educational approaches. Armed with this knowledge, I believe that the challenges associated with online teaching and learning can be transformed into exciting opportunities.


Limitations

Although this research contributes to an increased understanding of how adult learners may experience the phenomenon of engagement while learning in online environments, there were limitations to the study that must be explicitly acknowledged. For example, it cannot be assumed that an investigation of the individual experiences of four research participants is representative of how adult learners experience engagement generally, nor can one online learner’s experiences be representative of other online learners’ experiences in other contexts. Thus, the research findings presented here are not to be considered conclusive, nor may they be transferable to other online learning environments.

Additionally, the investigation was focused on the research participants’ online learning experiences during one online course, which offers only limited insight into the phenomenon of engagement. Because the context of the study was a condensed online course that was conducted in only four weeks, this was a very limited timeframe that provided only a brief glimpse into online learners’ lived experiences of engagement and thus, contributes limited insight into the phenomenon. Further inquiry is necessary to provide additional and deeper insight into adult learners’ experiences in online learning environments longitudinally.

It is also plausible that naming the phenomenon (i.e. “engagement”) at the initiation of the study may have limited the openness of the investigation into the lived experience by prematurely framing the research participants’ descriptions. Additional research that does not interject or impose a name for this phenomenon might be even more insightful and generative. Further, referencing NSSE’s five critical factors for
engagement (IUCPR, 2011) in the early stages of the research process during the initial screening interviews may have tainted the openness of the investigation as well.

It is also important to reiterate that a post-intentional phenomenological research design typically closes with crafting a text that illuminates tentative manifestations of the phenomenon under investigation and related intentional meanings, although this study went on to additionally identify themes of pedagogic significance based on tentative manifestations. Vagle (2010a) makes a strong argument for why organizing or converging structures such as themes are inappropriate because their attempts to center meanings, descriptions, and lived experiences that are tentative, fleeting, and endlessly deferred are futile (p. 21-22).

**Future Directions**

Future directions for this inquiry include further exploration into the phenomenological significance of virtual space as lived space or embodied space. Merleau-Ponty’s (1962/2005) phenomenological philosophies are focused on the mind-body connection and he writes about lived experience as embodiment, emphasizing connections between the world and the body. The notion of lived space as embodied space is compelling when it is considered in the context of virtual space or lived experiences in virtual learning spaces. Inhabiting virtual space as lived space troubles embodiment as it is typically used to refer to physical materiality. For human beings living in the world, embodiment means being present in body and therefore connected to the world as the body inhabits lived space. However, this is problematic when considering virtual spaces because I would argue that there is a legitimate, incorporeal ‘embodiment’ to inhabiting virtual spaces, regardless of whether or not this dwelling is of
a physical or material nature. Future directions for this inquiry include continued exploration into the human-centered nature of learning with technology and in doing so, mining for meaning in human-technology relationships associated with virtual learning spaces as embodied spaces.

Also relating to the human-centered nature of learning with technology, I am interested in further inquiry into Ihde’s (1993) philosophy of technology and his postmodern phenomenological assertions that the ubiquitous and profound ways various technologies are being used today philosophically positions them as agents in our experiences in the world. I believe that learning technologies, more specifically, have yet unimaginable potential to open up new spaces for deep and meaningful connections and to radically alter how we experience learning. In this light, I am interested in continuing to explore relationships that are formed and shaped by online learning technologies, the connections that are made possible because of them, and what is required to support this transformation.

One way to begin to do this may be to explore online content as vibrant matter. Bennett (2010) describes vibrant matter as rich, dynamic, highly textured matter that is alive with potential, as opposed to matter that is passive or inert. She also discusses the agential vitality of matter to animate and shape other things (p. viii) and she uses vitality to mean “the capacity of things... not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (p. viii). What might be possible if we consider the vital materiality of learning technologies or “the material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts” (p. xiii) in union with pedagogical efforts and the learner’s
autonomy to shape and form online learning environments and online learning experiences? I believe this raises valuable questions about the potential that learning technologies hold to transform online teaching and learning if they are successfully supported by appropriate pedagogies and design efforts to cultivate “the active role of nonhuman materials” (p. 2). This line of inquiry may also be aligned with the historical intellectual debate in the field of Learning Technologies over whether or not media influences learning, originally beginning with assertions made by Clark (1983), and later criticized by Kozma (1994), Jonassen, and others (Jonassen, Campbell, & Davidson, 1994). I am not suggesting that learning technologies hold sole agency or can be seen as influencing learning exclusively without the influence of human forces. I am, instead, interested in pursuing how and under what conditions media can influence learning, as Kozma suggests. I support his argument that we don’t understand the relationship between media and instructional methods well enough and should focus our research efforts on the potential capabilities of learning with media. Moreover, I am also drawn to Jonassen’s response to this debate as he advocates for a greater focus on learning than on media or instructional approaches. He also argues that we should focus on the potential of learning with technology as he writes about computers as “mindtools” (Jonassen, Carr, & Yueh, 1998). In his description of mindtools, Jonassen contends that technologies can and should be used as cognitive tools for learning to enhance critical thinking skills. Can such mindtools be framed as vibrant matter, as Bennett suggests, with agential potential to help shape the learning experience? Perhaps learning technologies as mindtools can be seen as vibrant matter in this regard and they can be leveraged to enhance learning through constructively building knowledge and critical thinking skills. I am also
interested in exploring how online technologies can be used as an agential force together with the instructor and among learners for the co-construction of online learning experiences. Thus, another future direction for this research is to explore online content and online learning environments as vibrant matter.

An additional future direction for this research is to continue to explore the creative, generative potential of joyful digressions while learning online, as Massumi (2003) discusses the generative nature of embracing unconstrained exploration. And I am interested in exploring this as a phenomenon of interest in online learning experiences. I am also interested in other phenomena associated with the learner experience and online learning. For example, two of the participants in this study referred to “silence” in online learning environments. This was manifested in the research participants’ interactions with peers as well in quiet reflection. This phenomenon of silence was experienced in different ways and was tentatively manifested as one participant credited it for enhancing engagement, whereas another participant stated that it diminished engagement. This warrants further inquiry into this unique phenomenon in order to gain a deeper understanding of it through how it is experienced, and calls into question how “silence” is interpreted by learners in asynchronous online learning environments.
References


Doering, A. (2009). Course notes from Foundations of Distance Education. Online graduate course conducted from the University of Minnesota, June-August 2009, Minneapolis, MN.


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Vagle, M. D. (2011a). Course notes from *Interpretive Research.* Graduate course conducted from the University of Minnesota, June-August 2011, Minneapolis, MN.


Appendix A
IRB Approval (initial, dated 8.23.11)

08/23/2011

Angelica Pazurek
Curriculum and Instruction
Room 125 PeikH
159 Pillsbury Dr SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

RE: "A Phenomenological Investigation of Online Learners' Lived Experiences of Engagement"
IRB Code Number: 1107P02623

Dear Dr. Pazurek:

The referenced study was reviewed by expedited review procedures and approved on August 22, 2011. If you have applied for a grant, this date is required for certification purposes as well as the Assurance of Compliance number which is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA 0004003). Approval for the study will expire one year from that date. A report form will be sent out two months before the expiration date.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of this study includes the consent form and e-mail invitation, both received July 22, 2011.

The IRB would like to stress that subjects who go through the consent process are considered enrolled participants and are counted toward the total number of subjects, even if they have no further participation in the study. Please keep this in mind when calculating the number of subjects you request. This study is currently approved for 10 subjects. If you desire an increase in the number of approved subjects, you will need to make a formal request to the IRB.

The code number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

As the Principal Investigator of this project, you are required by federal regulations to inform the IRB of any proposed changes in your research that will affect human subjects. Changes should not be initiated until written IRB approval is received. Unanticipated problems and adverse events should be reported to the IRB as they occur. Research projects are subject to continuing

On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

for
Christina Debrovolny, CIP
Research Compliance Supervisor
CD/ks

CC: Aaron Doering
Appendix B
IRB Approval (annual continuing review, dated 8.4.12)

1107P02623 - PI Pazurek - IRB - APVD Continuing Review

irb@umn.edu <irb@umn.edu> 
To: pazur003@umn.edu 

TO: adoering@umn.edu, pazur003@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee renewed its approval of the referenced study listed below:

Study Number: 1107P02623
Principal Investigator: Angelica Pazurek
Expiration Date: 08/02/2013
Approval Date: 08/03/2012

Title(s):
A Phenomenological Investigation of Online Learners' Lived Experiences of Engagement

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota HRPP notification of continuing review approval. You will not receive a hard copy or letter. This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

You may go to the View Completed section of http://eresearch.umn.edu/ to view or print your continuing review submission.
Appendix C
IRB Approval (annual continuing review, dated 6.8.13)

1107P02623 - PI Pazurek - IRB - APVD Continuing Review

To: pazur003@umn.edu

TO: adoering@umn.edu, pazur003@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee renewed its approval of the referenced study listed below.

Study Number: 1107P02623

Principal Investigator: Angelica Pazurek

Expiration Date: 06/06/2014

Approval Date: 06/07/2013

Title(s):
A Phenomenological Investigation of Online Learners' Lived Experiences of Engagement

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota HRPP notification of continuing review approval. You will not receive a hard copy or letter. This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

You may go to the View Completed section of http://eresearch.umn.edu/ to view or print your continuing review submission.
Appendix D
Email Request for Participation in Research Study

Request for participation in online learner engagement study

Angelica Pazurek <pazur003@umn.edu>
To: Wed, Aug 24, 2011 at 9:23 AM

Hello Everyone!

I hope you have been enjoying the summer! I am writing because I have just now secured IRB approval and would like to ask you to take part in a brief study about your experiences during the online course CI 5321 in which you were enrolled for Summer 2011. Your perspective is important so that I may learn more about how learners experience engagement in online learning environments. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to do three things: (1) participate in an initial interview which can be conducted at a location convenient for you, online using video chat, or by phone; interviews can also be conducted individually or in a small group according to which is more comfortable for you, (2) write a detailed description of your experiences learning online in which you felt most and least engaged, and (3) participate in a follow up interview to address any additional or new questions that arise. Participants who complete all three components of the study will receive a $20 Target gift card at the conclusion of the study.

If you have any questions about the study you can contact me by email or phone (listed below), or the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line at the University of Minnesota at 612-625-1650.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please respond accordingly to this email. Thanks so much for your patience, your time, and your consideration.

With Warm Regards,

Angel

--
Angelica L. Pazurek
Learning Technologies
Department of Curriculum & Instruction
Appendix E
Consent Agreement

A Phenomenological Investigation of
Online Learners’ Lived Experiences of Engagement

Background Information:

You are being asked to participate in a research study entitled “A Phenomenological Investigation of Online Learners’ Lived Experiences of Engagement” which focuses on collecting data about learners’ experiences in online learning environments. The purpose of the study is to help online instructors, facilitators, and instructional designers better understand how adult learners experience engagement when learning online, specifically: 1) What is it like to experience engagement in an online learning environment? and 2) How do various elements of learning online affect learners’ feelings of engagement?

You were selected as a possible participant because you were an online learner in CI 5321: Foundations of Distance Education during the Summer 2011 term at the University of Minnesota. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. You may email me prior to our first meeting with your questions, or you will have ample opportunity to get all of your questions answered at our meeting before we begin.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things over the course of approximately 3 months:

1) Participate in one initial interview about your experience learning online. This interview will be audio taped and will last approximately one hour. It may be conducted in several ways according to what is convenient and comfortable for you. It may be conducted individually or in a small group of no more than 3, whichever you prefer. Again, according to your preference, it may be conducted in person at a location convenient and comfortable for you, online by video chat, or by phone.

2) Following the initial interview (within 2 weeks), write an informal journal entry describing in detail your experiences learning online. You will be provided with prompts pertaining to elements and times in which you felt most engaged and least engaged in order to help spur your writing. You need not worry about fancy or colorful language—you’ll be encouraged just to write in a personal journal or story fashion.

3) One month following the first interview, participate in one follow up interview (again, according to your preferences) in which we will discuss new ideas that have arisen, new lines of inquiry, and allow for elaboration of key points from the first interview or your written descriptions of your experiences while learning online. This interview will last approximately one hour and will also be audio taped.

You will also agree to allow the researcher access to your discussion postings, podcasts, blogs, written papers, and any other course submissions or contributions during the CI 5321 online course held during the Summer 2011 term at the University of Minnesota.
Risks and Benefits of Participation in the Study:

There are no known or anticipated risks associated with this study. Several measures will be taken which assure the privacy and confidentiality of your comments and written statements. These are described in detail in the next section of this form entitled “Confidentiality.”

There are no anticipated direct benefits to study participation. However, your participation will help in the development and design of engaging online learning environments and my ability to collect data about learners’ online experiences.

Confidentiality:

Your participation in this study will be private and confidential. Your name will not be used. Code numbers will identify each item of data. The master code list with the names will be stored in the researcher’s locked, password-protected computer and will be accessible only by the researcher and her academic advisor. Interviews will be recorded with a digital audio recorder. These digital audio files will be kept private and will be secured in the researcher’s locked, password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the researcher and the researcher’s academic advisor. All other research records will be securely stored by the same means.

Audio recordings will be transcribed and statements you make may be included, confidentially, in published reports of the study findings. However, your name or specific affiliation will not be associated with any statements you make and will not be included in any report or publication of the study findings. Furthermore, the online data collection mechanisms (i.e., email and online course components) are secure, thus further assuring privacy and confidentiality of your information. All data will be kept by the researcher until August 1, 2012. At that time they will be destroyed.

Compensation:

You will receive a $20 gift card in appreciation of your time following your full participation in the study, which will include your participation in two interviews and writing one description of your experiences learning online. If you decide to withdraw from the study early, which you may do at any time, you will not receive a gift card.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or with other cooperating institutions. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Angelica Pazurek, a doctoral student in Learning Technologies in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Minnesota. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact Angelica Pazurek by email at pazur003@umn.edu. You may also contact her academic advisor, Dr. Aaron Doering, by email at adoering@umn.edu.
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or her academic advisor, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read all of the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant_________________________________________ Date: ____________

Signature of Investigator_________________________________________ Date: ____________
Appendix F
Writing Prompts and Instructions Provided to Participants
for their Written Lived Experience Descriptions
(van Manen, 1990, p. 63-66)

Now I would like you to write an informal journal entry of sorts describing in detail your experiences learning online. Don’t worry about length, just write. Explain what it was like for you to learn online and focus on experiences you had in which you felt most engaged. I am seeking to gather comprehensive descriptions of your experiences. My objective is to understand the essence of engagement as it is revealed in your experiences, and what online learning was/is like for you. Some things you might share include specific situations, events, or people that were connected with your experience or that impacted you during your experience while learning online. You might also discuss your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about your experience while learning online.

If it will help you, you might consider using the following questions as a guide while you write. Don’t feel the need to address all of them directly, just use them to guide your writing. And again, I would like you to draw on and refer to your personal experiences during CI 5321. Please write in paragraph form.

• What is it like to be engaged when learning online?
• What is it like to feel engaged in an online environment?
• What does it mean to engage?

Don’t worry about fancy or colorful language—just to write as though this was a personal journal or as though you were telling someone your story. Some might even call this a “free write.” Don’t rush through it, but you don’t need to agonize over it either. Set aside an hour or two in which you just write down what comes to mind as you look back on your recent experiences during this online course. There is no “wrong” way to write this. It is simply your story.

It would be easiest to send your writing to me in digital format—with any text editing program you normally use such as Microsoft Word, Apple Pages, Google Docs, Open Office, or similar. And then please email it to me at pazur003@umn.edu when you feel as though you’re finished.

Your goal to complete this and submit it to me will be by __________________, but that is flexible. If you need more time, please just let me know. Thank you so much for your time, energy, and effort on this!
Appendix G
General Interview Guide (Patton, 2002)

Keep in mind the three research questions throughout the interview:

**Research Q1:** What is it like to be an adult learner in online learning environments?

**Research Q2:** What is it like to experience engagement in online learning environments?

**Research Q3:** How do various elements of learning online and dynamics of the learning environment influence adult learners’ feelings of engagement?

Explain the purpose of the study:
The research model I am using is one through which I am seeking comprehensive depictions or descriptions of your experiences while you were learning in the online graduate course. More specifically, I hope to answer these questions about your experiences:

- What was it like to be a learner in online learning environments? Or, what was it like to learn online?

- What was it like to experience engagement in online learning environments? Or, what is it like to find yourself engaged while learning online?

- What were the elements, dynamics, or aspects of the online learning environment that influenced your experience? Or that influenced your feelings of engagement?

Explain an overview and purpose of the interview:
Through your participation in this study, I hope to understand engagement better as it reveals itself in your experiences—and what it was like for you. I’m going to be asking you to recall specific incidents, situations, or events that you experienced while learning online. And I am seeking vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of your experiences and what these incidents and situations were like for you. I’d like you to share your thoughts, feelings, perceptions, as well as situations, events, interactions, resources, and people that may have been connected with your experience or that may have impacted you or your experience while you were learning online.
Begin asking questions about personal demographics, educational and professional history, motivations for enrolling in the online course.

Lead in to participants’ basic perceptions of online learning—before and after the course.

Narrow in on how the phenomenon of engagement was experienced. Touch on each of the NSSE’s five critical factors for engagement (IUCPR, 2011) but be cautious not to reference these factors directly:

1. A supportive environment
2. Interaction
3. Challenge
4. Active and collaborative learning opportunities
5. Enriching educational experiences

Remain open.