Doctoral students' perceptions of learning in a blended research methods course: three telling cases

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DOCTORAL STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING IN A BLENDED
RESEARCH METHODS COURSE: THREE TELLING CASES

by

Sedef Uzuner Smith

A Dissertation
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DOCTORAL STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING IN A BLENDED
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ABSTRACT

As Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings (2008) state, research is “the sine qua non of the doctorate” (p. 4). Therefore, equipping students with the knowledge and skills to conduct research is a key priority in doctoral education. Blended instruction is a promising, yet so far seldom used model for supporting doctoral students’ learning and research training. This model includes a combination of traditional face-to-face (FTF) instruction with Web-based online approaches.

This phenomenological case study attempts to answer two questions regarding doctoral students’ perceptions of learning in a research methods course that used blended instruction: (1) How do doctoral students perceive their learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in the FTF and online components of a blended research methods course? (2) How do their lived experiences shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in the course? The study seeks to provide an in-depth look at these questions by considering the cases of three doctoral students.

Notions of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998) and activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 1993, 2001; Roth, 2007, 2009) provided the theoretical lens for this study. Data included in-depth interviews with the participants, fieldnotes made during observations of the FTF sessions, and documentary data, including the course syllabus and online transcripts.
DEDICATION

To my father Metin Uzuner, who left this world too soon and was not able to see my academic career.

To my mother Irfane Uzuner, who loves and cares for me unconditionally. Thank you for allowing me to achieve my dreams.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first extend my thanks to my advisor Dr. Jane Agee for her support during my Ph.D. program and writing this dissertation. She has been a great mentor helping me so patiently and generously at each step of the process. She is an incredible role model. I admire her professionalism, warmth, and kindness. Thank you, Dr. Agee, for helping me arrive at this moment and for continuously opening pathways for my intellectual and professional growth.

I am also grateful to the participants of this study. Whatever value this study has, it is due to their help and honesty in sharing their experiences with me.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background for the Study

The core purpose of doctoral education is to produce professional researchers that are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills to conduct research (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). Traditional strategies used for the preparation of doctoral students for the research role generally include a dyadic model of relationship between the student and the mentor, who is usually the student’s faculty advisor. Within this model, students’ acquisition of research skills takes place in an individualized environment with few one-to-one contacts with their mentors (Deem & Brehony, 2000). Walker et al. (2008) contend that this dyadic model, even at its best, falls short of what is required for doctoral students’ scholarly development as researchers. Conceptualizing this model as a “lone venture,” Wisker, Robinson, and Shacham (2007) criticize it for ignoring a critical component of doctoral education, which is the intellectual community created by faculty and students. According to Belcher (1994), “this community may have as much - if not more - of an effect on the learner as the mentor does” (Belcher, 1994, p. 24).

More often than not, the dyadic model of relationship that marks doctoral students’ interactions with their mentors during their academic studies also shapes their classroom experience. Doctoral students usually find themselves in classrooms where they experience learning as a solitary process. Ideas of autonomy and independence that underpin the pedagogic practices of traditional doctoral education are the driving forces behind these individual-based classroom practices (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000).
According to Walker et al. (2008), such practices fail to provide the needed context for the kinds of collaboration doctoral students need to develop their learning and research expertise. Shacham and Od-Cohen (2009, p. 287) also add that “this model of doctoral education is no longer sufficient to prepare graduate students for the rapidly changing work environment into which they will emerge.”

Recent research has shown that doctoral students’ scholarly development is most effective when it is collaborative and collective, involving work both with supervisors and peers (Manathunga & Goozee, 2007). The adoption of a community approach to doctoral education is found to create optimum opportunities for “shared experience, confidence building, reduced isolation and solitude, improved networks and empathy, and lack of hierarchy in the learning experience” (Parker, 2009, p. 52). To achieve at least some of these outcomes and to address the problems identified as specific to the traditional student-faculty relationship in the dyadic model, many strategies have been employed in doctoral student preparation. One strategy that has gained popularity, especially with the rapid development of technology, is online instruction.

Based on research evidence suggesting that online course designs support flexibility, reflection, and more importantly, teamwork and collaborative learning (McConnell, 1999), online courses have emerged as an alternative mode of teaching and learning in doctoral education. However, the implementation of such courses has not been unproblematic. In fact, recent research has revealed several downsides of fully online instruction at the doctoral level. For example, in a qualitative investigation of doctoral students’ experiences with fully online research methods courses, Lim, Dannels, and Watkins (2008) found that only a small group of students were satisfied with online
instruction, and the majority of the students interviewed in this study indicated that they perceived the online delivery “less conducive, though not ineffective, to their learning” (Lim, Dannels, & Watkins, 2008, p. 230). Time lag awaiting a response, feelings of isolation, and absence of interpersonal contact were the factors that were found to disrupt students’ learning in the online environment. Some of the participants indicated that online research courses could be richer with an added face-to-face (FTF) component. Similar issues also surfaced in the studies by Winston and Fields (2003) and Wikeley and Muschamp (2004). An essential conclusion emerging from these two studies is that fully online instruction falls short of supporting doctoral students’ acquisition of research skills when the physical separation leads to a psychological and communications gap among the students and faculty.

More recently, the problematic aspects of traditional FTF and fully online instruction in doctoral education has led those designing the coursework component of doctorates to become increasingly interested in employing strategies that can provide a more supportive and effective route for doctoral students’ training. One strategy that appeared promising was to combine FTF and online approaches. Ideally, this model, known as blended instruction, overcomes the limitations of both FTF and online instruction (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

In more specific terms, blended instruction involves the mix of traditional FTF and online instruction where “teaching and learning occur both in the classroom and online, and where the online component becomes a natural extension of traditional classroom learning” (Rovai & Jordan, 2004, p. 3). According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), thoughtful and careful implementation of blended instruction can result in a
transformative learning experience for students because the blended format allows learners to be connected to a learning community regardless of whether they are physically apart and together. They also write that when the interactive and time-independent nature of computer-mediated communication, which encourages reflection as well as fully developed and extended expression, are complemented with the rich dynamic of FTF dialogue, the dialogic processes of interaction get transformed. Viewed from this perspective, use of the blended approach in doctoral education has the potential to provide students with increased opportunities to maintain ongoing, collaborative interactions with their peers and instructors while engaging in reflective thinking, all of which are needed for their professional training.

Statement of the Problem

Research on student learning in courses that use blended instruction is relatively new, but growing. However, the majority of this research has been conducted with undergraduate students. There are remarkably few studies that are concerned with master’s level students, and even fewer that focus on doctoral students. There being almost a complete absence of research looking at doctoral students’ learning in blended courses leads one to ask, “Why have doctoral students been forgotten?” This question provided the foundation for this study.

With few exceptions, existing studies conducted at the undergraduate and master’s levels tend to show blended instruction as offering some distinct intellectual and social benefits for students over traditional FTF or fully online instruction. A significant number of these studies (e.g., Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2008; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003; Christensen, 2003; Gulbahar & Madran, 2009; Ireland, Martindale, Johnson, Adams,
Eboh, & Mowatt, 2009; Jackson & Helms, 2008; Leh, 2002; Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006, Sagin Simsek, 2008; Waddoups, Hatch, & Butterworth, 2003) showed that the blended approach is welcomed by most students because it provides them with convenience, flexibility, autonomy, and increased participation and socialization opportunities. Some researchers (e.g., Collopy & Arnold, 2009; El-Deghaidy & Nouby, 2008) also found that the blended approach encourages cooperation and closeness among learners.

Other findings recurring in multiple studies on blended instruction were concerned with the contribution of online contact to students’ learning. Some researchers (e.g., Aspden & Helm, 2004; Bailey & Morais, 2004; Cox, Carr, & Hall, 2004; Guiller, Durndell, & Ross, 2008; King, 2002; Owsten, Sinclair, & Wideman, 2008; So & Brush, 2008; Vess, 2005; Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006) showed broad agreement that online contact facilitates students’ engagement with the content and with online resources, and provides increased opportunities for their active participation in the discussions. It is also found that online support benefits students’ learning skills and improves their learning quality (Motteram, 2006; Voogt, Almekinders, van den Akken, & Monen, 2005, Wu & Hiltz 2004).

Some studies also brought to the fore the advantages of having FTF contact for students in blended courses. However, studies of this sort are considerably rare. As Macdonald (2008, p. 47) stated, “There is very little in the literature to draw on, when trying to establish exactly what face-to-face support might contribute to a blended strategy,” perhaps because its benefits “are considered too obvious to be recognized.” Nevertheless, the very few studies in this area showed that the FTF component of blended instruction cultivates social relationships, resulting in collaborative and
meaningful interactions among students and the instructor (Michinov & Michinov, 2008; Owsten, Wideman, Murphy, & Lupshenyuk, 2008; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; So, 2009).

From a cognition/achievement perspective, while some studies (e.g., Delialioglu & Yildirim, 2008; Larson & Sung, 2009; Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2007; McCray, 2000; Olapiriyakul & Scher, 2006; Tang & Byrne, 2007; Utts, Sommer, Acredolo, Maher, & Matthews, 2003) indicated no significant differences between the learning outcomes of students in blended courses compared to those of students in comparable online or FTF courses, others (e.g., Boyle, Bradley, Chalk, Jones, & Pickard, 2003; Dowling, Godfrey, & Gyles, 2003; Hughes, 2007; Hwang & Arbaugh, 2009; McVey, 2009; Pereira, Pleguezuelos, Meri, Molina-Ros, Molina-Tomas, & Masdeu, 2007; Reasons, Valaderes, & Slavkin, 2005) reported that significant differences (both positive and negative) exist between students’ learning in blended courses and the learning of their counterparts in FTF and online classes. Some researchers (Lim & Morris, 2009), however, cautioned that the blended delivery methods alone can not account for successful or unsuccessful outcomes. These researchers found instructional factors (such as instructor quality, learning activity, and learning support) and learner variables (such as age, average study time, motivation level, preference for online learning) to be the key factors that interact with and influence students’ learning outcomes in blended courses.

Do these findings also hold true for learners at the doctoral level? How does blended instruction support doctoral students’ learning and research training? And perhaps more important, how do doctoral students perceive their learning in blended courses? These are the questions that beg answers because so far the research focus has
not been on doctoral students and their perceived learning in these new environments that we call blended courses.

Why Doctoral Students?

To write about this would be another chapter, so I will just focus on a few important points. Compared to undergraduates and other graduate students, doctoral students have unique characteristics. As Lovitts (2001, p. 6) wrote, they are typically accomplished people who have been “successful their entire lives and view themselves as superior students, as people who can surmount any academic obstacle, and as people who finish things they start.” Doctoral students’ educational experiences are unique as well. In their programs, these students go through a process of socialization which places special demands on them, both socially and intellectually. This is why Walker et al. (2008) refers to doctoral education as “a complex process of formation” (p. 8).

The roles doctoral students play and the kinds of learning they go through in their programs are unlike any others in their prior academic experiences (Gardner, 2009). The nature of doctoral work requires them to delve deeply into philosophical and epistemological issues and to “creatively generate new knowledge, critically conserve valuable and useful ideas, and responsibly transform those understandings through writing, teaching, and application” (Golde, 2006, p. 5). For these reasons, doctoral students require a different type of instructional support for their social and intellectual development.

Although there is a general consensus on the elements of what constitutes effective doctoral education, the challenge is how to design programs that embody these principles. As I have mentioned earlier, one approach that seems promising is to use
blended instruction, which combines FTF practice with reflective, collaborative online learning.

Doctoral Students and Blended Instruction

At this point in time, only two studies, Agee & Uzuner (in press) and Crossouard (2008) have focused on doctoral students in courses that use the blended approach. Both studies investigated the effects of going online for some part of instruction in research methods courses. In so doing, Agee and Uzuner (in press) were particularly concerned with students’ learning, whereas Crossouard (2008) focused more on students’ identity construction as researchers (full description of these studies is presented in Chapter Two). These two studies have certainly provided us with useful insights into the advantages of integrating an online element, namely asynchronous online discussions, into research methods courses at the doctoral level. However, because they only focused on technology integration and said nothing about the FTF element that was already there, they did not provide us with a holistic understanding of the ways in which the blended form of instruction facilitated (or hindered) doctoral students’ learning.

The present study attempts to address this “gap” in the literature by providing comprehensive descriptions of doctoral students’ perceptions of learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in both the FTF and online components of a blended research methods course. It also offers the reader insights into students’ lived experiences that shaped their interactions, engagement, and participation. While the study is descriptive, it focuses on the importance of context and participants’ frame of reference by using an “emic perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 267). To insure that such a perspective was captured, I employed phenomenological case study methods.
Research Questions

The questions guiding this study were:

1. How do doctoral students perceive their learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in the FTF and online components of a blended research methods course?

2. How do their lived experiences shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in the course?

Use of the word ‘how’ points to the discovery-oriented nature of this study. It denotes that my goal was not to test any hypotheses, but to provide insights into the subjective experience of learning as disclosed by a group of doctoral students.

I interviewed six purposefully selected doctoral students for this phenomenological case study, but eventually focused on three in my analysis. The questions guiding the research served as the foundation on which I formulated the interview questions. They also served as the cornerstone for the analysis of the data. To triangulate my findings, I also used fieldnotes made during observations of the FTF meetings and documentary data, which included the course syllabus and transcripts from the online components of the course.

The conceptual frameworks that drove the analysis of data were Lave and Wenger’s constructs of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998), and Engeström’s (1987, 1993, 2001) version of activity theory. The constructs of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation offered a lens for understanding the learning process as it was taking place within the blended course community, and activity theory offered a functional approach
to capture the contradictions occurring for the participants within that process. Moreover, the study also drew on Roth’s (2007, 2009) work which elaborates on the affective dimension in activity theory. Engeström’s and Roth’s ideas, in combination, were particularly helpful in addressing the second research question.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is three-fold. First, it provides insights into the perceived learning of doctoral students, an overlooked population of learners, in a course that used blended instruction. Unlike previous research which has mainly concentrated on the online aspects of blended learning, this study looks at the full scope of students’ perceived learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in both the online and FTF components of a blended course. It also adds to our understanding of the ways in which the contextual, affective, and personal dimensions affect students’ learning experience at this advanced level.

Limitations

Patton (2002) states, “There are no perfect research designs. There are always trade-offs” (p. 223). Below, I briefly describe the “trade-offs” this study necessitated.

The very first “trade-off” of the study came in framing its methodology. The qualitative nature of this study allowed for in-depth descriptions, yet it limited its ability to generalize. In addition, I, the researcher, was the instrument of the study. I made the observations, took field-notes, conducted interviews and interpreted responses. I understand that my own limitations of energy and skills have certainly influenced the whole research process. Furthermore, the case studies I present in this research are my versions of the accounts of the research participants. The interpretive nature of qualitative
research work means that someone else could tell the stories of these individuals differently, with different emphasis.

Other “trade-offs” came in choosing the research site. Due to limited access to potential sites, I had to conduct this study in a course which was taught by one of my dissertation committee members. To maintain participants’ confidentiality as well as the integrity of my findings, I did not involve this person in the analysis and interpretation of my data in any way (see Appendix A for instructor consent). She did not exert any sort of manipulation or control of the study’s findings. Furthermore, due to limited resources and time, I had to limit my sample size to six. This decision narrowed the study’s scope and excluded other students from contributing their voice to the outcomes.

The final “trade-off” came in the theoretical lenses that framed the study. The notions of community of practice, legitimate peripheral participation, and activity theory provided the framework for analysis and interpretation. The results may have been different if I had used other frameworks.

Nevertheless, despite the above limitations or “trade-offs,” I believe this study addresses a substantial gap in the literature and makes important strides toward understanding doctoral students’ perceptions of learning in blended courses.
Definitions of Terms

Below are definitions of some of the terms I used throughout the study. I am providing these definitions to establish some common understandings between me, the researcher, and the audience.

*Learning*: Refers to the changes in the structure of participants’ thought processes, discourse, and activities.

*Lived experiences*: Refers to the key aspects of participants’ experiences in the course – these aspects being contextual and affective dimensions.

*Contextual factors*. Include students’ previous experiences and individual needs, their level of competence, familiarity with content, familiarity with academic English, familiarity with the tools used, the amount of time they intend to invest in the course, support or lack of support from the instructor or fellow students, and the course community’s social structure and its division of labor, etc.

*Affective factors*. Include emotion, motivation, and identity. Emotion refers to a state of feelings. Motivation includes goals individuals have; it also encompasses their understandings of how goals can be achieved and what their pay offs entail (such as satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, etc). And identity pertains to who someone is, whether it is perceived by self or others.

Personal Interest

This study emerged from a noticeable lack of detail in the literature concerning doctoral students’ learning in blended course environments, but it was also influenced by my observations, experiences, and earlier research.
I was first introduced to blended instruction in the first year of my Ph.D. studies. At the time, I started taking blended courses out of necessity due to the fact that most courses required for my program were converted into this format. Having all of my prior learning experiences in traditional classrooms, I was curious and anxious about learning through this new model. In retrospect, I can say that some of the blended courses I have taken throughout my Ph.D. studies really facilitated my learning, whereas others did not seem to have much of an influence. All in all, I have been through all sorts of feelings about the blended courses I have taken, generally positive, but overwhelmed and frustrated by them at times. This is why examining how other doctoral students experience learning in blended environments and what sense they make out of their experiences is of interest to me.

In the numerous blended courses that I have been in, both as a student and a teacher, I have witnessed particular situations which gave rise to tensions that disrupted the activity of teaching and learning. These tensions usually arose from instructional and technical issues as well as interpersonal ones, such as disagreements, competition, power issues, cliques, lack of trust among the learners, etc. These observations motivated me to investigate how students’ lived experiences shape their learning and engagement in blended courses.

Lastly, of the many constitutive events that led me to this study, participating in a research project that aimed at understanding how the online components of a blended research methods course influenced doctoral students’ learning was the most significant. This project provided me with insights into some of the issues that needed further exploration. While participating in this project, I found myself raising all sorts of
questions, which later on became the guiding questions I wanted to pursue in depth in this study.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Introduction

In this chapter, I review the available literature regarding doctoral students’ learning and acquisition of research skills in blended courses. In addition, I present readers with a detailed description of the theoretical/conceptual frameworks serving as the lenses through which I analyzed the data.

Research on Doctoral Students’ Learning in Blended Courses

In the last decade, there has been an ongoing debate about doctoral education in light of contemporary research suggesting that knowledge is no longer being produced by the independent scholar, but in collaboration with other scholars (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000). At the heart of this debate has been the criticism targeted at the pedagogic practices of traditional doctoral programs that emphasize the idea of the lone scholar working in isolation from others. Scholars criticizing those practices advocate that doctoral programs adopt a community approach to facilitate doctoral students’ learning and research expertise.

Recent research (e.g., Boud & Lee, 2005; Hasrati, 2005; Leshem, 2007; Olson & Clark, 2009; Parker, 2009; Shacham & Od-Cohen, 2009; Wisker, Robinson, & Shacham, 2007) has also provided corroborating evidence to these scholars’ claims by showing communities as crucial elements in doctoral students’ learning and research preparation. Specifically, this research has demonstrated that doctoral students make sense of research better when they interact, do things together, negotiate new meanings, and learn from each other.
In light of these findings, it can be argued that there can be great value in using the blended approach in doctoral education because with its multiple forms of communication, this approach is assumed to have “the capabilities to facilitate” communities that “provide the condition for free and open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation, and agreement” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 97). In addition, it is also assumed that the blended approach offers a distinct advantage in providing learners with flexibility and convenience – characteristics that are, according to some adult learning theorists (e.g., Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), most valued by adult learners.

All together, these assumptions make a strong case for the potential of blended instruction for providing meaningful learning experiences for doctoral students. However, taken at face value, these assumptions lead to conclusions that may not reflect the true nature of learning for doctoral students in blended course environments. It is therefore appropriate to consider these assumptions in terms of what we already know about doctoral students’ learning and acquisition of research skills in blended research methods courses.

Quantitative survey studies (e.g., Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007; Arabasz, Boggs, & Baker, 2003) show that since 2002, blended courses have been undergoing rapid growth and acceptance at the doctoral level in the United States. Yet, there has been an almost complete absence of research documenting doctoral students’ learning and experiences in blended courses, especially in research methods courses that are the core of conventional doctoral training. Studies of this sort have only recently come into existence with the work of Crossouard (2008) and Agee and Uzuner (in press).
Crossouard’s (2008) qualitative case study investigated eleven doctoral students’ identity construction in a research methods course that used blended instruction. The focus in this study was on the online peer discussion forum activity that was introduced as an add-on to the course without replacing any classroom time. This online discussion forum served as a virtual space where students could post their research assignments for peer review and discuss each other’s work without the constraints of time and space.

Data for this study included students’ online discourse, which was analyzed using critical discourse analysis – a tool for studying the textual (genres and styles employed), interpersonal (intersubjective positioning of the students through evaluative comments) and the ideational (the content or subject matter addressed) aspects of discourse. Interviews were also conducted with the participants to obtain deeper understandings of the changes in their standpoints and perceptions as a result of their participation in the online forum.

In the introduction to the study, Crossouard highlighted the importance of peer learning in doctoral education. She then turned to sociocultural learning theories to explain the social nature of learning and identity construction. The idea of learning as “happening in a dialectical relation of self and others within particular communities, so entailing the formation of identities” undergirded the study (p. 52). After briefly discussing the social nature of learning, Crossouard presented an overview of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation and Engestrom’s (2001) cultural historical activity theory. These theoretical constructs provided a lens through which the results relating to students’ identity construction were interpreted.
Findings indicated that the discussion forums provided students with increased opportunities for dialogue about their research, encouraging them to take up a more collegial position as a researcher, and they “created an opportunity for extended collaboration between peers and the tutor in the assignment task development, attempting to reconstruct the division of labor of a tutor as only a summative assessor” (p. 57). The online forums were also found to positively influence students’ social relations by leading to a reconstruction of initially problematic relationships for some in the FTF setting. These findings confirm the idea that blended instruction, especially its online component, can have transformative effects on doctoral students’ research training.

Agee and Uzuner (in press) explored more thoroughly the effects of the online element on students’ learning in a blended research methods course. The online element in the course included 11 asynchronous discussions that preceded each FTF meeting. The analysis in this study was based on three of those discussions: one from the beginning, one from the middle, and one from the end of the course. In their analysis, the researchers focused on how the students used the online discussions for their learning, specifically what cognitive and social tools they used. To get an idea about what the students thought about the value of those discussions for their learning, the researchers also looked at students’ self-evaluations, where they commented on the ways in which the discussions changed, enlarged, or challenged their thinking on the course content. The results of this study, which were grounded in sociocognitive theory, supported the usefulness of online discussions in providing a site for doctoral students where they could draw on a rich repertoire of tools and strategies as well as on the knowledge of others to enhance their thinking and understanding of theory and research.
The Need for Future Research

As with all research, both Crossouard’s (2008) and Agee and Uzuner’s (in press) studies vary from each other in terms of their methodological approaches and quality within those approaches. However, two common things appear in them. First, they did not provide us with a holistic view of doctoral students’ learning taking place in blended courses. This is mainly because their focus was limited to the online aspect of the blended courses they studied, showing the potential advantages of integrating computer mediated communication into FTF courses. There is, therefore, a need for studies investigating doctoral students’ learning occurring in both the FTF and online portions of blended courses.

Second, because these studies focused primarily on technology related issues, they left the contextual and emotional aspects of learning relatively untouched. In this research, I argue that an understanding of student learning in blended courses at the doctoral level, or at any level for that matter, cannot be developed with research that is only concerned with the effects of online contact and support. Therefore, rather than focusing on the benefits and potentials of the use of online technology, research needs to move toward understanding the contextual and affective factors that can significantly influence the process of learning in blended courses.

The aforementioned issues have motivated the design of this study which aims at providing comprehensive descriptions of a group of doctoral students’ perceived learning in a blended research methods course. In Chapter One, I introduced the questions guiding this study. It is worthwhile to restate them to summarize the essential thrust of the study. The guiding questions I posed in the introduction were:
1. How do doctoral students perceive their learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in the FTF and online components of a blended research methods course?

2. How do their lived experiences shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in the course?

Having stated the research questions, I now turn to the theoretical frameworks that guided this study.
Community of Practice and Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Educational researchers have found Lave and Wenger’s construct of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to be very relevant to doctoral students’ learning and acquisition of research skills. Drawing on socio-cultural theories which take social interaction to be central in individuals’ learning and development, Wenger (1998, p. 48) described a community of practice as a social setting where individuals develop, negotiate, and share their theories and ways of understanding the world. There are no definitive measures for determining whether a particular social group should be considered a community of practice. Yet, the central ideas that underlie this notion point to three key elements, such as mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, as being crucial in such determination. In that sense, a cohort of doctoral students in a blended course on qualitative research can be described as a community of practice based on a common purpose (e.g., understanding how qualitative research works), mutual engagement (e.g., weekly meetings of the group, online and FTF), and a shared repertoire of resources and tools (e.g., required or recommended books and articles for the course).

Wenger contended that individuals’ engagement in a community of practice always entails a process of negotiation of meaning, which generates circumstances for further meanings “that extend, redirect, dismiss, reinterpret, modify or confirm – in a word, negotiate anew – the histories of meanings of which they are apart” (Wenger, 1998, p. 52-53). In Wenger’s view, negotiation of meaning takes place in the convergence of two processes: participation and reification. Participation involves acting and interacting, and reification involves producing artifacts (such as tools, words,
symbols, rules, documents, concepts, theories, etc.) that become a focus for the negotiation of meaning.

Wenger described participation and reification as complementary processes in that each has the capacity to make up for the limitations the other has. For instance, when reading books or articles do not make an idea clear to a student, his/her peers who have a better grasp of that idea may become a source for understanding through conversation, a form of participation. This way, participation enables new meanings and understandings that could not be achieved only by reification. By the same token, reading and writing about an idea may enhance one’s understanding in ways that interactions cannot. These ideas suggest that meaning making in a community of practice occurs both through interaction and through exposure to a variety of forms (e.g., books, articles, stories, symbols, terms, etc) that reify the subject at hand.

Lave and Wenger (1991) also made the case that learning within communities of practice is not receiving or absorbing information as a result of transmission or assimilation. Rather, in their view, learning is “increasing participation in communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49). Their notion of legitimate peripheral participation becomes relevant here.

Legitimate peripheral participation is grounded in Vygotsky’s notion of the “zone of proximal development,” which refers to “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development through problem-solving in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Accordingly, legitimate peripheral participation takes place in activities where one party is more skilled or expert than another. Within this participation
frame, the novice’s involvement in the activities of a specified community is “legitimate” in the sense that she/he is granted enough legitimacy to be treated as a potential member of a community that involves more knowledgeable others. The novice’s participation is also “peripheral” in the sense that learning in this participation framework is “centripetal” by nature, pointing toward full participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) reminded us that centripetal participation does not imply occupying the center of a community, because they argued there is no such thing as ‘the periphery’ and ‘the center.’ In their usage, peripherality is a positive term, and when enabled, it provides “access to sources for understanding through growing involvement” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37).

In Lave and Wenger’s view, learning as participation in communities of practice becomes more effective: (a) when there is sufficient amount of interaction between participants, (b) when participants are given access to an activity and are provided with ample opportunities to gradually move from a peripheral to a more central position, and (c) when the technologies, tools, and artifacts of the community are employed adequately to support learning.

Although the notions of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation are important constructs to consider for the purposes of this study, namely understanding doctoral students’ perceptions of learning developing within a blended course community, they have weaknesses. First, these frameworks do not account for the competing elements of the context within which learning takes place. Contextual factors/variables lie outside the purview of these theories. Second, although Lave and Wenger acknowledged the existence of tensions and conflicts in communities of practice, they did not perceive those as an integral part of learning. Rather, they view such
contradictions as a source of continuity and discontinuity of the practice and its development. It is for these reasons that I now turn to Engeström’s (1987, 1993, 2001) version of activity theory which more explicitly recognizes the conflictual nature of learning and accounts for the significant features of the context that both supports and/or hinders one’s learning.

Engeström’s Version of Activity Theory

Engeström’s (1987, 1993, 2001) version of activity theory, or cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) as it is also called, has its origins in Vygotsky’s notion of mediation and Leontiev’s (1981) ideas on ‘activity.’ Engeström’s version of activity theory expanded Vygotsky’s and Leontiev’s ideas by elaborating on the social dimensions of learning activities as well as the contradictions within those activities.

Engeström (1993, p. 67) proposed that an understanding of human actions requires an understanding of the surrounding structure, the context, within which those actions are situated. From this perspective, contexts are viewed as activity systems that integrate the subject (the agent), the object (what the agent is acting on), mediating artifacts (signs and tools), rules (the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions within the activity), the community (individuals who share the same general object), and the division of labor (division of tasks as well as division of power and status between the members of the community).

In Engeström’s activity theory, tensions and contradictions are considered as inherent elements of activity systems – an idea that is crucial to this study. Specifically, this theory views activity systems/contexts as unpredictable places that are almost always in flux with tensions, disturbances, double-bind situations, and conflicts that “exert an
influence on the participants in the system and on the tasks therein” (Beauchamp, Jazvak-Martek, & McAlpine, 2009). In this theory, activity systems are characterized by four types of contradictions: primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary.

Primary (inner) contradictions exist internally. They may stem from tensions within components of the activity system, such as tensions within the object, the community, or the tools, etc. For instance, primary contradictions might occur when a tool individuals use to conduct an activity frustrates them or becomes unusable or even inappropriate. Primary contradictions may also arise from tensions between “the use value” and “the exchange value” of an activity (Engeström, 1987, 1993). These contradictions can best be understood in terms of breakdowns between individual actions and collective activity. This means that in any given setting, different actions or motives may be realized despite the fact that each individual in that setting display the same behavior in a task. For example, in a classroom setting, one student may be learning for learning’s sake (use value), while another may be engaging in the same learning activity to obtain a passing grade (exchange value). It is this multiplicity of motivations that lies at the heart of the tensions between the use value and the exchange value.

Secondary contradictions are those that exist between central components of the activity system, such as tensions between the expectations of the subject and the intentions of the learning activities, or tensions between the social relationships among the community members and the division of tasks and responsibilities. Tertiary contradictions are those that exist between “an activity in the way it currently exists and its possible forms in more advanced states” (Roth, Lee, & Hsu, 2009, p. 143). For example, in an academic context, tertiary contradictions may arise when an instructor,
while teaching students who are accustomed to learning through teacher-centered pedagogies, integrates into her methods of teaching new techniques that correspond to the ideals of student-centered teaching. As Engestöm (1992, p.21) wrote, “The new procedures may be formally implemented, but probably still subordinated to and resisted by the old general form of the activity.” Lastly, quaternary contradictions exist between the central activity and its neighbor activities with which the former interacts, for example the contradictions between education of doctoral students at the university, focusing on theory, and the central activity (practice) of researchers in real world.

It is important to note here that in activity theory, contradictions are not viewed as signs of weakness. Rather, they are viewed as key elements that provide the trigger for qualitative transformations. A classic example is an intervention study by Engeström (1999) which shows how disturbances and double-bind situations generated by aggravated contradictions within a hospital setting provided the stimulus for practitioners to reflect critically on their practices and take necessary actions to transform them. The findings of this study support the idea that “it is not contradictions themselves that are ‘progressive’ but our determination to expose and resolve them; for criticism, the pointing out of contradictions, induces us to change our theories, and thereby to progress” (Nelson, 1983, p. 138).

Although Engeström’s version of activity theory was originally developed as a conceptual tool to understand transformations in work and organizations, in the last decade, it has become a useful framework for understanding issues in education. For example, in the field of doctoral education, Beauchamp, Jazvac-Martek, and McAlpine (2009) used activity theory and its key concept of ‘contradiction’ to document the
complex roles and relationships that influence doctoral students’ identity development. Hopwood and Stocks (2008) and Crossouard (2008) also drew on activity theory and its notion of contradictions in their work, the former investigated the issues relating to doctoral students’ teaching development in terms of the challenges they faced, and the latter explored the challenging situations doctoral students encountered as they participated in online forums in a blended course. Scholars from outside the field of doctoral education have also found activity theory useful in studying technology mediated learning (Barab, Barnett, Yagamata-Lynch, Squire, & Keating, 2002; Barab, Schatz, & Scheckler, 2004; Scanlon & Issroff, 2005; Shu-Sheng, Marek, & Hsiu-Mei, 2010), literacy development in classroom contexts (Weimelt, 2001), educational psychology (Leadbetter, 2005), and teacher professional development (Blanton, Simmons, & Warne, 2001; Donnelly, 2008; Karasavvidis, 2009; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004; Yagamata-Lynch, 2003; Yagamata-Lynch & Smaldino, 2007; Yagamata-Lynch & Haudenschild, 2009).

I find Engeström’s version of activity suitable for the purposes of this study for two reasons. First, it draws attention to the influences of contextual variables (such as the goals of the activities students engage in and their intended outcomes, the nature of tools the students use, the rules that govern their behavior, etc.) on learning. Second, with its emphasis on contradictions, this theory provides a structural model within which tensions can be identified and the complex dynamics within a social system can be captured.

Nevertheless, despite its increasing use, Engeström’s version of activity theory has recently been criticized for not considering the role of affect in learning – an aspect that is also underplayed in Lave and Wenger’s notions of community of practice and
legitimate peripheral participation. The affective dimension of learning has very recently come to the fore in this theory with the work of Roth (2007). Below I describe how Roth conceptualized the affective dimension of learning from an activity theory perspective.

Activity Theory and the Affective Dimension of Learning

Drawing on Vygotsky’s (1986, p. 10) idea that the separation of intellect and affect “makes the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of “thoughts thinking themselves,” segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal needs and interests, the inclinations, impulses, of the thinker,” Roth (2007, 2009) offered an expansion and development of activity theory principles to include affect in the analysis of human activities. The aspects of affect that Roth proposed to integrate into the main tenets of activity theory include emotion, motivation, and identity.

Roth theorized that motive, emotion, and identity mediate what people do and how they do it. He demonstrated this relation in a five year ethnographic study (Roth, 2007) that focused on two fish culturists (Erin and Jack) working in a salmon hatchery in Canada. Through observations and interviews, Roth showed that the goals the fish culturists chose for themselves while they engaged in their daily work practices in the hatchery and the emotional feedback they derived from their immediate situations and contacts influenced how they participated and what they learned as a consequence of their participation. The fish culturists became more interested in their work and in learning when they saw their payoffs in terms of achievement, job satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment. These positive emotions encouraged them to increase their emotional energies and intensity of their participation, whereas negative emotional states
arising from emotionally draining situations and contacts led them to experience frustration, discontent, and disengagement.

In Roth’s study, emotions and motives also influenced the fish culturists’ identities – their sense of who they were with respect to others and self. For example, as a result of his dissatisfaction with the new management of his company, one fish culturist (Jack), who was formerly recognized as an ideal mentor and a knowledgeable expert, lost his interest and motivation in learning and improving his practices in his workplace. He then acted with and reproduced a negative emotional valence which led the management and his coworkers to view him as “an unmotivated worker who merely puts his time” (Roth, 2007, p. 57). With the new identity he developed, Jack oriented himself toward work as “just another job.” He was no longer interested in learning or changing his practices.

By weaving together crucial questions of how emotions, motivation, and identity constrain and enable what people do and how they do it, Roth’s work provided an enhanced view of activity theory, one that positions the affective dimensions as crucial components in the triangular representation developed by Engeström. In combination, Roth’s and Engeström’s ideas of activity theory provided a valuable tool to help illustrate the specific aspects of the learning process that my analysis revealed.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study is concerned with the phenomenon of learning at the doctoral level as a group of participants experienced it in a blended course. It is primarily phenomenological because it aims at capturing and describing their lived experiences (Giorgi, 1997). The study also takes elements from case study approach as it aims at gathering “comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information” about each participant (Patton, 2002, p. 447). Therefore, I characterize this study as a phenomenological case study.

The following questions guided this research:

1. How do doctoral students perceive their learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in the FTF and online components of a blended research methods course?

2. How do their lived experiences shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in the course?

This study originally started as a case study of six doctoral students. However, eventually I chose to focus on three students in order to present detailed accounts of the data.

Research Time Frame

The research time frame for this study was one semester (14 weeks) from January 2010 to May 2010. I felt following the participants through one full semester was necessary to answer my research questions fully.
Data Sources

The primary data sources for this study were three in-depth interviews with the participants. Secondary data sources included fieldnotes made during observations of the FTF meetings and documentary data, which included the course syllabus and transcripts from the online components of the course, all of which were publicly available.

Research Site

The study took place in a qualitative research methods course offered in the College of Education of a large, research-based university in the Northeastern United States. The course was delivered in a blended format, including both FTF and Web-based approaches, and it addressed qualitative research design, data collection, and analysis. There were a total of 16 students in the course (14 women and 2 men).

Selection of Participants

Because my aim in this study was to provide “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973), I chose to work with a small group of students. Initially, using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002), I decided to recruit a sample of six to eight students from the course who were different from each other in terms of demographics (such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, departmental affiliation, full time or part time student status), beliefs about learning, as well as experiences with blended instruction.

I used the first day of class to recruit volunteers for the study. In that session, I introduced myself to all of the students enrolled in the course, and informed them about the purposes and the nature of the study. After that brief introduction, I distributed the consent form (see Appendix B) to the whole class. This form included a brief statement
of the purpose and length of the study and my role as the investigator. It also informed the students about the tasks they would be asked to perform as part of agreeing to the study, information about confidentiality of records, participants’ rights, possible benefits, and how the results would be disseminated.

A small survey (see Appendix C), which was designed to serve as a tool to identify a diverse body of participants, also accompanied the consent form. Only those students who agreed to participate in the study and thus were willing to commit to three interview series were asked to take the survey. The survey included a total of 17 questions. Questions 1 and 2 addressed students’ prior experiences, if any, with blended courses. Questions 3 and 4 were about the course’s value to the students. Questions 5 and 6 addressed students’ self efficacy. Questions 7, 8, 9, and 10 asked about students’ attitudes toward peer learning, teacher feedback, and peer feedback. The last set of questions (Questions 11 through 17) addressed students’ ethnicity, nationality, departmental affiliation, full time or part time student status, etc.

I encouraged all 16 students to volunteer, but also explained to them that not all students who volunteered would necessarily be chosen to participate because of my need for a small sample of students. I also made it clear to the students that I needed consent from everyone in the class to be able to access the course’s online components. All 16 students gave me permission to access the online materials that were publicly available on the course website. And except for one student, all students (N=15) in the course volunteered to be interviewed for the study. Of these 15 volunteering students, I selected eight based on the responses they gave to the survey questions. I started my data collection with these eight students. However, when I contacted them (via email) to
schedule for interviews, two students dropped out because of scheduling conflicts. After that, I continued the study with six participants.

Although I conducted interviews with six individuals, I eventually chose to focus on the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of three students (all participating students knew about this condition). McCracken’s (1988) “less is more” approach was my guiding principle when deciding on this number. McCracken (1988, p. 17) states, “it is more important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than more specifically with many of them.” Three yielded an appealing balance of manageability for in-depth case studies. I was prepared to increase the number of cases if three proved to be insufficient, but this did not turn out to be necessary.

The three cases I selected from my sample of six were those of Jen, Kelly, and Connie. These three cases, in my interpretation, were “telling” cases “in which the particular circumstances surrounding [each] case serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239). In other words, I specifically focused on these three cases because the features that were present in them best illuminated the key aspects of the theories that framed this study.

Data Sources

My data sources for this study primarily constituted three in-depth interviews with the participants. Other sources of data included the fieldnotes I took during observations of the FTF meetings, and documentary data, which included the course syllabus and transcripts from the online components of the course, all of which were publicly available.
Interviews

In order to enter into “the mental world of the selected participants” (McCracken, 1988) and understand their learning experiences in this blended course as well as how they made meaning out of these experiences, I conducted in-depth interviews with the participants. In these interviews, I employed Seidman’s (2006) in-depth interviewing protocol with three-interview series.

Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes with each participant. They were spaced about five weeks apart, held in rooms on campus where privacy could be assured, and taped, transcribed, and kept anonymous. Each interview had a distinct purpose and focus. In interview one, I obtained descriptive details of the participants’ perspectives on their learning, expectations from the course as well as their views about qualitative research and blended instruction. In interview two, I sought to understand the details of participants’ experiences in the selected blended course. In this interview, my focus was on what it was like for the participants to learn in this course. Finally, in interview three, I obtained participants’ reflections on their learning and experiences in the course.

To increase the comparability of student responses during the analysis, I used standardized open-ended interview protocols (Patton, 2002). The interview questions are available in Appendix D.

Observations

To triangulate my findings, I used observation data gathered from the FTF meetings of the course. The class met FTF nine times during the semester for 2.5 hours. I observed seven of these nine meetings (I was unable to observe the first FTF meeting because I used that session to obtain consent forms from the students and I missed the
FTF meeting on March 8th). During each observation, I paid close attention to the course happenings, activities, interactions, and the participants’ behaviors.

Patton (2002, p. 456) recommends qualitative researchers to organize their fieldwork through “sensitizing concepts” which provide “directions along which to look” (as cited in Blumer 1969, p. 148). He writes:

[…] observers do not enter the field with a completely blank state. While the inductive nature of qualitative inquiry emphasizes the importance of being open to whatever one can learn, some way of organizing the complexity of experience is virtually a prerequisite for perception itself” (Patton, 2002, p, 279)

In this study, Engeström’s activity theory and his four questions, “Who are the subjects of learning? Why do they learn? What do they learn, what are the contents and outcomes of learning? How do they learn, what are the key actions or processes of learning?” (Engeström, 2001, p. 133) provided a useful sensitizing framework for observations. These questions gave me a general sense of guidance in approaching the observations.

Documentary Data

Documentary data included the course syllabus and transcripts from the online components of the course, all of which were publicly available. The transcripts contained students’ online postings – those they posted on the course website for online discussions. The course syllabus provided insights into the requirements of the course, and the transcripts enabled me to understand how students were making meaning of the course readings.
Methods for Analysis

Merriam (1988, p. 119) wrote, “Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research. Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read.” Based on this recommendation, I started my analysis as soon as the interview data, the documentary data, and observation field notes became available to me.

The data that I worked on for this study included 135 double-spaced pages of verbatim interview transcripts (for the three selected cases), 81 pages of field notes, and 310 pages of documents, which included participants’ online postings as well as the course syllabus. I prepared hard copies for field notes and documents and conducted their analysis on paper. For the interview data, however, I followed a different approach. I conducted the analysis for interview data both on paper and on the NVivo 8 software, a coding tool used for qualitative analysis. I chose to work with NVivo because I was familiar with it as I used it a few years ago when conducting research which was independent of this study. Despite some of its technical difficulties and complexities, I have found NVivo particularly helpful for isolating and contextualizing codes and categories. It allowed me to print occurrences of each particular code in isolation from the text, and when necessary, I only needed to click on the references to the isolated codes themselves to see them in context. Fortunately, these features of NVivo enabled me to manipulate my data with much greater facility than with the older card and indexing system recommended by Merriam (1988).

Working with Interview Data
I analyzed each interview data set using Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) coding strategies. Strauss and Corbin suggested that one begins the analysis with open coding, which pertains to closely examining the data and condensing it into preliminary categories. Before I began with open coding, I read through the hard copies first and made marginal notes. Then I did a sentence-by-sentence rereading of the data and wrote down comments and queries to generate codes and categories that represented what I was seeing in the data. At this stage in the analysis, I took each sentence and gave it a name by asking myself, “What is this? What does it represent?” Some of the category names I came up with were “emic” in the sense that I used the words/phrases of the participants that seemed like good cover terms, while for others I used words that were based on my description of what was going on in the data. Each time an instance of a code/category occurred in the data, I asked specific questions such as “who, when, where, what, how, how much, and why?” Sometimes the answers to these questions were in the data, sometimes not. When they weren’t, I took those questions to the next interviews.

I repeated the open coding process twice for each material once by hand on a hard copy then by using the NVivo software. Next, I compared the two codings to test for consistency – a strategy I used to achieve reliability, as suggested by Richards (2005). I continuously refined my coding based on the differences I observed in the two codings of the same data set. Table 1 presents a few examples from the open coding of the interview transcripts.
Table 1
Examples of Open Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Transcripts</th>
<th>Sample codes generated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The others were doing the talking. Usually even though I have things to say I don’t talk much”</td>
<td>Feeling silenced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I was surprised at this level some of my peers didn’t look like the person who spent enough time not in what they wrote but in the presentation”</td>
<td>Tension within the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“With my knowledgeable friends, which some of the peers become, I think it [group work] would be more agreeable. I think because they have more of an understanding of what you are doing. Others just see the path.”</td>
<td>Giving credit to “knowledgeable friends”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that once a researcher assigns initial codes and categories to qualitative data, s/he should take a second pass through it with the aim of organizing and linking those codes by using a coding paradigm involving causal conditions, context, actions and interactions, intervening conditions, and consequences. They called this procedure axial coding, “the process of reassembling data that were
fractured during open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). With this in mind, in axial coding, my goal was to compare one code/category to another and to create relational statements about how they related to each other. To achieve this goal, I focused on the initially coded categories and asked myself the following question: Is X category related to Y category? Asking and answering questions like that with my initial categories allowed me to create relationships in my mind such as “X is a reason for Y,” “X leads to/affects Y,” “X facilitates/hinders Y,” etc. I then drew cluster diagrams, as recommended by Charmaz (2006, p. 86), to visualize those relationships.

The category relations I created became my working ‘hypotheses’ which I tried to validate through constant comparison. I compared data with data to look for events and instances that supported or refuted the relationships I generated. For example, I compared interview statements within the same interview and compared statements in different interviews. In the same way, I compared what happened on one day with the same activity on subsequent days. Such a comparison allowed me to refine my categories and their interconnections.

To show how I conducted axial coding, I provide a sample cluster diagram here which shows the relationships between categories that emerged from one of the interviews. The boxes in the diagram represent categories and lines between them denote associations showing causal or intervening conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences.
An Example of a Cluster Diagram from Axial Coding

Having issues with speaking English

Being left out and feeling silenced in discussions

Lack of excitement about discussions

Self-disclosure – letting others know

Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommended that after the open and axial coding processes, which may occur concurrently or consecutively within the analysis, the researcher should continue with selective coding – the process of selecting core categories through which a story line can be formulated. With this in mind, I looked at the results of my axial coding and asked myself the following questions: What seems most striking or salient here? Which previously identified categories seem to encompass the main event or happenings? What instances, events, or happenings are reflected over
and over again in the data? What story can I tell with those? As I was looking for answers to these questions, I paid particular attention to those categories that were related to my research questions, “How do doctoral students perceive their learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in the FTF and online components of a blended research methods course?” and “How do their lived experiences shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in the course?” I then consolidated the categories under three core categories that reflected these specific research questions. The first category described the participants’ beliefs and theories about learning in general. The second category described their perceptions of learning developing through FTF and online interactions and activities in the course. And, the third category described the tensions acting as the intervening conditions on participants’ interactions, engagement, and participation.

Using open, axial, and selective coding processes this way allowed me to stay focused and to see my data in its entire complexity. It also allowed my analysis and interpretations to be true to my data. I can confidently say that the final stories I crafted emerged from those categories and relationships that existed in the actual data, not from what I thought was out there but had not come across.

Once I got a big picture of the interview data inductively through the use of open, axial, and selective coding strategies, I used Merriam’s (1998) case study analysis. Merriam suggested two stages of analysis for qualitative case studies: within-case analysis, which pertains to preparing a description for each person in the evaluation; and cross-case analysis, which refers to looking for similarities and differences across participants to “establish the range of generality of a finding or explanation, and at the
same time, pin down the conditions under which that finding will occur” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 151). With this in mind, for within-case analysis, I considered the participants individually. After analyzing each participant’s case, I conducted a cross-case analysis to see what common points they had and how they differed. In so doing, my aim was to build a general pattern of explanation that helps to account for participants’ learning experiences in the course.

Working with the Observation Data

The observation data included 81 pages of typed and double spaced fieldnotes written in the style of a play script, indicating the setting, the activities, artifacts used, social interactions, instructions from the professor, and whatever the students and the professor said, with direct and indirect quotes. I used thematic analysis to analyze the fieldnotes. Thematic analysis is a widely used approach that offers researchers a way of seeing, making sense of, and analyzing qualitative information (Boyatzis, 1998). In the first stage of a thematic analysis, the researcher reads though the data set and identifies the themes/codes that describe the observations. Then s/he looks closely at each theme, in relation to each other, to uncover patterns of association. The goal of this analysis is to summarize the findings under thematic headings. The thematic analysis approach shares many features of the open, axial, and selective coding processes I used with the interview data. Despite the similarities, however, these two approaches (thematic analysis and open, axial, selective coding) are different in that the latter includes a higher level of analysis.

While working with the observation data, I used thematic analysis in the following ways. First, I read and reread each fieldnote a few times. Next, I marked
similar passages in the fieldnotes with a code to categorize them (see Appendix E for code illustrations). Eventually, my coding yielded a pool of 31 codes, all of which were generated inductively from the data. Then I wrote down all of my codes on a piece of paper and linked them to one another. In the end, I produced five master themes to summarize and explain the observation data set. These themes were:

1. The emergence and development of social relations
2. Revoicing, bringing back, and expanding online contributions
3. Instructor-student collaborative explorations
4. Learning through multiple modalities
5. Procedural scaffolding.

I decided to present the material from the fieldnotes in three ways: to provide a detailed description of the FTF component of the course; to situate coded data from the interviews within context; and to validate findings from the interview data.

Working with Documentary Data

Documentary data consisted of the course syllabus and transcripts from the online components of the course, all of which were publicly available. These transcripts were from the two online activities students did in the course: dialogues on assigned readings and reading group discussions.

I followed the same analysis process with the transcripts as I did with the fieldnotes. That is, I conducted a thematic analysis which initially yielded a total of 24 codes that I developed inductively from the data (see Appendix F for coding illustrations). I then organized these codes into two general themes that reflect students’
subject positions in their online contributions: Positioning self as a learner eager for help, and positioning self as a teacher, offering explanations and advice.

For the course syllabus, I followed a less intensive method of analysis. As I read through the syllabus, I put remarks in the margins to add meaning and clarity to what I was seeing, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984). These remarks then became the descriptive material, with illustrative examples from the syllabus itself.

I decided to present the material from the syllabus to provide contextual information about the course. And I used the material from the transcripts to provide a detailed description of the activities and interactions that took place in the online components of the course, to situate coded data from the interviews within context, and to validate findings from the interview data.

Validity Issues

In this study, I took several measures to address validity and thus increase the study’s methodological rigor and analytical defensibility.

Credibility

To establish credibility, I used direct quotations from the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents, used multiple sources of data (triangulation), gathered data over a period of time, and took my interpretations back to my participants to solicit their views on my findings (member checking).

Using verbatim statements from the interviews and documents as well as using excerpts from the field notes allowed me to support and illustrate my findings. Triangulating the interview data with observation data and documentary data rendered a holistic understanding of the situation and avoided the danger of relying exclusively on
one data source. Gathering data over a semester enabled me to establish relationships and build trust among my participants. And member checking, or “taking the data and interpretation back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 169) enhanced the accuracy of my interpretations as it enabled me to verify that my construction of the participants’ experiences did indeed match reality.

**Dependability**

How far can the readers rely on a set of findings? In addressing this inquiry, Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) suggest that good qualitative research discloses the inner workings of the overall research process to audience so that they could follow the chain of evidence that led to the conclusions. To ensure dependability, I tried to do my very best to explicate my methodological choices and the steps I followed in their execution.

**Transferability**

Merriam (1988, p. 173) writes, “One selects a case study approach because one wishes to understand the particular in depth, not because one wants to know what is generally true of the many.” In addition, Maxwell (2005, p. 115) states, “the value of a qualitative study may depend on its lack of external generalizability in the sense of being representative of a larger population.” In this study, I am not concerned with generalizing my findings. Rather, I will leave it up to my readers to decide whether my study findings apply to situations they encounter. Therefore, the kind of generalizability/transferability I am thinking of in this study is what Merriam (1988, p. 177) calls, “reader or user generalizability,” which refers to generalization of a study’s findings by its readers or
users. To enhance reader generalizability of my findings, I presented detailed descriptions or accounts of my participants and their perceptions of learning in the course.

**Researcher bias**

Following a phenomenological approach requires the researcher to engage in the Epoche (bracketing) process wherein she/he sets aside “preconceptions, beliefs and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies to be completely open, receptive and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). In accordance with this principle, I practiced bracketing at the beginning and throughout the study. I started by composing a subjectivity statement (see Appendix G) where I set aside my biases and prejudices which could cloud my analysis and continued the Epoche process by staying away from imposing my prejudgment on what I heard, saw, and found. I might not have achieved the Epoche perfectly, as there are always some things that are not “bracketable” (Moustakas, 1994). Nevertheless, I believe the energy, attention, seriousness, and genuineness that I put into the whole process significantly reduced the influence of my preconceived thoughts and judgments and allowed me to approach things with openness.

**Reactivity**

Reactivity is “the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). In qualitative research such as this one, reactivity can be reflected in the observer effect – participants may change their behavior because they know that they are being observed – and in the interviewer effect – their responses to the interview questions may be influenced by the interviewer or by the feeling that they
should provide pleasing answers to be seen in a positive way. To eliminate these situations, I used the following strategies: (a) I prolonged my observations and engagement in the field so that the participants could get used to my presence and act in the ways that they usually act, (b) I ensured strict confidentiality to obtain both positive and negative student input in the interviews. I let my participants know at the outset of the study that their participation would be unknown to the other members of the course including the course instructor, and (c) I avoided asking leading questions in the interviews.

Researcher’s Role

During the study, my role was that of a researcher. I had no responsibility for teaching or grading my participants before, during, or after the study. I did not interfere with the natural sequence of events or classroom happenings, assist students with their projects, or attempt to change the manner in which the class was taught. During the online and in-class observations, I assumed the role of a non-participant observer.

Ethical Issues

I conducted the study after I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In line with IRB’s ethical standards, I kept participants’ identities secret and substituted pseudonyms for their names, country and departmental affiliations. No one knew who participated in my sample of six. I thought the participants would be made vulnerable if their gender were known, so I concealed it by using female names and pronouns for all.
Potential Benefits to Participants

In addition to compensating the participants for the time they put into the three interview series, I shared perquisites of my privilege – that of being a student in the last phase of my doctoral study – with the participants (Lincoln, 2002). Even after data collection was completed, I made myself available to the participants as well as other students in the course and provided them with information and advice about matters related to IRB protocols, transcribing and analyzing interviews, and using the Nvivo software for qualitative data analysis. I also shared with them my experiences, knowledge, and resources on writing the qualitative dissertation to help them with their own research.

In terms of other benefits, participants commented that the interviews afforded them the following opportunities: to reflect on their learning in the course and the contradictions they experienced along the way; to analyze the outcomes of their own learning in the course in terms of its duration, understanding, and transfer; and to see the interviewing techniques, which they had learned in the course, being utilized in actual practice. The following excerpts from the interviews provide evidence for these benefits:

Excerpt 1:

I think it has been really interesting to do the interviews with you about the course and my learning in it because what has really become more profound is your invocation of me reflecting on the course, not on the chapters, not on the quality of research but really allowing me the opportunity to really consider what I am experiencing in the course. We are talking about interviewing in class. How do you prepare questions and
how do you conduct an interview? Here it is right in front of me so it is a wonderful gift seeing it in action, not just in books. I almost feel if I were running the course, I would try to inject that experience purposefully, not voluntarily, because it enhanced my learning (Jen).

Excerpt 2:
It [interviews] was a good metacognitive process because you really put me into a position where I had to look back some of the things I said and kind of go back and say “Okay, why did I say that?” In truth, we don’t think about what we say when we say it. It was a really good reflective process to look back at some of the things that I posted, some of the experiences that I had, and how some of those things were either dealt with or pushed to the side or made more sense (Kelly).

Excerpt 3:
It was good to get the chance to talk about my experiences. Each time I had an interview I thought about the class and myself more and more so it helped me to focus. It was like a checking in with myself. I appreciate that (Connie).

In the following chapter, I present the findings of the study, focusing on the context first then the description of the three cases I selected for the analysis. It is my hope that the analysis has provided a rich description of the setting and the cases, and offered meaningful links to the theories guiding this study.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

In qualitative research, analysis involves bringing structure and order to data by organizing it into themes and categories, and interpretation includes attaching meaning to the analysis and making sense of it (Patton, 2002). Lessons learned during the analysis and interpretation processes are then presented in a textual form which communicates these understandings to the readers. Van Maanen (1988) describes this process as telling the “tales.” In this chapter, I present the stories unfolded throughout the processes of analysis and interpretation. In so doing, I focus on three students, Jen, Kelly, and Connie, despite having data on six focal students. I selected these three individuals because their cases were unique, yet illustrative of a more general story that emerged from the whole data set. While telling the stories of Jen, Kelly, and Connie, I incorporate their voices in the form of quotes. These quotes served as empirical data which provide insights into their experiences. I must note here that all names of persons throughout the study are pseudonyms. I thought the participants would be made vulnerable if their identifying information (such as gender, ethnicity, country origin, departmental affiliation, etc) was known, so I altered such information to conceal their identity.

Before delving into the case studies, I provide important contextual information about the course the participants were enrolled in. This information is crucial in laying the groundwork for the cases. In addition, the use of activity theory necessitates this contextual information given that it views human behavior as embedded in contexts and requires a contextualized analysis of individual actions.
Contextualizing the Case Studies: The Blended Research Methods Course

In this section, I give an overview of the course context in which Jen, Kelly, and Connie participated in. The discussion below, which uses illuminative examples of the activities and interactions that took place in the online and FTF components of the course, is based on the findings from three data sources: the course syllabus, fieldnotes from the FTF meetings, and online transcripts, which were publicly available on the course website. Quotes from the participants and other people in the course appear throughout this discussion. All names are pseudonyms and all quotes are verbatim with only occasional corrections for reader’s convenience.

General Information about the Course

The course was titled “Qualitative Research Field Methods,” and was taught within a school of education at a research university in the Northeastern United States. It used a blended approach. That is, the process of learning in the course occurred both in the classroom and online. The online component was not just an add-on. Rather, it was a key aspect of the course.

There were a total of 16 students in the course, 14 women and two men. They came from various programs at the university (e.g., Curriculum and Instruction, Reading, and Social Welfare programs) and had different professional backgrounds – teachers, social workers, and nurses. They also ranged in age as well as in their full time or part time status. Most of them were parents, working professionals, and graduate assistants. Some were travelling from long distances. The class was racially and ethnically diverse as well. There were four international students (two Asian, one Eastern European, and
The rest were Euro-Americans. Because the course was only available for those who had completed 15 credits in their Ph.D. programs, the students enrolled in it were in the second and third year of their studies. The course was taught by a tenure track faculty member who was experienced in qualitative research. She had previously taught the course many times, and it was her third time teaching it in a blended format.

Goals of the Course

The objective of the course was to enable students to gain a better understanding of “how qualitative research is designed and conducted; how theories inform different methods; how analyses are conducted; and how qualitative researchers position themselves in relation to participants and to their research findings” (course syllabus). The readings for the course included four required textbooks, 12 recommended books for further reading in addition to the four articles. These readings addressed appropriate methods for conducting qualitative research.

Grading

The course was designed as an A-E graded course. Sixty eight percent of students’ grades were based on their participation in online (58%) and FTF (10%) discussions. This large percentage indicates that the course relied heavily on discussions to examine issues related to qualitative research design and analysis. The remaining 32% of students’ grades were distributed among a research project, a peer review process, and a poster session, 20%, 8%, and 4% respectively (see Table 2). These assignments were outlined in detail in the course syllabus, which was passed out on the first day of class.
Table 2
Assignment Descriptions

*Research Project Options*

Option 1 is obtain IRB approval and conduct a qualitative study within the given time frame.

Option 2 is to read four qualitative research articles critically and dissect their methods.

Option 3 is to develop a purely qualitative research design that might be used as a pilot study for dissertation.

*Peer Review*

To review two other students’ research project papers following the guidelines provided by the instructor.

*Poster Session*

To prepare a poster displaying the content of the final project and present it to class on the last day of the course.

*Course Structure*

The course lasted for 14 weeks, including one week of winter break and one week of spring break. Throughout the semester, the class met fully online three times (on weeks six, eight, and eleven). The rest of the sessions were held FTF, with an online task preceding each one of them. Blackboard 2.0 was the application used for supporting the online components of the course. Everything about the course (e.g., course syllabus,
instructions for assignments, supplementary readings, etc) was available for students on Blackboard.

The FTF meetings took place on Mondays for 2.5 hours (from 4:15 to 6:45 without a break) in one of the ‘moderately flexible classrooms’ on the university campus. The classroom was called ‘moderately flexible’ because rather than the traditional tablet armchairs, it had round pedestal tables and mobile chairs to assist students with collaborative work. The room also had an instructor station equipped with computer and audiovisual equipment, allowing the instructor to use the Internet and audio-video equipment while teaching.

Face-to-Face Activities and Interactions

The discussion below focuses on the interactions and activities that took place in the FTF components of the course. It is organized to reflect the themes that emerged from the fieldnotes. In some places, data and findings from students’ online contributions are integrated into the discussion to show the interconnectedness between the online and FTF elements.

Data from the fieldnotes suggested the following themes as ways to describe what was consistently happening in the FTF sessions: (a) the emergence and development of social relations, (b) revoicing, bringing back, and expanding online contributions, (c) instructor-student collaborative explorations, (d) learning through multiple modalities, and (e) procedural scaffolding. Below I explain each theme with illustrative examples.

The Emergence and Development of Social Relations

Throughout the semester, a sense of community blossomed and matured in each FTF session. Initially, that sense of community was most visible among the students who
had been in previous courses together, knew one another, came from the same
department, and sat together. During the first quarter of the course, this closeness among
certain groups of students seemed to minimize their interactions and relationships with
others. However, with the passage of time spent together, a sense of camaraderie and
fellowship formed among the students as they connected with each other, shared ideas,
stories, and talked about experiences.

Most students in the course arrived a few minutes early to each FTF session and
used that time as an opportunity to talk with each other. Their conversations had a course-
related aspect to them, but to a large extent they were socially oriented. Below are
examples from my fieldnotes that typify this pattern.

Example 1

Kelli, Lori, Tamra and Janet are gathered around the table talking about
literature reviews. Jen enters the room, greets everyone (“Hi everybody!”) and
takes a seat next to Lori. She then turns to Tamra and asks, “Hey, how
was Panama?” Tamra responds, “Great! The weather was beautiful!” Lori
points to Jen’s necklace and says, “I like your necklace.” Jen responds,
‘Thank you.” (Fieldnotes II, 2/8/2010, 4:05 pm).

Example 2

It is seven minutes before the session starts and the students are talking
among themselves:

Lori: (to Jen) I liked your hair. It looks cute. Did you have a hair cut?

Jen: Yes, I did. Two weeks ago.

Lori: I am sorry. I haven’t seen you for a long time.
Jen: I know we were online (laughs).

Sam: (to the whole class): Does anyone know the schedule for FORUM?

Joyce: FORUM? What’s that?

Liz: It is a weekly meeting where Ph.D. students present their work.

Joyce: Hmmm. Cool. Can anyone attend that?

Liz: Yeah, it is very informal.

Beth (to Connie): You are teaching this semester, right?

Connie: Yes, I am.

Beth: How is it going?

Connie: Busy, but I like teaching.

Jen (to Ellen and Joyce): Did you know that there is a speaker coming to Skidmore to talk about art that comes from trauma?


These social interactions that took place prior to the beginning of each session appeared to serve a number of functions, including sustaining already established relationships and forming new ones. Because the class did not have a break, getting together a little bit beforehand seemed to provide an effective and simple means for students to socialize.

The fieldnotes also made clear that a socially stimulating atmosphere was the norm rather than the exception in each FTF session. Jokes, anecdotal situations, and humorous remarks were often part of the classroom discourse. Laughs pervaded the room when humor was included in the presentation or discussion of the content. Adding a touch of humor to the interactions appeared to nurture an inviting climate in the class. It also seemed to make the learning process enjoyable for the students.
Although the students usually sat with the people they knew in class (I must note here that there appeared to be some slight changes in this seating pattern toward the end of the semester), during small group meetings and discussions, there was a conscious effort on the part of most students to pair up with the people they did not really know well. As they interacted regularly with each other, a strong sense of community and togetherness spread to the entire class, making it really hard for some to say goodbye on the last day of the course.

In light of these descriptions, it can be argued that a community of practice came into being in the course as students purposefully developed interpersonal relationships and facilitated those relationships. As Wenger (1998, p. 283) wrote, “Communities of practice could in fact be viewed as nodes of “strong ties” in interpersonal networks.” However, in his description of a community of practice, Wenger places the emphasis more on the information flow such as “the nature of what is shared and learned” rather than the nature of interpersonal relationships. It is, therefore, for this reason that I continue with a description of the content portion of this community of practice.

Revoicing, Bringing Back, and Expanding Online Contributions

Each FTF session was preceded by an online task which set the stage for the whole-class discussions held on Mondays. In the course syllabus, this online task was labeled as ‘dialogue on assigned readings.’ For this task, students were responsible for posting a ‘thought piece’ to the course website upon reading the assigned texts for the Monday meeting. The thought pieces were one page long (250 words) posts where students were expected to describe their thoughts on how the readings affected their perspectives on conducting qualitative research, make connections to other readings,
and include questions they had after reading the assigned texts. The thought pieces were not prompted by questions posed by the instructor, but by students’ own interest in the material read, and in hearing how others interpreted it. In addition to posting a thought piece, each student was also required to respond to another student’s thought piece. In these responses, which were limited to 150 words, students had the option of extending the ideas presented, raising questions, or exploring related ideas or theories.

Each thought piece was expected to receive one response, and once this was confirmed, the dialogue was over. Both the thought pieces and the responses had to be posted online before the Monday meeting and students were expected to bring a printed copy of those to class. Students knew the instructor was reading the thought pieces and responses, but she did not participate in this online dialogue. Rather, she drew on the ideas students raised in them to initiate discussions in FTF sessions.

FTF classes typically began with a 20-minute discussion activity where the instructor asked students to get into small groups and discuss the questions and ideas put forward in the thought pieces and responses. Each group then reconvened for a broader conversation as a whole-class. This activity often began with instructor-initiated prompts such as the following:

What I want to do now is to have you move into small groups of four or five. Did you bring copies of the thought pieces and responses? I want to have you discuss in the groups and pull things together. Lots of interesting things came up in the thought pieces. One was about the role of the researcher. Another was the function of the research studying only four people. Sam and Joyce asked the question,
“What is our representation?” Liz had a good comment on the photo versus film thing. Now, break in small groups and decide what you want to discuss (Fieldnotes, 2/1/2010).

In small-group discussions, students usually glanced through the thought pieces and responses and picked up on issues and ideas that they thought were worthy of further exploration. Then, within their groups, they identified the key questions, reframed issues, generated possible solutions, and evaluated those solutions. When time was up (20 minutes), they reconvened as a whole-class and a spokesperson from each group reported on his or her group’s discussion. The instructor’s presence in this whole-class discussion activity served to provide clarifications, explanations, and examples to validate students’ understandings. The excerpt from the fieldnotes below illustrates how the ideas discussed online were brought back and expanded in the FTF sessions.

Janet: In our group, we were talking about different scenarios. For example, during classroom observations, a teacher might change the way she teaches and act better because of the researcher’s presence. This can be problematic. What can we do to minimize researcher’s impact? We also talked about interviews. During the interviews people might do a reflection on things and change behavior. What do you do as a researcher? You have to be careful about what you advise.

Instructor: It happened to me when I was doing my dissertation. I was researching teachers. I dressed in jeans, didn’t want them to see me as a professor. A lot of them were new teachers, struggling. It is hard if you have a counseling background. The impulse is to give advice. That’s a
delicate situation. Students go to the researcher and ask for help. You need to decide and talk to them ahead of time and say how you will position yourself. You need to explain that. People sometimes want to give you what you want. You have to say up front “I want your view on these” (Fieldnotes, 2/1/2010).

This excerpt portrays how the ideas put forward by students in the online environment become available for further inspection in the FTF discussions through revoicing. In this particular instance, Janet, as the spokesperson of her group, addresses the whole class wanting them to mediate her and her group members’ understanding of the role of the researcher in qualitative research – a topic that was brought up in some of the online thought pieces. In the response that follows, the instructor uses her personal experiences as a tool for Janet and others’ mediation. By linking the discussion to her experiences, the instructor provides the students with an opportunity to connect conceptual ideas about qualitative research to what researchers actually do or experience in practice. Revoicing and expanding online contributions in FTF sessions this way created opportunities for what Lave and Wenger (1991) termed legitimate peripheral participation.

Such revoicing and bringing back ideas from students’ online contributions also occurred outside of the small group and whole-class discussion activities. For example, during the mini-lectures – these were lectures of a few or ten minutes in length where the instructor was outlining important points related to the readings – the instructor often referred to the ideas and issues presented by students in their thought pieces and responses, as shown in the excerpt from my fieldnotes below:
Instructor: [...] Most of the time people have difficulty in triangulating. In addition to interviews, you can observe people, collect artifacts. In one of the thought pieces James also mentioned using visual graphics. Visual prompts work better than verbal ones. You can show a picture or ask people to bring a photo. These are great prompts in terms of getting people to talk. Showing them a short clip also helps. People usually have fear of disclosing things. Watching a video and then working from that sort of removes things from talking about themselves. These are the general things I wanted to go over with you. Hopefully you have copies of thought pieces . . . (Fieldnotes, 3/22/2010).

As these excerpts from the fieldnotes make clear, the FTF discussions were, for the most part, an extension of students’ online dialogue. Achieving and maintaining continuity between online and offline dialogue this way seemed to provide a continuous course of learning for students.

_Instructor-Student Collaborative Explorations_

Much of the time in the FTF sessions was devoted to discussions between the students and the instructor. The instructor’s role in these discussions was to direct the conversational traffic, to focus issues, to probe, and to provide scaffolding, which included examples, advice, additional information, and explanations. In these discussions, students asked questions, gave responses to the instructor and to one another, and added comments to the ongoing talk when they wanted to. Their questions, responses, and comments then became the cues to the instructor concerning what needed to be addressed next.
In the classroom, students sat at tables grouped in clusters of four or five people and the instructor sat in a central location in front of the students. This seating arrangement seemed to facilitate collaborative interactions and explorations. The instructor frequently invited and encouraged students to ask questions and propose initiations with statements such as, “Any questions?” “Does anyone have a question?” This allowed students to have control in choosing the topic for collaborative inquiry and made them responsible for each other’s learning. Sometimes the instructor took primary responsibility for focusing the collaborative dialogue. For example, in one instance, while opening the floor for a group discussion, she said, “Decide what you want to discuss. But I don’t want you to go into the qualitative versus quantitative debate. Stay away from that one.” With this statement, the instructor signaled to the classroom community that certain topics did not have legitimacy in that particular discussion. The instructor’s attempts to control the topics this way appeared to keep students on track and ensured that crucial issues were covered.

The way the instructor structured and orchestrated the collaborative discourse yielded legitimacy for each student to be listened to. Her questions and comments were directed to the whole class rather than to any particular student. There was a lively and productive give and take where students articulated their ideas, asked and answered questions. Consider the following excerpt from the fieldnotes as an example of such give and take.

Joyce: [...] back to the role of the researcher, do we contaminate?

Sam: I think the question should be, “how can we not impact what we are doing?” instead. I keep thinking if you are honest with yourself and your
audience, then you give yourself the ability to be part of it. I read a piece about an ethnographic study in which the researcher was a participant. She was straightforward saying that she knew she was participating. I think that just admitting your role is a step in the right direction.

Instructor: Yes, thinking about your influence is important in qualitative research. If you have a female handing out surveys, it will impact how males respond. When you used the word ‘contaminate’ it made me wonder about what I call a mirror effect, the way how you view. I remember in one research project a teacher I was observing was older and I did not like what I was observing in her class, and I interpreted what was happening through my lenses. I remember in my first conference presentation of that research someone asked me if that teacher was the worst one. I realized my own feelings leaked into my research. It made me stop and think about my research. (Fieldnotes, 2/8/2010).

In this example, Joyce takes on a discussion facilitator’s role asking a question that problematizes the role of the researcher in qualitative research. Sam responds by reconstructing the original question and offering an alternative explanation. The instructor enters into the discussion, offers a new term (mirror effect) and provides examples from her experience to explain it.

As shown by this example, students resolved issues and worked out understandings by engaging in collaborative and exploratory interactions with each other and with the instructor. These interactions, which became mediating tools, were in the form of what Wenger (1998) referred to as mutual interactions, wherein participants
“shape each other’s experiences of meaning” (p. 56). How the students interpreted qualitative research and what they understood about it appeared to be negotiated and shaped continuously in the context of such mutual interactions.

Learning through Multimodalities

Discussions were not the only means of learning in FTF sessions. Mini-lectures, simulation activities, and video clips were frequently integrated into the learning process. Mini-lectures usually lasted between 5-10 minutes and they were accompanied by discussion and questioning. In these lectures, rather than reviewing what the students had read, the instructor presented alternative explanations, provided examples, and shared personal experience. As an example, consider the excerpt below from my fieldnotes.

Instructor: I wanted to tell you about focus groups. They have been around for a long time especially in the business world. They are used in a number of settings, sometimes in psychology. My son did his dissertation on stress and used focus groups to talk about how his participants felt about a stress reduction program. It is an interesting data source that offers triangulation to get different views. It might be a useful thing in phenomenological research. One other thing about focus groups is the theoretical piece. Just thinking about that for a moment, which frameworks will be useful for a focus group?

Lori: Case studies.

Instructor: Think about theories not approaches.

Connie: Can we use feminist theory? How women cope with stress, for example?
Instructor: Absolutely! Very appropriate. Getting different perspectives on that would be a perfect situation. If you use focus groups it needs to be compatible with your framework. If you look at individual learning, it might not help. Anything else about theoretical constructs? Mid-level? Big ones? (Fieldnotes, 4/26/2010).

As this example shows, unlike traditional classroom lectures, the mini-lectures that took place in the course were dialogic and interactive, with the instructor constantly shifting her role from being ‘the sage on the stage’ to being ‘the guide on the side.’

Aside from the mini-lectures, the use of simulation activities was very frequent in the course. The instructor used simulation activities to introduce the technical features of doing qualitative research (such as interviewing, observing, coding, etc.) to the students. In these activities, the class would usually watch a group of volunteering students complete tasks that resemble real situations that one would encounter in the research world. At the conclusion of each simulation activity, the entire class, with the guidance of the instructor, would engage in debriefing where they would discuss their observations, comment on what was effective and what wasn’t, and talk about what they took away from that activity. Below is an example of a simulation activity and a follow up debriefing session from the course.

Instructor: I want to start with interviews tonight. You may want to jot this down. We are going to pretend this is our research question: “What factors shape food purchasing practices of highly educated consumers?” I want you to individually develop three questions for interviewing protocol remembering the research question. I will then arbitrarily call on people.
Then we will have an actual interview. See what kind of questions you
will come up with that will help answer the research question.

[Students are on task]

Instructor: OK, looks like you are finished. Anyone volunteering to be the
interviewer? [One student volunteers to be the interviewer and another
volunteers to be the interviewee].

Instructor: The rest of you will give feedback after this.

[Students perform]

[Debriefing starts]

Tori: To me this sounds more like a commercial interview rather than a
research one.

Instructor: It did sound like that because she is taking on that role.

Instructor (to the interviewer): Could you answer the research question
with this data?

Interviewer: Not really.

Instructor: What opportunities were missed? What might you do in the
second interview? Let’s talk about that. . . (Fieldnotes, 3/22/2010).

Simulation activities such as this one and the debriefing sessions that followed them
provided students with opportunities to work out epistemological beliefs and theories in
the context of practice. These activities also granted legitimacy to students by allowing
them to perform in front of the whole class as researchers.

In addition to mini-lectures and simulation activities, video clips were other
means that were frequently used in FTF sessions to mediate students’ learning. Videos
gave the students tools to approach and conceptualize abstract entities about qualitative research from their own perspectives. For example, in one of the sessions, while working on the topic of case studies, the instructor showed students video clips from a documentary about an alleged murder in a rural farming community. After the students watched the video, the instructor asked them to think about the documentary in terms of a case study. In doing so, she posed the following questions: “What do we have here? What is the case? What are the parameters of the case? What questions can you ask if this was your case study? What theoretical frameworks and approaches would you use?” As the students answered these questions, the video became a focus for the negotiation of meaning. New connections were made and different perspectives were brought up.

**Procedural Scaffolding**

In FTF sessions, the instructor purposefully created time for procedural scaffolding which included giving students timely reminders about what needed to be done next, providing them with explicit instructions about what to do in course assignments, and providing technical guidance, such as explaining Blackboard system features and functions as well as assisting students in navigating the course website. This kind of scaffolding appeared to help students understand how to do things. An example of procedural scaffolding is found in the excerpt below where the instructor clarifies the final project options and ensures that students are aware of the assignment expectations.

**Instructor:** I had meetings with some of you about your projects so I thought it would help to start with questions. One of the things is the research question piece. That works differently depending on the study and study design. I will spend some time on this. Let’s take it step by step.
How many of you chose assignment option number two? This is a literature review, but different so pay attention to how it is different. You will look at articles that interest you. The idea is you are going to look at what methods authors are using and if they are appropriate. Specifically focus on methods. You are analyzing their methods. The research question is about the article. Does that make sense?

Tori: Is it specific to their method?

Instructor: Yes. The research question is directed toward the article. It is not a research question you will ask for a larger study. I just wanted to clarify that. Describe also what databases you use. On Feb 22nd, we will have a library workshop about database search. I think you will find it helpful. The length of the paper is not an issue. OK, here is a list of all the things you should include: Abstract, research question. . . . (Fieldnotes, 2/8/2010).

Receiving such scaffolding from the instructor seemed to guide students in understanding their tasks. It also helped them to focus their effort and time on the critical parts of the assignment.

Online Activities and Interactions

While the FTF contact was used for teacher-student interaction in the form of questions and answers, lectures, and the practicing of skills through simulation activities, the online element in the course was used for collaborative dialogue among students, with the instructor taking a back seat. Two types of learning activities were performed in the
online environment: Dialogues on assigned readings and online reading group discussions.

As mentioned earlier, dialogues on assigned readings involved closed dialogues that did not require continuous interaction. In these dialogues, each student was expected to post a thought piece within the online discussion area for peer comment and to respond to the thought piece of one other student. When this was done, no further action was required.

Dialogues on assigned readings aimed at encouraging students’ preparation for the FTF meetings on Mondays. In those dialogues, students were required to transform (not tell) their knowledge by delving deeper into the assigned readings. The ideas they put forward in them were then used as an anchor that structured and guided the FTF discussions on Mondays. The postings (thought pieces and responses) for this dialogue were due by midnight on Sundays, approximately 16 hours before the Monday meeting. This deadline was completely respected by the students.

The other online activity, that is the online reading group discussions, on the other hand, involved an open discussion, and it took place on the weeks when the class meetings were held fully online (there were three fully online meetings in the course). In this activity, students worked in self-selected groups of four and carried on threaded discussions on the articles they chose from a list provided by the instructor. Students were responsible for reading and discussing one article per discussion and these discussions did not carry over to the FTF meetings.

The criteria on which participation in the online reading group discussions was judged included referencing specific ideas in the selected article, making connections to
ideas of others, course readings, and outside readings, and demonstrating timeliness and politeness. In terms of quantity, each student was required to post at least four thoughtful messages to each online group discussion. Each discussion lasted for a week and the students took turns leading them.

As these descriptions make clear, dialogues on assigned readings (thought pieces and responses) and online reading group discussions were distinct from each other. However, despite their differences, they had two things in common: Both activities were asynchronous, that is, messages were received and read later, and the instructor did not participate in any of them.

Two themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts from students’ online dialogues on assigned readings and online reading group discussions. These themes were: Positioning self as a learner eager for help, and positioning self as a teacher, offering explanations and advice. These positions were not immutable, but were constantly changing in relation to students’ familiarity, comfort level, and expertise with the content. Below I describe the nature of these positions under two headings: Students’ subject positions in their online dialogue on assigned readings, and students’ subject positions in online reading group discussions.

Students’ Subject Positions in their Online Dialogues on Assigned Readings

As mentioned earlier, online dialogue on assigned readings consisted of thought pieces and responses. A range of thought pieces were evident on the course website. Some were long and required scrolling through a few pages. Others were relatively short, meeting or going a little over the 250 word requirement. Responses, on the other hand, were about 150 words, more or less. The thought pieces were written in formal
language, whereas responses were much more conversational, and they were directed to
the poster of the thought piece rather than the whole class.

In their thought pieces and responses, students acted as resources to each other,
exchanging information, asking questions, making sense of the readings and situations,
and sharing ideas. The following posts are illustrative of much that I saw happening in
the thought pieces and responses.

Below is a thought piece by Kelly:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Subject: Insights and Question on Ch 5&amp;6</th>
<th>Topic: Thought Piece 2/17 and Response 2/21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Kelly</td>
<td>Date: February 18, 2010 4:34 PM</td>
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This installment of Patton’s book provided me with a much richer sense of qualitative research and a great deal of food for thought. The way depth versus breadth and looking at sample sizes were discussed was very illuminating. I also really appreciate the way Patton discussed cases and case studies. It seems obvious in his describing of varied situations that most case studies are really compilations of many micro-cases. That also places emphasis on clearly defining what you want to know, I’m sure many case studies started out as micro-cases that wound up growing well beyond the initial target to encompass a broader scope. Like in many aspects of qualitative study, this is probably the types of skill that improves greatly with experience.

This reading did leave me with a couple of questions that I ponder even now. In Patton’s description of field notes, he mentions that this is a place for feelings, reactions and the like to be recorded. I have never considered these having a place in field notes though they most certainly will greatly impact the interpretation of results later. This leads me to the question; how can recording reactions and feelings “in the moment” improve research that seeks to objectively describe something? Aren’t these types of reactionary events the opposite of objective? The other question that is really vexing me is how to incorporate flexibility and creativity, touted by Patton as critical to qualitative research, into IRB proposals? Maybe another acquired talent…

What follows is a response to Kelly’s thought piece by Jen:

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<th>Subject: Re: Insights and Question on Ch 5&amp;6</th>
<th>Topic: Thought Piece 2/17 and Response 2/21</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Jen</td>
<td>Date: February 18, 2010 8:11 PM</td>
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Hi Kelly,
It does feel like the more proficient we believe we are becoming, the more there is to learn, master and discover. I too viewed the task of clarifying purpose as most significant to one's study and possibly one of the heaviest burdens to undertake. In considering your
question "how can recording reactions and feelings in the moment improve research that seeks to objectively describe something?" it is my understanding that one's feelings are recorded as objectively as possible as they pertain to the given environment and scenario being observed. Research designs are conceived with an individual's desire to seek more knowledge, deduct information or ascertain a situation. Therefore the feelings and reactions of the observer, in a real time scenario, can be documented with a limited personal agenda and the observational reactions and feelings are documented as they relate to that which is being observed. Also key is the purpose of one's study be firmly held in focus at all times. Personal feelings and observations under these circumstances, coupled with direct quotes and rich descriptive field notes could then possibly "improve" the research. As for your second question on how to "incorporate flexibility and creativity into IRB proposals" this I can not clearly answer more than make a suggestion to consider- much like good teaching- flexibility and creativity can be approached with passion, fairness, clarity and a willingness to do what is the best interest of the students/or study.

At the beginning of the thought piece, Kelly makes evaluative comments about the assigned reading. She shows her appreciation of it by talking about how much it moved her further in her understanding of qualitative research. She then gives her perspectives on the topic at hand in the form of postulates. From these postulates, she infers that qualitative researchers must be skilled at identifying a clear path to their goals – a condition which, according to Kelly, can only be attained by experience. Kelly ends her thought piece by posing a series of questions that assist her in the problematization of the topic and exploration of her understanding of it.

The response from Jen is very ‘teacherly’ in the sense that it offers an elaborated explanation to the questions posed by Kelly. At the beginning of her contribution, Jen establishes solidarity, using the personal pronoun ‘we,’ and denotes her alignment with Kelly and others by admitting that she also finds the task of clarifying purpose as the most important, yet challenging aspect of qualitative research. She then goes on to provide intellectual guidance to Kelly and others by constructing meaning for Kelly’s questions. Jen’s use of this ‘teacherly’ form of address, characterized by explicit
explanations and making suggestions, all show her taking the role of the teacher in this response.

This example is typical of all of the thought pieces and responses insofar as the poster of the thought piece puts forward ideas and poses questions and the person who responds builds on those ideas and provides answers to the questions.

As evidenced by the example posts above, in their thought pieces and responses, students played a number of fluid roles, ranging from the position of a novice, asking questions, to being a teacher, offering explanations and advice. These roles were constantly redefined as a student who assumed the role of a novice in one post could become an information provider for others in another. To illustrate this point, I show an example where Jen, the student who took on the role of the teacher in the example above, positioned herself as a learner in another post in the same dialogue.

Subject: Response- Chapters 5&6-Purpose in Design  
Topic: Thought Piece 2/17 and Response 2/21  
Author: Jen  
Date: February 15, 2010 2:10 PM  
The most significant concept, I found in chapter 5, is the importance of specifying the purpose of one’s research design. Substantial, valuable research needs to begin with a clear and established purpose. While working on organizing my own thoughts for our project proposals no other time does this idea of clarity and purpose become more apparent as the initial and perhaps the most challenging struggle of research design. How does a novice researcher establish their purpose with clarity and in such a manner as to create a strong foundation for the rest of their research to build upon and hold up? What motivates inspires and energizes the researcher to take on a study? How does one begin to establish purpose? Is it with an initial understanding of what the outcome might look like at its conclusion- the end before the beginning? Or does it stem from a personal desire of the researcher to seek knowledge without expectation of what they may discover?

Subject: Re: Response-Chapters 5&6-Purpose in Design  
Topic: Thought Piece 2/17 and Response 2/21  
Author: Sue  
Date: February 18, 2010 5:35 PM  
Those are some pretty deep questions Jen! Patton does say that each scholarly discipline is organized around attention to basic questions and the research involved is derived from those questions (p. 215). The degree of our attachment to such questions is probably what
energizes and motivates us to go forth and research! I found it interesting that his chart on p. 216 didn’t include fundamental educational questions. My guess of the fundamental questions in education would be: What is the fundamental purpose of education? How do children learn? What do we expect our children to become after schooling? How do we motivate them to achieve this? As to developing clarity of purpose I think that’s where theory guides our research questions. A literature review should position your ideas among those that have gone before you and provide a reason for why this is an important or relevant topic for research.

The exchange above is initiated by Jen with lots of questions. This time, rather than providing explanations, Jen admits her struggles and presents herself as a learner who is eager for knowledge. There follows Sue’s response to Jen’s questions. It includes various aspects of teacher discourse, such as the language of evaluation and praise as in “Those are some pretty deep questions Jen!,” and the language of advice and explanation. In her response, Sue takes on the role of the teacher, but she does it cautiously, as indicated by her use of words/phrases such as “probably,” “my guess …would be.”

These are just examples of how online dialogues on assigned readings ensued with students assuming different roles cooperatively. Those who had better understandings of the topics at hand became resources for others who had less. This exemplifies the kind of learning trajectory that is described as legitimate peripheral participation by Lave and Wenger (1991). Legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice posits that individuals move from a peripheral (learnerly) position to a more central (teacherly) position as they become knowledgeable enough in a given domain/topic. However, as the patterns that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts made clear, the students were interchanging these teacher-learner roles easily, asking questions and offering information, all within the same context.
All in all, online dialogues on assigned readings seemed to provide a platform for students where they could articulate and share their thinking, give and receive help in understanding, and delve deep into the ideas presented in the course readings.

*Students’ Subject Positions in their Online Reading Group Discussions*

Online reading group discussions took place three times over the semester and each lasted a week. In these discussions, students worked in groups of four. These groups were formed by self-selection. Upon forming their groups, students also selected with their group members three articles to read together and decided the order in which they wanted to read them. Each group discussion was led by a student (sometimes by two students) who initiated the discussion and kept it going by asking questions, building on other’s ideas, and setting up invitational topics. Others in the group were required to participate in the discussions with at least four posts. In their groups, students sometimes responded to specific individuals, at other times they addressed their responses to all of the group members. Unlike the dialogues on assigned readings, online reading group discussions were in the form of a conversation, with posts receiving a subsequent reply. A genre of communication that is similar to that used in email exchanges (such as greeting, thanking, complimenting) was also typical of students’ contributions in these discussions.

In online reading group discussions, students constantly brought each other into their sense making. Questioning, negotiating, clarifying, reflecting, evaluating, drawing opinions from all in the group and working out connections to their respective research ideas and practices were the features that were predominantly exhibited in their contributions. Students moved between different subject positions as they negotiated
and renegotiated meaning in these discussions, sometimes as a novice and sometimes as a knowledgeable other. To illustrate, I provide an example thread that is representative of the online group discussions. In this example, one group is discussing the article titled, *Angles of vision: Enhancing perception in qualitative research* by Alan Peshkin (2001). The thread begins when Ellen, the discussion leader, posts the following message.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: First discussion thread</th>
<th>Topic: Article 2 - Reading Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Ellen</td>
<td>Date: March 14, 2010 7:52 PM</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Hello Reading Team,
Over the course of the week, I will try to facilitate the discussion of our selected article “Angles of Vision”. I hope to break down the article into 3-4 different discussion threads. I encourage any of you to also pose a question for discussion that might not have been in my “line of vision”.

I would like to start by presenting the topic of observational formats and “what to look at”. On page 241 Wolcott talks about 4 ways to look at things: “observe and record everything”, “observe and look for nothing” at least nothing specific, “look for paradoxes” and “look for the key problem confronting the group”. If you were to think about the study that you may conduct, which approach do you think fits best for your study? For me I believe there will be a use of several of these approaches. I do not think it is possible to see and record everything so I will eliminate that approach. Given our previous discussions in class and online I also have difficulty imagining we can do research by observing and looking for nothing in particular. We are all approaching our research from a particular lens/perspective. It would be hard to believe someone can put that lens down and be completely impartial to what they observe and how they interpret it. For my study, I believe I will be using the approaches of looking for paradoxes and looking for the key problems. I will be trying to study the field of trauma by looking at the positive changes that can occur as a result of someone having to face a life threatening experience. The paradox here is that many could struggle to conceive the possibility of anything good coming out of something so bad. The other approach will be looking for the problems. However in my case I will be looking at how people handled the problems and faced the challenges that came along with the problems. The problem of experiencing a traumatic event will hopefully be the conduit for the changes and adjustments made in the person’s life.

I pose the following questions to you. Do you agree with how Wolcott has separated out the ways to observe our participants? Which approach or combination of approaches will you use in your study?
As Ellen’s post above shows, the discussion leader’s role is mainly one of starting the ball going with some questions. Each student responding to her post engages in series of actions centered around those questions and the text they have read – the text serving as the object of understanding as well as the tool in supporting their understanding of qualitative research, as seen below.

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**Subject:** Re: First discussion thread - Wolcott vs Janesick?

**Topic:** Article 2 - Reading Group

**Author:** Joyce

**Date:** March 15, 2010 8:05 PM

Interesting question, as when I read the same page I highlighted Janesick’s three points and thought to myself how useful are these questions in terms of an approach to a study? Currently, I am contemplating how we in academia observe BSW students’ reactions to field work and felt that Janesick’s point regarding tensions might be more applicable.

Janesick caught my attention more than Wolcott, because of Janesick’s third point – “look[ing] for points of tension – what does not fit? What are the conflicting points of evidence in the case?” (p. 241). This seemed intriguing when you consider does the ‘talk match the walk’ of students who maybe can talk the talk (academic achievement) but can’t walk the walk (the field practicum). Given the nature of behavior in the academic environment where we attempt to ‘professionally socialize students into the profession’, their posturing and guarding may be more of a façade in order to garner perceptions of competency. Since I am interested in how BSW students ‘manage’ their internship or field practicum as it relates to secondary trauma, these tensions that Janesick talk about – looking to see what fits and does not between the behavior and the academic product may be more appropriate observational format for my study. I too, am curious as to others in our group thoughts about Janesick versus Wolcott’s observational strategies as a guide, does it help with focus and purpose?

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**Subject:** Re: First discussion thread - returned to Patton

**Topic:** Article 2 - Reading Group

**Author:** Beth

**Date:** March 15, 2010 10:05 PM

Great start Ellen!

I have to admit I initially skimmed right over the Janesick summary and went right to the Wolcott description on page 241. It is interesting how you and Joyce present differing ideas. I found Janesick's list to be more vague and seems useful to think about how to approach the preparation for the observation - a sort of "how to". Wolcott's list spoke more to me in terms of being more practical in guiding us on "what to look at". After reading that section of the article though, I went back to Patton's book and reviewed the purposeful sampling - which guides us in identifying whom we will study. For my study, looking at mentoring, I like Wolcott's ideas of "observe and record everything" and "observe and look for nothing", within the framework of Patton's purposeful sampling notion.
I know I have my own ideas of what mentoring looks like, but the purpose of my study is to uncover what others experience as mentoring - so I will need to be open to just about anything - and record it, in case it gives me clues about the mentoring that occurs among nursing faculty. Wolcott’s notion of looking for nothing - under-girds that concept of objectivity in research - and not approaching the study with a pre-determined idea of what the results should look like. You do make a good point about the struggles to remain impartial, as we adjust our lens. I am not so certain we have to remain impartial, as much as we need to remain transparent in our practices and analysis, and keep really great field notes. Does that make sense?

Up to this point, ideas are shared and connections are made. The students are using the discussion as a space to make sense of the readings and to do thought experiments about their own research. Then, one student (see the post below) brings along new knowledge and resources. Through the use of such resources, she attempts to further extend the learning of the group. Her input draws others’ attention to three pieces of information critical for understanding qualitative research: subjectivity, keeping an open mind, and having a focused purpose.
looking very purposefully on how people grow from traumatic events and think these may all be the initial biases that need to be considered in our beginning stages. How does the perspective we take in those first steps of study design account as a potential bias when we choose how to collect data? Is being too focused become its own bias? Grinnell & Unrau goes further to underscore that data collection typically involves multiple data sources, that subjectivity remains a hallmark of qualitative work and that returning to the field to adjust the lenses between broad (not looking for anything in particular) and more focused purpose may enhance the observational experience for data collecting. This brings me back to earlier discussions in this course about being open to context, and letting the patterns emerge - then similar to the notion of layering our approaches so that the central themes or data can emerge. Grinnell & Urau underscored that in qualitative research the researcher ‘is the research process and any personal values beliefs and experiences of the researcher will influence the research process. The researcher learns from the research participants and their interaction is mutual’ (p.93).

This process of sharing and negotiating was not unique to this particular group. “Zones of proximal development,” wherein students fed one another's learning and understanding (Vygotsky, 1978), were also continually created among other groups in the discussions when students shared knowledge and expertise, voiced opinions, tested tentative hypotheses, and reflected on what they had read.

These online group discussions appeared to be beneficial in that they not only connected students with one another beyond the parameters of a FTF contact, but also offered learning opportunities in their own right. They provided students with spaces where they could support each other’s learning by exchanging information, providing feedback on ideas, making sense of situations, and sharing understanding of content and research methodology – a finding that is also highlighted in Agee & Uzuner (in press). In online group discussions, the class evolved into a community of practice where all of the students were full members. This seemed to change the nature of relationships between students and affected the process of learning in the course.
Summary

In the sections above, I presented general information about the blended research methods course the participants were enrolled in and provided descriptions of the activities and interactions that took place in its FTF and online components. Central to those activities and interactions were the emergence and development of social relations, the flow of ideas from online to offline conversations, collaborative explorations, use of multiple modalities, procedural scaffolding, and the ever-changing roles of the students in the online discussions, sometimes as learners and sometimes as teachers. I illustrated these with supporting evidence from the fieldnotes and online transcripts.

Lave and Wenger (1991), whose ideas and theories about learning I drew on in this study, contend that learning becomes more effective: (a) when there is sufficient amount of interaction between participants, (b) when participants are given access to an activity and are provided with ample opportunities to gradually move from a peripheral to a more central position, and (c) when the technologies or tools of the community of practice are employed adequately to support learning. The discussion above suggests that Lave and Wenger’s three criteria were, to a large extent, met in the course. Students had opportunities for interaction, online and offline, through which they could develop a collective and individual view of what qualitative research is about, and they also had opportunities for engagement in practice. Of course, the question remains as to whether such experiences supported students’ individual learning. The answer to this question will become clear in the description of the case studies that I present in the sections below.
The Case Studies: Jen, Kelly, and Connie

In this section, I introduce the case studies that are based on the findings from the interviews. In these case studies, I sought to explore issues and ideas that pertained to the main research inquiries: how the selected participants perceived their learning developing through the online and FTF interactions and activities in the course, and how their lived experiences shaped their interactions and engagement.

In this section, I focus on the case studies of Jen, Kelly, and Connie as “telling cases” (Mitchell, 1984). I selected these three individuals because their cases were unique, yet illustrative of a more general story that emerged from the whole data set. In addition, their cases were “telling” because they told aspects of the theories that I used to frame this study.

The Case of Jen

I present, below, the case of Jen as a “telling case,” which provides a way of exploring how the interactions and activities in the online and FTF components of a blended course shaped one student’s perceptions of learning as well as her engagement and participation. This telling case also serves to illustrate how emotions, an aspect of learning that is often overlooked in research on doctoral education, appeared to be played out in that student’s learning. I picked Jen’s case among six other cases I studied because “the particular circumstances surrounding [it] serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent.” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239).

I followed Jen over a semester. I interviewed her three times, observed her in class, and looked at her contributions in the online components of the course. The following passages include the constructed nature of my findings. I present them in three
sections: Jen’s stated beliefs and perspectives about learning; perceptions of her learning developing through the online and FTF interactions and activities in the course; and her lived experiences that shaped her engagement and participation. Before I present these findings, I want to set the stage for readers to learn about who Jen is. Thus, at the very beginning of her case, I provide a brief profile.

**Jen’s Profile**

Jen was an American-born female with a European background. She had close ties to her cultural roots, as indicated by the stories she told during the interviews. At the time of the study, Jen was a part-time Ph.D. student and had been teaching in the public school system full-time for 24 years. In addition to being a student and teacher, Jen was a wife and a mother. Having multiple roles of wife, mother, teacher, and student led to what Jen called a “busy existence.”

Jen noted that her student responsibilities were a priority in her life (“I certainly prioritize my studies”), and that these responsibilities took an enormous time and effort. She said, “There is a seriousness to it, and if I felt I could not thrive and learn, and learn and thrive, then I probably would not do it. So perhaps I am driven in that direction.” Despite the time-consuming efforts being a student involved, Jen really enjoyed the academic arena. She said:

> Being a Ph.D. student is providing me an opportunity to be with people who have similar interests in education or educational research or are thinking about things that don’t necessarily have to be plugged in specifically to my profession day to day. So, I enjoy that as a Ph.D. student.
Jen spoke with excitement about education. Her passion and desire to affect and change education was what actually motivated her to pursue a Ph.D. in this field. Educational research was something that was very exciting for Jen as she saw it as an opportunity to pursue some ideas about her students and how they learn. She indicated several times in the interviews that the more she learned about the methods and rigor involved in qualitative research and read qualitative research reports that made “perfectly good sense,” the more she became intrigued with this research paradigm. She knew she really wanted to incorporate elements of qualitative methods into her research, but she also knew there were so many things she needed to be aware of (“There is so much . . . I feel like I know, but it becomes bigger”). It was this awareness and interest that led Jen to enroll into this course. She wanted to dig deep into qualitative research and to immerse herself in learning as much as she could about “how one does qualitative analysis, all the options, the cons.”

Prior to enrolling in this course, Jen had taken three other courses in the program that used blended instruction. During the interviews, she articulated some dissatisfaction and discomfort with two of those courses she had previously taken. As a result of those experiences, she said she started questioning herself, her abilities, and her decision to pursue a Ph.D. She noted, “Honestly, had I had those two courses first in this program, I probably would not have continued.” Eventually, Jen made the decision to continue her studies. But because she was working full-time, she decided to take only one course at a time. Therefore, this course was the only course she was taking that semester. When asked what her biggest expectation of the course was, Jen commented, “I think that it is
necessary for me I feel very encouraged and that is what I am looking for. I am looking for a good experience to feel confident again about my decision in this program.”

**Jen’s Stated Beliefs and Perspectives about Learning**

Jen reported a high need for structure, order, and consistency. She liked and needed clear, specific directions, guidance, and rules. “I find that when things are clear and organized, I am very comfortable with that format,” she explained. Structure meant safety for Jen, especially when things are new. Because blended instruction encouraged her to learn in new and unfamiliar ways (“I am novice to blended learning”), she wanted to know what it was she was expected to do online and FTF. She needed guidance on boundaries and expectations.

Jen also liked working with imposed deadlines: “Because of my personality, what speaks to me most is clarity for when things are due. Because then I can organize a very very busy existence into a way that I can manage and get things done.” She added, “I prefer knowing ‘post this by 11:00 Friday and respond by Sunday 11:59.’ Then I know what my parameters are. It is very clear to me.” Jen understood some instructors’ desire to exhibit a flexible, open-ended, and intuitive structure. Nonetheless, she said, “The very flexible . . . I don’t have a problem with it, but I have found that it has posed some problems to me.” Showing such a strong preference for structure and guidance, as is the case with Jen, is not uncommon to adult learners. In fact, a seminal study of adult learners by Andrews, Houston, and Bryant (1981) found that adults like to have the instructor provide structure while they engage in study for themselves.

Jen’s desire and need for structure and direction would seem at first glance to be at odds with the general view of adult learners, specifically doctoral students, as self-
directed individuals who need minimal instructional guidance. However, Jen viewed herself as efficacious, self-regulated, and autonomous. She said, “I am pretty confident that I can learn if the instructor is not there all the time.” Jen developed this belief about herself as a result of the successes she experienced with particular learning tasks and situations. She explained:

I am pretty confident that I can pretty much figure anything at this point in my life. It might take me forever and it might be stressful, but I have the skills to seek information out and I had to do that in several situations in this program.

In light of these statements, it can be concluded that if need be, Jen can successfully act as an autonomous learner in the pursuit of knowledge.

Studies suggest that autonomous and self-regulated learners focus on the educational process (Zimmerman, 1998) and orient themselves toward mastery rather than performance or achievement (Ames, 1992). In interviews, Jen repeatedly emphasized that she loved the educational process (“I am really enjoying the process more than having one focus”). She also expressed goals that sounded mastery oriented. She seemed to be more interested in developing skills and abilities above and beyond doing a required task than doing the task and demonstrating an ability to obtain a good grade. Jen’s comments below from Interview One illustrate this point:

The idea of a grade seems to be sort of like a focus. It is an evaluative method, so only because it is an evaluative method, I try to do my best. But I also enjoy feedback so that I will know I am perhaps achieving the level of work that is the expectation of the program.
This remark also shows that Jen valued feedback and approval on her performance. She needed to know how she was doing. She said, “I try to be conscious of not wanting to know exactly. That’s a typical student approach. You seek value from the authoritative figure. But there is a lot to be said with getting feedback.”

While speaking about feedback and its importance for her learning and progress, Jen also revealed her beliefs about the role of the instructor. She remarked, “I do have an expectation that the teacher is facilitating to some extent, sometimes more sometimes less, but facilitating and being present, whether it is present intellectually or present online.” As this statement indicates, it was important for Jen to “feel” the instructor presence, his/her readiness to help when the need arises. Instructor’s lack of presence was troubling for Jen as she indicated in the excerpt below:

I did have a professor who was not as present as much and said “Gosh, in retrospect, I am really sorry. I thought you guys were doing so well. I spent a lot more time in my other class.” I don’t really appreciate that. Maybe that might have been the truth, but I did not want to hear that because it wasn’t something that I was thinking was happening.

The positive learning experiences that Jen remembered almost always had to do with instructors who were present and enjoyed what they were doing, and doing it skillfully. These experiences led Jen to view successful learning as dependent on the instructor’s presence as well as his/her control and management of the learning situation, as reflected in her statement below:
Good teaching impacts the results of good learning. [...] When there is a good teacher and they know what they are doing and they really have the passion for wanting to help their students, then good learning can occur.

Jen gave the instructor a great deal of credence and authority (“The teacher is in charge”). Her attribution of a primary role to the instructor in the learning process seemed to interfere with her acceptance of peer feedback as well as her perception of peer learning. She noted, “I think that I really honor a teacher’s input as a facilitator and as having a stronger knowledge base than my peers.” Jen admitted that she “had amazing experiences with others in a group where [they] played off of each other and got to a place where alone [they] could never have gotten to,” but she also said opportunities for learning through peer interaction “depends on the group dynamic.” This belief led Jen to view peer interaction or peer discussion as a valuable learning strategy, but not the most valuable. Jen had respect for her peers’ knowledge, capability, and capacity. She said, “Certainly especially at this level, there are people who are coming to the experience with perhaps more life experiences and professional experiences. So their knowledge base is very strong.” However, she said she would prefer instructor input over peer feedback/input when asked to choose.

Contemporary theories of learning (Roth 2007, 2009) suggest that feelings and emotions play a substantial part in motives, identity, and learning behavior of students. In the interviews, Jen discussed how experiences of affect influenced her learning. She stated that negative emotions and emotional experiences would prevent her from giving attention to her learning. She explained, “If I am around someone who makes me uneasy, I feel I might focus on that emotion and not be able to focus as much on the coursework.
[…] I learn when I am comfortable.” Therefore, she expected her instructors to care for her being as much as her progress, and she wanted her peers to be cordial, respectful, and cooperative.

**Jen’s Perceptions of her Learning Developing through the Online and FTF Interactions and Activities in the Course**

Jen associated learning with “successfully meeting a challenge that is new.” In her view, she learned a lot in the course because she successfully tackled “challenging” and “new” content information. When I asked Jen what it was she did learn, she indicated to me that she experienced an epistemological transformation which led her to see qualitative research (content) from a more complex perspective (“What I learned through the course is it [qualitative research] is a lot harder than I had considered in the beginning”). Jen spoke in more detail about this transformation:

I first connected qualitative research to the things classroom teachers do naturally. We speak to students in a way that is very similar to interview process. We journal about the conversations with students, we collect hard data, we have students reflect on their pieces periodically. That is something that is collectable and you can analyze it. But I learned that there is much more to it [qualitative research] and it is much more formal. I like the formality of the process. There was a structure that I did not know really existed, and learning about that structure offered me the opportunity to approach my own teaching very differently.

Jen admitted that the course not only helped her develop a conception of the meaning, function, nature, process, and forms of qualitative research and bridge those sets of
knowledge in a professional context (her own classroom teaching), but it also afforded her a new vantage point from which she could see herself anew in the academic dimension of her life. She noted:

This course made me feel “OK I can do this.” Last semester was a learning experience. I am glad I did not quit. [...] I felt very successful in the course because I felt that I was able to redeem myself as a learner. In a way I had to prove something to myself and this course allowed me to feel confident again. [...] I feel pretty good about the course.

Solidifying her self-esteem through this course allowed Jen to get “more comfortable as a student at this [doctoral] level,” and being comfortable yielded the safety and security she was looking for in a learning experience.

While re-conceptualizing activity theory, Roth (2007, 2009) talked about emotions and emotional states as crucial elements that influence one’s motives and identity. His research in particular elucidated how experiencing positive emotions leads to a positive mind-set which in turn leads to favorable judgments of one’s self as well as his/her performance and functioning. The same was true for Jen. In the interviews, she mentioned repeatedly that she was “pleased” with the course in general and felt “very connected” and “inspired.” She also noted that the positive emotions she experienced in the course contributed to her feeling good about herself and that the “good feeling” mediated her every action in the course.

If we consider this blended course as a collective “activity system” (Engeström, 1993), Jen felt “very successful” and “comfortable” in this system. Although the object of the course (qualitative research) was new and unfamiliar to her, at least initially, she
managed to have a “pretty strong handle on it” in the end. In the interviews, Jen described herself as a student who entered the course with little knowledge of the qualitative research to one who ended the semester having learned more than she had expected.

Jen felt particularly good about the rules that were defining the system. She was pleased to see that the guidelines were “clearly outlined.” She noted, “If you fall short or exceed them, at least you know what the criteria is for every given task.” In terms of the tools used, Jen found the readings “very manageable.” She also found the online activities (tools) in the course “very doable.” In early interviews, Jen discussed having experienced anxiety about the online environment in the other blended courses she had previously taken. In later interviews, however, she said she experienced success in the online portions of this course. And with that success, she became more comfortable with the blend of online and FTF instruction.

In terms of the community, Jen described her classmates as “a very interesting collective.” She knew some of her peers from other classes, so there was a comfort level there. However, when it came to learning from peers, Jen felt a “little bit of apprehension,” because she did not find some of her classmates “confident with the subject.” Therefore, she felt she needed to rely more on the instructor for intellectual guidance than her peers.

Speaking about the instructor in particular, Jen noted that she especially liked her enthusiasm about the subject (“She seems to love what she is talking about”) and the responsive, supportive, and comfortable persona that she was projecting. She noted:

Our professor seems to have some real nice ways about her persona, one that is comfortable. She is facilitating the group in a very professional
way. As far as the feedback is concerned, I was very pleased. I felt that she was timely in her responses. She was constructive and supportive at the same time.

Jen also felt the instructor created a very structured foundation to the course, which, according to Jen, “is key to feeling pretty good about what you are doing as a student as opposed to not knowing what is going on.” She also felt the instructor created a very “complete Blackboard experience.” She explained, “Everything was set up so that you could look for it and it was there.” These comments make it evident that Jen felt fulfilled with the structure and direction that was provided for her in the course.

Jen was really happy to see that the instructor mixed FTF and online instruction somewhat equally and remarked, “The blended instruction was absolutely a good balance.” Having experienced some anxiety about learning online in her previous blended courses, she was pleased to see that the course did not favor online contact over FTF contact. She said, “This class does not require the need to be online as much as other blended courses […]. The amount of time required online is manageable.”

Initially, Jen was particularly worried about the online discussion requirement in the course because she knew from her prior experiences that reading, following, and responding to discussions in the online environment could become overwhelming when students post too frequently. However, she later admitted that the posting requirements of the course, which put a limit on the number of messages one could post and the number of people one could interact with, alleviated her anxiety and helped her make better sense of the information available in the discussions. As she reflected, “Because of the
instructor’s requirements, I am realizing I am getting much more out of a one to one response or one to four responses as opposed to one to thirty.”

When commenting on the online activities and interactions in the course, Jen made it clear that she perceived the online dialogues on course readings, which included the thought pieces and responses, more favorably than online group discussions. She said producing a thought piece after reading the assigned texts and submitting it online for peers’ inspection influenced her motivation. She perceived the thought pieces as “directives” and saw them as something positive, a force that gave her a strong reason to delve deeper into the readings. As she explained, “Anything that is directive helps me with my learning. If you are not directed to do something, you let it go […]. The fact that it [the thought piece] is a directive helps me with my learning.”

Jen mentioned a few times in the interviews that the thought pieces allowed her to review and reflect on what she had read (“They [the thought pieces] focus me in coming to understand my own thought based on what I have just read”). She saw value in the thought pieces as she thought of them as useful tools fostering her learning and shaping her thinking. In Interview Two, she proudly pointed to her first thought piece and said:

I do remember the first thought piece being ‘OK, I just discovered something that makes sense to me.’ And I liked that. At that point, which was at the beginning of the course, I wasn’t sure how I felt about not using my own students in a research study. I saw that as very beneficial since I have a relationship with them that would possibly give me more insight during the research. The reading initiated the thought, but as I wrote and
rewrote [the thought piece] I found that I was aligning it with myself and the potential ideas I had for my own research down the line.

The highlighted portions in the excerpt above show how Jen’s ideas changed and grew as she engaged in writing her thought piece. Writing the thought piece clearly encouraged careful thinking which in turn facilitated the development of her learning. For Jen, the thought piece became a tool through which she could explore new information, create connections between new and previous knowledge or experience, and to get in touch with herself (“As I was writing my thought piece, certain things started to show up particularly as they aligned to me as an educator”).

My analysis of Jen’s thought pieces revealed that she was using them as a sounding board for ideas. In each thought peace, I observed Jen exploring her understandings of the course content, asking questions to further those understandings, and doing some interpretive work by linking those understandings to her own teaching practice. Below is a thought piece by Jen which illustrates this:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Jen</td>
<td>Date: March 14, 2010 10:30 PM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transcription of the interview can be ridden with difficulty. When transcribing interviews how does one translate the oral into the textual without sacrificing the reliability and validity of the authentic interview conversation? When selecting the approach to best transcribe i.e. with the assistance of a secretary or by one’s self, or whether or not to document the many subtle conversational pauses, expressions and sounds, I was encouraged by Kvale & Brinkman’s argument that all selections are personal and individual in nature to the study being conducted, “There are no correct, standard answers to such questions; the answers will depend on the intended use of the transcript” (p.181).

The discussion on analysis techniques brought to mind parallels between successful interview analysis technique and successful classroom teaching. Both need to be structured so as to have some goal in mind with room to expand depending on the participants’ responses. Although the interview should be able to shift slightly in direction, it is imperative that the interviewer keep the participant connected to the overarching research question initiated in the interview. Since interview transcripts can be overwhelmingly lengthy, it becomes necessary for the researcher to analyze the data as
the interview takes place as well as after the fact. This is similar to how seasoned teachers teach. They are able to “read” the responses of their “subjects” as the lesson takes place. This then affords them the opportunity to debrief their own lessons and make meaning of their own teaching and student performance after students have left. Who is in charge of making “meaning” when analyzing the interview transcripts? Once again, I was encouraged to understand that interview research and transcript interpretation can provide valid and reliable data when approached with dependable means to make makeable interpretations of the data. As a novice researcher, it is still overwhelming to comprehend the enormous responsibility and knowledge base that is necessary to select the appropriate means to make meaning of an interview study. That said, a "perfect" approach may not exist, but instead, an approach that is close to "perfection" for each individual study may be something one can achieve.

The kind of meaning making she engaged in the thought piece above and others suggested to me that Jen was having an educationally beneficial experience online with the thought pieces.

Wenger (1998) contended that using and producing tools or artifacts (such as the thought pieces) can facilitate understanding, a process he termed “reification.” In Jen’s case, thought pieces served as reified artifacts through which she could reflect her sense making. Her understanding of the assigned readings grew and changed as she gave form to her ideas and thinking by producing the thought pieces. Reifying the abstractions in qualitative research this way seemed to provide her with new kinds of understandings, and Jen seemed to enjoy this generative process.

According to Wenger (1998), learning requires both reification (“making into a thing”) and participation (“to take a part or share with others”). Participation in online dialogues on assigned readings included students’ sharing of their thought pieces (the reified artifacts) with the whole class as well as responding to one other student’s thought piece. It can therefore be said that participation in this particular online activity was organized around reification. That is, reified records of students’ understandings formed
the focus for online negotiation of meaning and interaction. Jen was particularly pleased with this process of sharing meanings, understandings, and negotiations online. She felt reading and responding to others’ thought pieces furthered her understandings of what she had read in the assigned texts. She showed her appreciation by saying:

It is interesting to see how many people are saying the same thing at times.

It is also interesting to see how people are not aligned at all. Their perspective is so different. It is also interesting to see how people from different disciplines perceive the same thing.

Jen reported reading every student’s online thought piece. She described her interactions with those as mindful and careful. She added, “So it is not an immediate “Oh I want to get done with it” kind of thing.” Jen explained that typically she would read her peers’ thought pieces and then step back “sometimes for a day and sometimes for a few hours” and consider the ideas presented in them as objects of thought and reflection. She would then decide who she would want to respond to and how.

As was the case in her thought pieces, in her responses, Jen often linked her understandings to her teaching practices and attempted to help her peers’ understanding through the analogical links she made between doing qualitative research and teaching.

Below is a well-thought-out response by Jen which illustrates this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Re: The interview quality issue</th>
<th>Topic: Thought Piece 3/5 and Response 3/7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Jen</td>
<td>Date: March 1, 2010 6:55 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hi Liz;</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Like you, I too am discovering the many issues that need to be addressed and understood more deeply in regards to interview investigation. I would like to respond to your thoughts about the many nuances that a seasoned interviewer must be knowledgeable in and proficient about recognizing while conducting their interviews and the issue you raise in ascertaining the "truthfulness" of the interviewee's responses. Educators are trained to formulate creative exciting questions which get students to think about, and make
connections to, the information being presented. One frequently used educational framework for this practice can be found in Benjamin Bloom's "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals" (1956). Although a well thought out approach to teaching good questioning methods in the classroom, what occurred to me in thinking about your question is that the more interested and personally involved students are in the questioning process, the more "truthful" their answers tend to be. So perhaps establishing a level of comfort with our interviewees and questioning them in ways wherein they feel their responses are valued, makes for a more authentic and valid response.

Jen also said she enjoyed reading her peers’ responses to her thought pieces and those of others, but she did not find the responses as intellectually stimulating as the thought pieces. She explained, “There have been times where classmates have posed questions which furthered my thoughts. There are times where it is a very polite response and we are in agreement, so it does not further promote my own thought.” However, Jen even valued those “polite responses” because she said they made her “feel good” by allowing her to see that “somebody else is also aligned” with her thinking.

The descriptions above indicate that the online dialogues on assigned readings played multiple roles in supporting Jen’s learning in this blended course. The thought pieces provided what Jen described as “checking for understanding” of the ideas she read in the assigned texts. The sharing of the thought pieces with peers online and receiving comments from them gave Jen a sense of where she was in terms of her thinking and understanding of the course material relative to her peers.

Another online activity in the course was online group discussions where students got into small groups of four and discussed articles of their choice on the weeks when the class met fully online. For Jen, the biggest advantage of this online group discussion activity was “to read an article which aligns itself with the coursework” and “get different perspectives.” As was the case with the graduate students participating in Du, Zhang,
Olinzaock, and Adams’ (2008) study, Jen showed a preference for small groups and found the group size of four in these online discussions “very manageable.” She also liked the time lag between each discussion (“I do like how they are spread out. They are not like three consecutive weeks”) and appreciated the structure and the rules the instructor provided in them.

In Jen’s view, the online group discussions “went very well.” She felt that her peers’ tone in them was supportive and nonjudgmental, giving her and others opportunities to engage in “open discussions.” Jen also said that being exposed to different ideas and views in the online group discussions almost always prompted her to “do further readings.”

Aside from all these positive things, however, Jen realized some complicating features which she thought was pervasive in these discussions. For example, she talked about the (sometimes annoying) recursiveness of the discussions which reengaged them with issues that were already delved into. She said, “It [the discussions] is so aligned with the coursework that I feel like we are repeating the same thoughts. Sometimes you get bored of repetitive thoughts.” She also felt that doing the same online discussion activity with the same group of people became repetitive and uninteresting after a while. As she explained, “There is something about doing a repetitive exercise that it loses its intrigue, like you have done it once and now you are going to do it again with the same people.” Jen acknowledged that repetitive activities provide a way of putting some sort of predictability to learning, but also maintained that such activities are important and beneficial “if not overdone.” Jen did not feel that the online group discussion activities
were overdone in the course, but she certainly did not seem to be so thrilled with them either.

Jen also thought that the online article discussions became more of a “polite chatting” than a critical discourse as her group members were always agreeing with everything each other said. She said, “We kind of bring up things that were connecting, but it almost seems like we are kind of hanging out and chatting online.” Jen expected to see more profound and critical responses from her group members, but said, “I don’t find such responses in these discussions.” To illustrate her point, she mentioned instances in the discussions where she thought opportunities for higher level of learning were missed simply because group members either did not respond to posts that had the potential to trigger intellectual conflict or they responded with agreement to maintain the group harmony. Jen’s expectation for substantiated disagreements and alternative opinions in online discussions is compatible with Wenger’s notion of community of practice which specifies that dissonance or “sociocognitive conflict” (Mugny & Doise, 1978) is necessary in group learning. According to Wenger, the active negotiation of dissonance and disagreements in communities of practice is what gives group members an opportunity to enhance individual and social development (Wenger, 1998, p.147).

All in all, Jen did not believe much learning occurred for her in the online group discussions, but still saw some value in them. She conveyed these sentiments in the following passage from Interview Two:

I truly believe that these types of exercises, I look at them as exercises, through the course of time help build knowledge. Unless something deeply profound is said or something that connects with me, I will not
remember [them]. However, I feel that these exercises are important. I almost see them as you are running a marathon, and you know that you want to get to the end and you are striving to come in a place for second, third, or whatever your goal is, but you can’t even begin to run the race without having the prep work. So these exercises are, I think, as necessary as warm ups. They are also necessary as little mini races in preparation for the big race. Although I feel terrible that there is nothing that someone said stands out in my head, I still think they are important.

In my analysis of the transcripts of Jen and her group’s online discussions, I have seen many instances of high level discourse which suggested to me a potential for learning. For example, in one of the discussions, Jen posted a comment in which she talked about the idea of social stratification that can change within a group being studied and explored the impact of this change on the research process itself. This comment sparked a lengthy exchange from other group members. As I tracked Jen’s contributions to this discussion, I could see her gain insight comment by comment as the discussion evolved. However, hearing Jen’s comments above led me to conclude that although the online discussions helped Jen in her understanding of the course content, they did not actualize their fullest potential for creating a truly memorable learning experience for her.

However, compared to the ones online, Jen found the interactions and activities in the FTF environment “far more memorable.” She believed that her being a “visual learner” played a significant role in this. As she explained:

I am visually dependent. The body language, facial expressions, the possible smile or frown if something is a complicated idea could indicate
to me that they [peers] find it as complex as I or they immediately understand it, so perhaps I need to ask a question for clarity.

As this statement shows, Jen needed the FTF contact, and especially the visual cues, to get a sense of whether she was going in the right direction. For her, the FTF environment provided a sense of human presence that she thought was lacking online. In the interviews, she discussed how much she enjoyed being in an academic facility with people FTF (“One of the things I don’t like is not being in an academic structure with other people FTF”). She also talked about how she felt more confident and comfortable learning in a physical environment than online. For instance, at midpoint in the semester, the class did not meet FTF for two consecutive weeks during which time all interactions and activities were conducted online. For Jen, those two weeks felt “a little too long.” She felt isolated and alone. The next FTF class was enough to get her started again.

My fieldnotes provided evidence that Jen displayed an active presence in the FTF sessions. The way she engaged in the activities and interactions showed how she enthusiastically committed herself to learning in those sessions. She seemed comfortable expressing herself in front of her peers and the whole class. For example in Class Two, during a small group discussion about the value of qualitative research, Jen openly disagreed with her peers who brought the idea of researchers’ including their feelings and experiences in their qualitative research report. She said: “I agree. There is a tremendous value in that. And those are all sincere statements, but when measured against standards in any measurable way, that’s when I call them in question.” This sparked a lively debate between Jen and her peers where negotiation of meaning became evident. Jen seemed to enjoy and appreciate such debates and constantly made efforts to initiate them.
In Jen’s view, the activities and interactions that took place in the FTF components of the course added a unique and useful angle to her understanding of the issues related to qualitative research (the content). She felt the discussions in class brought the content to life and made readings from the texts clearer. In addition, she felt that more profound ideas came out in FTF discussions than in online discussions.

Jen also had a high appreciation of the tools the instructor used in the FTF sessions, such as the video clips, simulation activities, question-answers, exemplifications, etc. She said those tools allowed her to “connect things on many different levels.” To illustrate, Jen spoke eloquently about how one of the simulation activities they did in class facilitated her learning and understanding:

The mini coding activity we did in class was so valuable, because it was really hard. I had never done that before. To have someone, the researcher, give us permission to look at her own research and confidently make us feel like whatever we did with it will be OK was very valuable to watch. I found it eye opening. Our classmates’ feedback … they brought up stuff that I did not see, and it was very insightful.

These statements show that Jen enjoyed and appreciated being inducted into the activity of qualitative coding more than reading and discussing it with peers online. She admitted that participating in the actual doing of qualitative coding under the guidance of a seasoned researcher (the instructor) facilitated her learning in meaningful ways. For Jen, because the FTF sessions revolved around such situated tasks, they provided better opportunities for real-world research experience than the online sessions.
Jen also appreciated the exemplifications the instructor provided in the FTF discussions. She felt the instructor’s sharing of her own personal experiences “humanized” what they were doing. She said she highly valued the instructor’s use of examples from real-life research situations and added, “The more you give an example experience to others who aren’t there yet, the more you give them an opportunity to understand if that’s what they can do, what they would like to do, and makes more sense.” This perspective encapsulates Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation which posits that novices learn know-how, develop experience, and grow in confidence through the mentoring and apprenticeship provided by experts. Jen’s learning experiences in the FTF components of the course can be interpreted as legitimate peripheral participation since the events and interactions that took place in them provided her with opportunities to learn qualitative research through observation and practice. It is for these reasons that Jen saw more value in the FTF sessions of the course than those that were online.

*Jen’s Lived Experiences that Shaped her Engagement and Participation in the Course*

Jen came to this course having taken three other blended courses in the program. During the interviews, she articulated mixed feelings about them. She said she “loved” one of those courses and thought she “thrived” in it. She explained, “I found it manageable. The professor was very present and I felt I got timely feedback.” She added, “The professor also had a very clear structure in her approach and what her expectation was for us online. It was a very nice schedule of FTF and online.” The other two blended courses, however, did not make Jen feel good. Although she saw herself as a successful educator outside of her coursework and had successfully completed numerous courses
toward her Ph.D., she felt there was something about those two courses that disoriented her and shook her confidence.

When I asked Jen what really bothered her about those two courses, she gave me several reasons. She said she really wanted to do well in them, but “had a hard time grasping and connecting in a secure way.” She felt a “disconnect” in both courses and said that disconnect created “a lot of confusion and frustration” for her. In Jen’s view, the disconnect stemmed from an imbalanced and discordant blend of FTF and online instruction. She complained about there being a lot of “immersion online.” She said, “First, we met three or four times. Then we never saw each other again. That was a major adjustment.” Lack of instructor presence and timely feedback in those courses was also troubling for Jen. She said, “I felt I was looking at a monitor.” Another upsetting feature was the loose structure that surrounded both courses. When talking about her experiences in one of the courses in terms of structure, Jen made the following comment:

There were many people in that class and what it felt like was everybody was talking at the same time. There was no structure as to how the conversations were supposed to ensue. At times people who were very comfortable with each other in their relationships from other classes would almost go off on tangents that really didn’t have a lot of relevance to the focus of what was taking place. I did not really appreciate that because I was already struggling.

Viewing herself as a novice user of technology, Jen had anxieties about learning in technology mediated environments. She reported that the troubles she experienced with the technical demands of those two blended courses added to her anxieties and shook her
confidence. When she had troubles and needed support, she said she was unable to get it.

She shared with me an instance when she had “a terrible situation on Blackboard,” but when she shared it with the course instructor, “it became [her] issue.” Looking back on the experience, Jen made the following comment about her instructor:

I think if you see someone who is having trouble, it would be nice if you tried and helped her out. Not “It is your problem, you go figure it out.” Especially with someone at this level who is pretty self-sufficient. This was obviously something that I did not know anything about. And apparently she did not either, but she did not fix it.

It became clear in analyzing Jen’s experiences that the lack of structure, guidance, instructor presence and support in those two blended courses created a conflict which made her begin to question her competence. She needed reassurance to offset those frustrations and to gain her confidence to continue her studies. She said that she found that reassurance in this course.

As mentioned earlier, Jen appreciated the clear structure and guidance this course provided her. She also appreciated that the instructor was available and supportive. My observations of the FTF sessions and online portions of the course substantiated her claims. The online interactions and activities had a clear structure. Students knew what was expected of them. As Jen described, the instructor “clearly outlined how many interactions [students] should have [online]. She even told [them] how many words she would like per post.” The FTF sessions also followed a clear, predictable pattern. Although the instructor did not show presence in the online discussions, she was a constant presence in the “ask a question” areas of the course on Blackboard. She
responded to students’ questions in a timely manner online. And when FTF, she took the
time off from the actual instructional time to provide procedural scaffolding to students
on matters related to assignment requirements, submission dates, guidelines, etc. As Jen
noted, due to such scaffolding, there had been “very minimal questions about the syllabus
and the dates of things.”

The students did not seem to encounter many issues online, and when they did,
the instructor was available to answer questions, explain technical details, and
troubleshoot problems. For instance, at the beginning of the semester, due to some
technical reasons, some students, including Jen, had difficulty posting their thought
pieces on Blackboard. Upon realizing the students’ troubles, the instructor made an
announcement online addressing the issue. She then spent approximately ten minutes of
classroom time in the follow up FTF session explaining the problem and providing a
solution to it. Having received very little instructor support and guidance in her previous
blended courses, Jen was particularly impressed with the instructor’s approach and said:

She [the instructor] seems like someone who noticed the problem,
addressed it, and double checked that it was solved. And then in class she
even took the time to make sure we were all on the same page. To me,
that’s the sign of a really good teacher.

Another instructor attribute that made this learning experience pleasurable and
meaningful for Jen included the instructor’s sharing of who she was as a person with her
students as well as her sharing of the successes and shortcomings she experienced in her
personal journey in qualitative research over the years. Jen noted:
Sometimes educators feel they can’t share who they are as people with their students but her sharing who she is, these personal connections, are so important. She also talks about her research “I tried this and it did not work.” You don’t always see that in academics. Some professors are less than willing to share. You almost feel as though they have been through the program and it is all theirs and that you have to find your own way. But she is not like that and I really appreciate it.

The positive feelings arising for Jen from the structure and orderliness in class as well as from her perceptions of instructor’s psychological closeness fed back into a positive emotional valance she brought to her work in class. She felt “connected” and that feeling connected encouraged her to do well, which in turn provided her with a positive self-image (“I feel successful again”). Theoretical support for this finding comes from Roth (2007) who posits that motivation and identity are results of emotions. In Jen’s case, the positive emotions she experienced in the course affected her performance and participation as well as her sense of self as an academic.

While reporting mainly positive experiences with the course, during the interviews Jen also offered some insights into the complexities she experienced. One of the major contradictions she experienced in the course appeared within the object of her activity, which was qualitative research. As Jen stated, “the tension came from it [qualitative research] being new. Because it was new, it was challenging information.” The language of qualitative research, which was new and unfamiliar, was also an issue for Jen. When she came into this course, she had the expectation that she could master qualitative research like other things she had mastered professionally or socially, but then
she quickly realized that it was “not easily mastered.” This realization frustrated Jen, but it did not render the object (qualitative research) uninteresting or difficult to deal with to her. Rather, it forced her to rethink her tools and strategies.

One strategy Jen developed to tackle her challenge with the object was “to read and reread and also bump up the time management.” As she explained:

I read things at least twice. In many instances, reading it twice affords me the opportunity to gain more confidence. I also set a schedule. I make an appointment like I would make an appointment for a haircut or for a doctor where I designate a certain amount of time where I make perhaps my husband aware or any social engagement that might come into that time. I actually have this set aside. I am also setting aside a very specific time to look at postings as opposed to what I was doing previously being a novice, which was feeling compelled to get online and read everything that was new. That could be done on the fly … 10 minutes after eating lunch. Now, I am trying to read something that I really should devote an hour to absorb.

From an activity theory perspective, Jen’s involvement in serious efforts to transform her ways of learning upon facing a challenge can be explained by Engeström’s (2002, p. 221) assertion that “aggravated contradictions generate disturbances and double bind situations, making it evident that something must be done.” Rather than dwelling on her frustrations, Jen looked for new ways to transform her learning. She interpreted the challenge as encouragement to develop the kind of tools and strategies that she needed for her mastery of the content.
Another contradiction Jen experienced in the course was within the community. This contradiction appeared between Jen’s views about herself and her peers. As a result of being a novice to qualitative research and not having taken the prerequisite course, Jen did not feel confident with the nature of this course. As such, she viewed herself as someone who was “flying in the dark.” She admitted that for the most part she looked to her peers for guidance (“I was really looking to see what other people do”), but she also mentioned that she was “a little insecure about that.”

The insecurities mainly emerged in Jen’s doubts about her peers: “I am not sure if we are all on the same page. I know why I am in the class. But there are people I don’t know what their motivation is.” While questioning her own, she wondered whether her peers’ work in the course was up to par. Various activities in the course also reinforced her doubts. For example, in two different activities, one was a peer review activity and the other was a poster presentation, Jen said she was “truthfully appalled” by her peers’ work. She explained:

> I was quiet surprised that at this level [doctoral level] some of my peers did not look like the person who spent enough time in what they wrote […] That would be something that I would not accept even at the high school level.

It was not just the form and shape of her peers’ writing that was appalling for Jen. She was equally disappointed by her peers’ feedback on her work. These negative evaluations and feelings resulted in trust and insecurity issues, as illustrated by Jen’s comments below:
My peers’ review of my paper … I found that I wrote the rough draft as though I was writing it the very best I could. The responses that I got from my peers were a little tweak here and there. When I had to go back and adjust the final, I struggled with it because there were such minor little tweaks that pretty much the way I wrote it was the way I sent it as the final. So I was a little insecure about that.

These disturbances played a large part in Jen’s perception of instructor feedback as being more real and honest than peer feedback. She felt using instructor feedback was less likely to result in such feelings of insecurity.

Summary

Jen felt her learning in this course was a success. In her view, the course not only helped to deepen her understanding of qualitative research, but it also helped to redeem herself. The structure and guidance provided to her in the course made her feel successful again.

Jen thought the course included an appropriate blend of online and FTF contact. She felt the online components of the course provided her with ample opportunities to talk about qualitative research with others, whereas the FTF sessions allowed her to put what she had been talking and thinking into practice. She appreciated having a mix of FTF and online activities in the course, but saw more value in learning within a physical environment than online.

In addition to the positive feelings and experiences she had, Jen also encountered several complexities and contradictions in the course. But these contradictions appeared only in latent forms, as dilemmas within various components of the course, such as
within the community and in the object. Some contradictions were overwhelming for Jen, but for the most part, she resolved them by means of transformations, change efforts. Rather than dwelling on her frustrations with them, she created new tools and patterns of practice to overcome them.

The Case of Connie

I present, below, the case of Connie as a “telling case,” one that illuminates the key aspects of activity theory that formed the theoretical grounding for this study. I selected this case because it is unique – Connie was the only international, non-native English speaking student participating in the study, and no other participant experienced the kinds of contradictions she experienced in the course. I believe the power of Connie’s case lies in its potential to offer two outcomes that are worthwhile: One, I think despite its uniqueness, specific aspects of Connie’s behavior in the course, and its consequences, would resonate with some readers’ experiences and knowledge, thereby offering them a “natural basis for generalization” which will become useful for them in their own theorization (Stake, 1978, p. 5). Two, for those readers who might not experientially resonate with aspects of Connie’s behavior, her case could bring them into sympathetic touch with the experiences of others (Geertz, 1973).

As was the case with Jen, I followed Connie over a semester. I interviewed her three times, observed her in class, and looked at her contributions in the online components of the course. At its core, my analysis illustrated how Connie’s motives and identity as well as the contradictions she experienced with various aspects of the courses played out in her perceptions of learning. The following passages include the constructed nature of my findings. I present them in three sections: Connie’s stated beliefs and
perspectives about learning; perceptions of her learning developing through the online and FTF interactions and activities in the course; and her lived experiences that shaped her engagement and participation. Before I present these findings, I set the stage for readers to learn about who Connie is by providing a brief profile at the very beginning of her case.

**Connie’s Profile**

Connie, an international student from Asia, described herself as someone who is passionate about her scholarly pursuits and interests. At the time of the study, Connie was done with her Ph.D. course work (“I just finished my coursework and hopefully I have two years to finish the dissertation”), and was taking this course to familiarize herself with qualitative research methods. Her desire upon completing her Ph.D. was to go back to her country and assume a faculty position at the college she graduated from: “After I finish my doctoral program, I will go back to my country. I especially want to go back to the college that I graduated from. It will be an honor for me.” When I asked Connie if research would be a part of her future career, she responded, “Absolutely. I love to do research because I am a very curious person. I always think about new ideas and new research topics. That makes me happy.”

Connie came to her Ph.D. program after exploring other career options. During the first interview, she described what brought her into doctoral studies:

After I completed my master’s in Sociology, I worked for several companies and organizations for four years. I wasn’t happy. The company I was working for was not something I was looking for. I realized I wanted to go back to school. First I audited a few classes in graduate school. That made me so happy. I was like “Oh
this is it!” Then I applied and got accepted with full scholarship. So, there was no reason to say no.

In Interview One and in subsequent interviews, Connie kept coming back to her love of learning and how she felt good about being a part of a Ph.D. program: “I love the doctoral program here. The school is very supportive and I enjoy what I am doing. I feel good about being part of my Ph.D. program.”

At the time of the study, Connie had lived in the United States for four years. English was not her native language. She noted, “The English I learned is from the books with formal schooling in my country. I can understand the professors well, but some American students speak so fast, like daily conversations. And I don’t get it.” The communicative challenges posed by her non-nativeness were particularly stressful for Connie who depended so heavily on collaboration and teamwork to thrive: “I like teamwork. I learn a lot by contributing to and being part of team work.” However, in spite of these challenges, Connie perceived her overall experiences in her academic life in the United States as positive. She believed in herself and had confidence in her scholarly skills. When speaking about language challenges, she said, “But I have to accept it because I chose to come here and this is one of the challenges all international students have to face with. It is my choice and I have to deal with that. But I feel I can do better in my language.”

Connie perceived her identity as multiple – a wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, teacher, and a Ph.D. student. When I asked her which role was more important than others, she responded, “Being a doctoral student comes first. I am very compassionate
about what I am doing.” When asked to describe herself as a student, Connie used the words “responsible” and “organized.” She added:

My personality is … whenever I have something, I finish it as soon as possible. And I always do things on time. My friends think I am a very organized person. I also have this some kind of self confidence about myself. When I have to finish a task, I first feel “Oh my God, can I do this?” But somehow I trust myself, and every task I do, I do that on time.

Connie had respect for and appreciation of both qualitative and quantitative research. She wanted to be knowledgeable in both traditions (“I know that I should know both”) and felt qualitative research to be more aligned with her interests (“I appreciate qualitative research more because my topic of interest is about in-depth understanding of people). However, due to time and financial constraints, she decided to choose the quantitative route for her dissertation. She explained:

I have a time constraint. I get funding from the school and there is a possibility that the school might cut the funding after four years. So I have to finish my dissertation as soon as possible. I want to have a straightforward dissertation with quantitative research. You can control some unexpected cases or situations and the IRB process is easier. But for the qualitative [research] you have to deal with many situations. Also, the professors in my department don’t offer qualitative courses nor put much value on qualitative projects due to funding reality. Although some faculty had qualitative dissertations for their Ph.D., they switched to quantitative research. Although they agree that qualitative research is really important,
they kind of hesitate to do that. So we have this impression that qualitative research is a little bit in the marginal area.

Despite what the professors in her department thought, Connie was really interested in finding out what qualitative research is and what it can do. Part of the intrigue of qualitative research for Connie was that she thought “there are less or few people who can do it really well.” She wanted to be one of those “few” people (“I would like to be a good qualitative researcher like Deborah Padgett”) and added, “This is something I am going to do in my later career.”

Connie came to this course with a specific goal in mind: to design and execute a qualitative study that is worthy of conference presentation or journal publication:

“They wanted to have a research design, go through the IRB process, conduct interviews and submit a proposal for a conference.” When I asked her to describe her expectations for the course, she said, “I would like the professor to give me practical comments and help me do this project and submit a paper for a conference or come up with a publishable paper. That would be very nice.”

Before coming to this course, Connie took two blended courses which left her with some mixed feelings. The dissatisfaction she experienced with the online components of her first blended course made her view the online contact as a waste of instructional time. She noted, “I wasn’t getting anything from the online discussions. Many students were posting because it was required. So sometimes some comments were meaningless, less quality. It was like chatting, and I was not too excited about reading them.” On the other hand, her second blended course, which had fewer students
and less rigorous online posting requirements, “worked very well” for Connie. She felt significant learning occurred for her in that course. Here are some of her reflections:

The other class in my doctoral program worked very well. Each student, about five Ph.D. students, posted one post each week about the readings and we discussed them in class with the professor. So it was like in-depth discussions about what we learned from the readings and I did not have to be confused with so many postings.

Connie confessed to me that when she first found out this course was blended, her reaction was, “This is going to be difficult.” But then she said her initial hesitation was replaced by what felt to her a sense of curiosity and a strong desire to learn qualitative research. The more she talked to her peers who had taken this course and recommended it to her, the more interested she became. This rising sense of interest and curiosity was what drew Connie to this course.

Connie’s Stated Beliefs and Perspectives about Learning

The conception of learning entertained by Connie before this study/course was: absorbing knowledge from others in a one-way fashion, wherein information goes from one person, generally the teacher, to the other, the student (“I used to think that learning is getting something from others, like one way”). However, the idea of learning envisioned by Connie during the time of the study/course was: learning as a two-way activity. She explained, “Nowadays, I realize that learning is sharing, back and forth communicating. When I am learning, the other person is learning from me as well.” With this statement, Connie affirmed the importance of reciprocal interactions during the process of learning.
Connie liked working and interacting with people: “If I have contact with people, I learn fast. I dislike working alone because I don’t know which part I am doing okay. Whenever I have interactions and team work with other people, I realize my strengths and weaknesses.” To this, she added that she enjoyed and benefited from group work especially when the group produced a “single outcome together.”

Reading these statements, one would expect Connie to also enjoy group discussions where every student becomes a sharer. However, Connie said to me repeatedly in the interviews that she did not like group discussions: “But I am not the person who likes group discussion very much, maybe because I am not good at talking. Whenever the instructor says ‘Let’s have a group discussion,’ I am not that excited.”

Connie admitted that group discussions, especially those that take place in FTF learning environments, were not something she engaged in with great enthusiasm because of the struggles she had with understanding her American peers’ conversational English.

Connie was a big fan of “learning by doing,” something that she thought was missing in most of her Ph.D. classes which relied heavily on reading and discussions. As a doctoral student, she enjoyed spending a lot of time reading and thinking about what she read. However, she said, “Just reading is not enough for me” and preferred to learn through experience and practice, whether simulated or real.

Connie viewed herself as a “slow reader.” While reading, she felt she needed to understand a sentence completely before she could move on to the next one. She also said she often needed a re-reading, sometimes more than one, to get a full understanding of the ideas she read about. These sentiments conveyed to me that Connie was a slow reader because she was careful and meticulous. She liked to study each word or passage. She
wanted to savor them and wonder about them. Connie admitted that her slow reading sometimes put her behind in her studies. When I asked her whether it was reading in a second language (English) that slowed her down, she responded, “Even when I am reading in my language, I think very much about each word and sentence to internalize them. So with English I have to think about those over and over again.”

Apparently, reading was not Connie’s greatest strength as she had some struggles with it. But, one area she really enjoyed and excelled in was writing: “I like writing. I think I am good at it.” What led Connie to view herself as a good writer were the positive comments she received from her professors: “The professors gave comments on my papers that my writing is strong.” Connie not only liked and enjoyed writing, but also believed that writing fostered her understanding of texts by allowing her to explore the tentative meanings she created while reading them. She saw value in exploratory writing and said, “When I am writing, I think I learn a lot.” Support for Connie’s assertions about the effect of writing on her learning comes from research that concluded that writing goes hand in hand with careful thinking (Applebee, 1984; Langer & Applebee, 1987) which then promotes learning and deep understanding.

During the interviews, Connie also articulated her beliefs and perspectives about the role of the instructor in her learning. She said, “First of all, the instructor should have interactions with students and give lots of feedback. S/he should also let the students know that they can maximize their potentials.” This statement implies that Connie needed to have a ‘guide on the side’ who would not only provide her with feedback on her learning and progress, but also provide her with the support she needed to realize her potentials.
Connie did not see the instructor as someone who knows everything, but she believed the instructor knows “much better than the students” and “has a wider scope.” She valued instructor feedback (“I really appreciate instructor’s feedback”) because she thought it enabled her to get a feeling for her progress and specified the problems she needed to work on. She indicated that good learning would occur for her in the presence of instructors who provide prompt feedback, show enthusiasm and concern about their learners and the subject matter, and emphasize structure in the learning process.

While talking about her beliefs and perspectives about learning, Connie also touched upon issues about peer feedback. She said she saw some value in receiving peer feedback, but found it to be a “risky” endeavor. Her doubts and frustrations about peer feedback seemed to arise from past situations in which peers’ input took her writing or thinking to a different direction – a direction that Connie did not intend to consider. This is how she defended her stance:

Sometimes I write something but they [my peers] read it differently.

Sometimes I suggest this and this and they read it totally different because they want to read what they want to read. As long as they give positive feedback and are really concerned with me, it is good. But there are some risks in getting peer feedback. They [peers] take things to a different direction from what I intended.

The comment above indicates that Connie saw value in peer feedback when it is given in a supportive and constructive way. She did not appreciate unconstructive criticism that challenged what she had written or presented an irrelevant direction for her to consider.
Connie’s Perceptions of her Learning Developing through the Online and FTF Interactions and Activities in the Course

Connie found the course “challenging,” yet said, “The quality is good.” She seemed proud of her accomplishments and the knowledge she gained in the course. She felt enlightened and was convinced that this class gave her the tools she needed to embark on future qualitative studies. She remarked:

In this class, we read a lot of books. Although I could not go in depth, I was able to understand how important or how difficult qualitative research is and who the main researchers are, and how I can do the research design.

I needed to know these even though I will do a quantitative dissertation.

Connie admitted that initially she had reservations about the blended nature of the course, especially about its online components. Referring back to her previous blended learning experiences, she thought this course would be very challenging with “endless comments to read and respond to” in the online discussions. Contrary to her initial worry that the online discussions might take too much of her time, it seemed to have been quite the opposite. She contended that with the instructor’s explicit and realistic guidelines specifying the number of postings required for each discussion, online participation did not become “that much challenging.” She felt excited that this course helped her believe that she “can do that” – with “that” referring to catching up with the sequence and pace of online discussions.

Reflecting on her learning experiences in the course, Connie felt that her steepest learning curve occurred in the FTF sessions. She appreciated the time she spent in the classroom and contended that participating in the FTF sessions deepened her
understanding of qualitative research in meaningful ways. She found the simulation activities, instructor’s mini lectures, exemplifications, and her use of various media to supplement her teaching in the FTF sessions extremely beneficial. She said:

It is good that the professor gives us information about her experiences. She is adding really good comments on what we have said in the online discussions. It was also good to watch how other people do interviews in class. Before that the professor asked us to prepare interview questions. When I watched other students doing their interviews, I was thinking “Wow they can think of very different questions.” It was good to watch them. It was good learning. Also the video clips and other activities the professor uses in class strengthen my understanding of qualitative research.

During my in-class observations, I got the impression that Connie appreciated the mini lectures the most in the FTF sessions. She was attentive to each word coming from the instructor’s mouth, her eyes and ears tuned in to what the instructor had to say. She was constantly taking notes, writing down everything the instructor said as though she was afraid to miss even one point during the lecture. During the mini lectures and question-answer sessions, she would not hesitate to ask questions, offer opinions, or bring up a relevant topic that interested her. For instance in Class Two, she asked a question regarding her confusion between ethnography and phenomenology. Everyone in class seemed to benefit from this question as it led to much discussion about what the focus and unit of analysis should be in each approach.
Although Connie’s opinions and questions filled up much conversational space during the mini lectures and question-answer sessions, she was a quiet presence during simulation activities and small group discussions. She never volunteered to participate in simulation activities, but when called upon (she was asked to volunteer to participate in a mock interview in Class Six), she responded readily. She participated in small group discussion activities without noticeable hesitation and seemed engaged, but was usually quiet.

Speaking of those discussion activities in class, Connie told me in the interviews that she learned a lot from them. She felt such activities helped her understand the depth of the ideas/concepts she read about: “Whenever we have discussions in class, it helps because even though I read the assigned chapters, I don’t understand them exactly. When we are having discussions in small groups, my friends help me understand some difficult concepts.” She recalled various instances where she was able to refine her ideas through the help of her peers during the FTF sessions. For example, in one instance she said she had read the assigned text about qualitative interviewing, but did not understand the miner and the traveler analogy (Kvale, 1996) that was used in it. She told me that it was not until she discussed the analogy with her peers in the classroom that she was able to get a firm understanding of it: “The discussion helped me clarify the miner/traveler analogy. I did not realize its meaning until that FTF discussion.”

It appeared from Connie’s statements that the FTF discussions provided her with what Vygotsky (1978) called “a zone of proximal development.” In other words, the discussions in the FTF environments became social spaces where Connie’s thinking and understanding were assisted by the mediating role played by her peers. However, despite
these benefits, the FTF discussions made Connie uncomfortable because she felt that she could not express her thoughts in English effectively in fast-paced, verbal communication. She explained, “In FTF discussions, I have to speak fast. That rushes me, so I can’t explain myself nicely. Then the students look at my face…. That’s a lot of pressure.”

This emotional constraint – feeling unable to express herself in FTF dialogue – appeared to be the reason why Connie preferred to discuss material with peers online rather than FTF despite the fact that she found FTF dialogue more beneficial than online dialogue. She explained:

FTF conversations are more helpful. But in online discussions I feel more comfortable. I prefer that to speaking in front of people because I can have more time to think about what I am going to say. I can edit and take enough time to think and show what I am thinking exactly.

With this statement, Connie offered substantiation for the research findings that discussions in the online environment cater in a different way for English as a second language (ESL) students who are less comfortable speaking English than writing it (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2004; Birch & Volkov 2007; Freiermuth, 2001; Freiermuth & Jarrell, 2006; Potts, 2005; Ware, 2004). For Connie, the time-independent nature of asynchronous online discussions provided an opportunity to comfortably compose her posts/messages before submitting them to the group.

Since one focus of the study was on Connie’s perceptions of learning developing through the interactions and activities that took place in the online components of the course, during the interviews she spent quite a bit of time articulating her thoughts,
beliefs, and experiences with the course’s online elements, which included the online group discussions and online dialogues on assigned readings. Her comments offered some interesting perspectives to this study.

Connie started out by commenting on the online group discussions which took place three times over the semester within groups of four students reading and discussing articles of their own selection. She acknowledged those discussions as a means for useful knowledge sharing, feeling that they gave her a different perspective on her ideas and thinking about the course topics. In the following excerpt, taken from Interview Two, for example, she talked about the ways in which the sharing of ideas that was made possible through the online group discussions benefited her:

It is good to hear diverse perspectives. Each person thinks differently. We read the same articles, but we all focus on different points. It is good to share them. For example, one time I read one of the articles very carefully, but did not pay attention to the author’s certain categories. One person in our group pointed out and asked how I felt about the author’s frameworks. Then I went back to the article and read it in more depth. So in a way, her question pushed me toward getting a better understanding of the reading.

It appears from the comments above that Connie benefited from the online group discussions because the different perspectives offered by others in those discussions brought different ideas, which enlarged the scope of her knowledge and her understanding. However, Connie did not directly connect the benefits of sharing different ideas or perspectives to her learning in specific ways. For example, when I asked her
whether significant learning occurred for her in the online group discussions, her answer was a “no.” She explained:

> Our group discussions … I found that they were not working very well. I sensed that we were doing them because they were required. Many times their [my peers’] thoughts were different from mine, but I wasn’t learning from them a lot. Every time we had discussions, we were reaching similar conclusions. Whenever I found a different perspective, it was helpful. It was good learning. But I did not see that happening a lot.

Connie’s comments above offer a strong reminder that although most current research (Balaji, 2010; Kay, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Wu & Hiltz, 2004) argues for a strong connection between participation in online discussions and learning, such a connection is not always apparent to students. For Connie, her and her peers’ investment in the online discussions was not an investment in learning, but an investment in meeting the course requirements and moving on (“I sensed that we were doing them because they were required”). She believed only occasionally that good learning occurred for her in those discussions.

Contrary to her belief, when I was reading the discussion transcriptions, I was pretty impressed by the high level discourse consistently generated by Connie and her peers in the online group discussions. To me, those discussions seemed to be places where significant learning could occur for individual participants as they played with ideas, asked questions, explored issues and assisted each other develop new/alternative perspectives in connection to the course topics and their respective research interests. The discussion thread below, wherein Connie and her peers explore their own meaning
makings, and more importantly, mutually enrich each other’s understandings by sparking new realizations, illustrates this point.

The thread began with the discussion leader’s exploration of why the “so what” question in research counts and why it is important. She then posed questions for her peers to ponder.

| **Subject:** Developing qualitative research questions - reflecting on writing | **Topic:** Article 1 |
| **Author:** Beth | **Date:** March 1, 2010 7:20 AM |
| Our first reading is the article "Developing qualitative research questions: A reflective process" by Jane Agee. I will begin with focusing on the section about writing a good question and intrigued by the points made on page 442. Agee makes the point that when we begin to write our question - we should ask ourselves "So what?" as a way to reflect on the importance of the study. I wonder, as novice researchers, if it is best to choose areas of study that have already been explored enough to have generated the answers to this "So what" question. If we desire to explore a subject, topic or experience that is not exhaustively discussed in literature, what avenues are available for us to gain the answers to this question. If we are looking to understand particular phenomena among people - can we really know how important the results will be prior to gathering the data? Is it not enough for us to pursue our personal interests, while we simultaneously attempt to fill in the perceived gaps of previous studies? |

Students in the discussion group started responding to the discussion leader’s questions one by one. What we see below is Ellen’s response first. She started out by saying “I took the "so what?" question a bit differently” and explained her thinking about it in detail.

| **Subject:** Re: Developing qualitative research questions - reflecting on writing | **Topic:** Article 1 |
| **Author:** Ellen | **Date:** March 1, 2010 2:20 PM |
| Hi Beth, I took the "so what?" question a bit differently. I was thinking that we really need to ask ourselves why we are going to do the research we want to do. After reading the research that is already out there, why would we want to study that same area/topic? What will our research contribute to the field of study we are interested in? I think there are very few topics or areas of research that can be deemed as exhaustive. There are always different perspectives, influences from social, environmental, or economic conditions or changes over time that can create a different way to look at an issue. The research we do needs to build on past research and contribute new ideas and points of view and that is the answer for me as to "so what?" |
Then Connie entered the discussion. After agreeing with Ellen’s response, she added a new twist to the arguments of what constitutes the “so what” question in research.

**Subject:** Re:Developing qualitative research questions - reflecting on writing  
**Topic:** Article 1  
**Author:** Connie  
**Date:** March 1, 2010 6:51 PM  
Hi Ellen;
The 'why' question (why would we want to study this) is also related to the purpose of qualitative research as both Agee and Patton stated in the readings. I agree with your point that few research areas can be deemed as exhaustive. I found two interesting and meaningful aspects of qualitative inquiry as Agee elaborated. One is the impact that the researcher may have on the lives of interviewees in the process of qualitative inquiry. This is why reflexivity of the researcher becomes significant. The other is how the researcher positions herself in the relationship with the interviewees. Even though two researchers have the exactly same topic, the nature of relationship (or interactions) as well as the researcher's influence would be very different. So we start with an initial research question, but may find it necessary to change or refine our subquestions as we further delve into the lives of the Other.

In the response that followed, Joyce first acknowledged what Ellen and Beth said. Like Connie, her ideas took the discussion to a new direction when she drew a relationship between the “so what” and “how so” question.

**Subject:** Re:Developing qualitative research questions - reflecting on writing  
**Topic:** Article 1  
**Author:** Joyce  
**Date:** March 1, 2010 6:53 PM  
Hello all! Great opening discussion - as the section on this basic question of "So, what?" also caught my attention and after reading your posts above, it reminded me of all our discussion regarding purpose. Beth's point of how can we anticipate the value or worthiness of a research goal prior to exploring the issue in some depth is a good one. Equally true is Ellen's point regarding how we form our professional concerns that become research endeavors is through experience with existing research and exposure to the literature on a topic that stimulate both our interest in a phenomena and what more we can learn about people's experiences. For me 'so, what' is related to the 'how, so?' question as it expands or retracts the lenses as we need to while maintaining and evaluating the focus that Agee talks about. I think the 'so what' as is very much about that internal dialogue or iterative process that we, the researcher, need to use to self-evaluate our process. From previous discussions from this course and in this article, 'so what?' is a helpful tool for moving from broader questions and grander theories toward more specificity in our research question and theories that are smaller or more specific to the researcher's world view. As Agee later talks about, "if a researcher takes seriously the idea that questions are evolving and provide tools for opening dialogue...earlier
assumptions may questioned." (p443). Leaving me thinking more about how we use this "so, what?" self-reflection to help guide us, focus our work and link this to how we later craft (consider this similarly to Kvale & Brinkman discussion regarding interviewing as a craft/art) our interview questions that will follow and hopefully make our research question answerable.

Joyce’s comments led to a new realization for Connie and Beth, as shown in the posts below:

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<th>Subject: Re: Developing qualitative research questions - reflecting on writing</th>
<th>Topic: Article 1</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Author:</strong> Connie</td>
<td><strong>Date:</strong> March 2, 2010 9:28 PM</td>
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<td>It is an interesting point that we intertwine &quot;so what&quot; and &quot;how so&quot; into qualitative inquiry. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) stated, qualitative study is about &quot;inter views&quot; or &quot;inter perspectives&quot; between the respondent and the researcher. Good research questions should be the ones that are able to reflect these inter-perspectives.</td>
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<th>Subject: Re: Developing qualitative research questions - reflecting on writing</th>
<th>Topic: Article 1</th>
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<td><strong>Author:</strong> Beth</td>
<td><strong>Date:</strong> March 2, 2010 9:47 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too true, Connie! It comes across repeatedly in the various readings that the question may be ours for the asking, but qualitative research is about the answers of the participants - their experience, from their perspective - their own views. That was a revelation for me reading the breakdown of the word inter-view. Really never thought of that before. I had always understood an interview to be fact gathering - sort of objective - but of course now I see it is the presentation of the facts as that person sees it.</td>
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<th>Subject: Re: Developing qualitative research questions - reflecting on writing</th>
<th>Topic: Article 1</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Author:</strong> Connie</td>
<td><strong>Date:</strong> March 2, 2010 9:54 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes! I also never thought about that way, &quot;inter-views&quot;. Isn't it refreshing? :)</td>
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The thread above exemplifies much of the talk that characterized Connie and her peers’ online group discussions. What became salient in this and other threads was that all participants entered into these discussions as intellectual partners, each bringing unique insights to bear on their exchanges to help themselves and others create new meanings and understandings. As I tracked Connie’s contributions to these online group discussions, I could see her gain insight and arrive at new realizations. That suggested to
me that there probably were many more opportunities for Connie for some significant learning in those discussions than she had ever realized.

When talking about her experiences with online discussions prior to coming to this course, Connie mentioned the delayed aspect of asynchronous computer mediated communication (CMC), which to her seemed to be a major disadvantage or challenge of online discussions: “In online discussions, sometimes you don’t get any response or when you get it, it is delayed. Sometimes online discussions also seem like one-way communication with no back and forth feedback.” In subsequent interviews, when I asked Connie whether the delay between messages and posts was also a factor for her lack of commitment to the online discussions in this course, she responded:

Not just the delay, but maybe writing and reading in English is the issue. I have to spend some time and think about it. Actually I get excited sometimes, but in general I am not that much excited about posting and reading others’ posts. When you are posting, that means you have to read others’ posts, too, and it is challenging. Because for me, it is easier to read a textbook, but the posts are written in daily language so sometimes I don’t get specific words, and I get confused. I am not getting a 100% of what other people post. It is a little challenging and it makes me uncomfortable. So I am doing the postings because I have to.

The issues that Connie highlighted in the above comment – the challenges with writing and reading in English – are not surprising for ESL students. For example, issues regarding confusion caused by native speaker peers’ use of daily, obscure language and acronyms in online writing were echoed by other ESL students in a study by Tan,
Aagard, Nabb, and Kim (2008). What is interesting in Connie’s comment is the pressure she felt to compose messages that were put together well given the time and privacy afforded by CMC. She wanted to contribute meaningfully to the discussions and knew that meaningful contribution required her to work with the ideas of others and to add something new to the ongoing dialogue. And generating new ideas during discussions meant spending extra time and effort to read everyone’s posts to see what gaps need to be filled in them. This is the kind of pressure that might be felt by any student, whether mainstream or ESL, and it can potentially put a damper on their participation and involvement in online discussion activities.

Another online activity in the course included online dialogues on assigned readings, which consisted of thought pieces and responses. For this activity, each student was required to post one thought piece to the whole-class discussion board. Each thought piece was expected to receive one response that was not followed by any other reply. While talking about the online dialogues on assigned readings, Connie evaluated the thought pieces positively. She said:

If I didn’t have to write a thought piece on what I have read, I would read without something in my mind. So now when I am reading, I say to myself “Okay, I can write something about this part in my thought piece.” So it is helpful to pick up some points that I want to talk about. In that sense the thought pieces help me clarify some concepts or some content. And I learn from that.

However, although Connie acknowledged some value in writing the thought pieces, she saw that activity as directed primarily toward the instructor, not toward her own learning:
“I have to post the thought piece, then somebody will respond to it, and then the professor will check it.” In this quote, Connie showed she was aware that her thought pieces had two audiences: her peers and the instructor. She also showed that her success in the course depended on the instructor’s evaluation of her thought pieces. As is clear in the excerpt below, it was this view of thought pieces as an object of evaluation that influenced Connie’s engagement with them:

I am doing it [the thought pieces] because it is required. I want to be more excited about them, but frankly I do not feel it now. I am not really engaged in the thought pieces. Because I don’t feel much excitement about them, I do not pay much attention to them. I post my thought piece and then check to see if anyone replied. If someone did, I just briefly read his/her response and that’s it. I don’t have to respond to that. It is not a requirement. I print all of the thought pieces and responses out before the class begins on Mondays and I skim them. But this week, I did not read them except for the one I responded to. I am not reading them thoroughly.

As these statements show, Connie was frank in admitting that her interest in the online dialogues on assigned readings was low and that she saw the whole activity as an obligation. When I asked her what particular things engaged her interest the most in this activity, she said she enjoyed and learned more from writing and reading the thought pieces when they connected to her research interests or topics (“I can understand better if I have my research in my mind when I am reading”).

Overall, Connie thought the online dialogues on course readings had “weaknesses and strengths.” She thought she could have benefited more from them if she was
provided with more direction. She said one of the hardest things about writing the thought pieces was picking some points of interest and working on them on her own rather than following guidelines or questions provided by the instructor. Without having a general topic of concern or a specific guideline to address, she felt “something was not enough in [her] posts in terms of coverage.”

Interestingly, however, while Connie preferred to have some more specific guidelines that framed the thought pieces, she knew having strict guidelines would limit diversity and stifle the adoption of relevant approaches to course readings: “It would be nice if the professor gave us the questions, but when there are questions, students try to find answers to them only and miss other good points.” These mixed feelings aside, Connie really appreciated having a record of all of the online dialogues on assigned readings. She said she “saved them all in a folder” so that she could use them as a retrospective source of information even after the course was completed.

*Connie’s Lived Experiences that Shaped her Engagement and Participation in the Course*

In order to make sense of Connie’s lived experiences in terms of their impact on her participation and engagement in the course, it will be fruitful to view the structure of those experiences as instantiations of the context (this blended course) within which Connie functioned. For this, Engeström’s (1987, 1993, 2001) activity theory becomes useful. A few key concepts of activity theory include ‘activity systems’ and ‘contradictions.’ I will briefly discuss these two, relating them to Connie’s case.

In activity theory, ‘activity systems’ are ‘contexts’ (Engeström, 1993, p. 67). An activity system/context includes the subject, the object, tools, rules, the community, and
the division of labor. The subject component of a context consists of the individuals who helped create that context. However, for the purposes of this analysis, the subject is “Connie” as an individual. The object, that is what Connie acted upon, was qualitative research. The projected outcome was developing competence and expertise in this research paradigm. This outcome was reached by such means as the instructor’s explanations, books/articles, theories, questions, individual/group projects, online and FTF discussions, videos, simulation activities, use of writing, etc. Individuals, including peers and the instructor, who assisted Connie in attainment of her outcomes constituted the community. The rules were the parameters, such as code of behavior, standards of grading, requirements for online posts, and timetables set by the instructor. Finally, the division of labor consisted of the tasks and responsibilities of Connie and her peers as well as the instructor.

In addition to the structural components of the context (subject, object, tools, rules, community, and division of labor), Roth (2007, 2009) encouraged researchers working with activity theory to include in their analysis the sensuous aspects, such as emotions, motivation, and identity, that are embedded in the subject. He argued that only by taking into account the subject’s emotions and feelings together with the structural dimensions of the context, can researchers capture the activity system as a whole. From this perspective, the sensuous aspects of Connie’s learning, her feelings and emotions, also became important areas of scrutiny as they mediated her actions and participation in the course.

From an activity theory perspective, activity systems are considered to be places that are never stable or harmonious. They are characterized by contradictions which take
the form of dilemmas, double bind situations, tensions, and/or sources of trouble. Contradictions may emerge internally (within and between various components of an activity system) or externally (between various activity systems). When they emerge, contradictions typically lead to breakdowns in individuals’ normal flow of activity and are managed in a variety of ways ranging from tacit withdrawal to innovative change efforts directed toward improving the activity (Engeström, 2008). Examining the contradictions that presented themselves to Connie in the activity system of this blended course and the ways she worked through those contradictions illuminated what impeded and/or supported her participation and engagement.

Below I discuss Connie’s lived experiences that affected her participation and engagement in the course in connection to the structural and sensuous dimensions of activity theory. Within this discussion, contradictions are special focus for my analysis.

I will begin with Connie’s experiences with one of the most central issues of activity theory - that is “the object.” As I have mentioned earlier, Connie appreciated qualitative research (the object) and saw its potential for providing opportunities to develop rich understandings of processes and people. Although she did not intend to pursue a qualitative dissertation, she could see her future research being aligned with the qualitative tradition. In Connie’s view, doing qualitative research was a complex process that required considerable analytic effort. She also felt that only few people could do it successfully. Nevertheless, Connie had a strong desire to learn qualitative methods (“I need to learn qualitative research”). Her desired and projected outcome of this course was to develop competence and expertise in this research tradition. It was this projection that
functioned as the motive of her actions in the course and gave meaning to her participation and engagement in it.

The tools that were used to mediate Connie and others’ understanding of the subject material in the course included, but not limited to, the instructor’s explanations (lectures), books/articles, questions, projects/assignments, online and FTF discussions, videos, and simulation activities. Connie liked and enjoyed having the opportunity to draw on various sources to help her understandings (“I like the structure of the course. We have lectures, we do discussions, and then move on to watching DVDs”). At the same time, however, she expressed some concerns and difficulties with some of the tools used in the course, such as the readings and discussions, online and FTF.

The heavy volume of assigned readings posed challenges to her. Being a slow reader and wanting to understand every word, idea, or concept in depth added to her challenges. She noted:

The textbooks I could not read enough. I was trying to do my best, but sometimes I was skimming. The instructor asked us to read one book in one or two weeks and for me it was not easy. I don’t think the content was overwhelming but reading a textbook was hard. When I am reading, I am thinking. I read sentence by sentence and try to take in and think again. So it takes time.

Instead of offering comments off the top of her head, Connie wanted to master all the assigned readings before making a comment in the discussions. This became especially problematic in online discussions as it made her become a “late poster.” Below is an
excerpt from Interview Two in which Connie admitted to posting late to the ongoing online discussions:

I have to read all the chapters and until I finish those, I can’t write anything. I can write some comments without reading all of them, but I feel like I have to cover them all. So I am not an early poster.

Online transcripts also verified Connie’s tendency to post late and thus supported her claims.

Connie said a few times in the interviews that she did not like discussions in general, FTF and online. Not liking discussions fed back and made those less exciting and interesting to engage in, thereby producing and reproducing lack of engagement. For example, Connie was not an enthusiastic and frequent contributor to the online discussions/dialogues although transcripts revealed that she made intellectually significant contributions. She remarked, “I don’t feel much excitement about online discussions. I do them because they are required. I don’t post too many posts. If I am supposed to post four posts, then I post four times. I don’t exceed that.”

As these statements show, online group discussions and dialogues had no intrinsic value for Connie. Participating in them only served the purpose of meeting the course requirement – a requirement exchanged for a participation grade. Connie’s placing a higher value in meeting the course requirement rather than participating in those discussions/dialogues to obtain a better understanding of the knowledge read reflected a contradiction between “the use value” (the intrinsic meaning and value of an activity) and “the exchange value” (the worth of an activity in quantitative terms) (Engeström, 1993). Connie’s perception of online discussions and dialogues as unhelpful practices
Whenever I find a different perspective [in online discussions/dialogues], it is helpful. But I have not seen that happening a lot) seemed to have increased the exchange value of her participation independent of its use value (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 112).

Connie’s lack of excitement and engagement in online discussions/dialogues can also be explained by her negative feelings about learning online. For Connie, online components of the course were sources of “additional work” and “extra trouble.” As she explained, “When I log in, I see a lot of comments, announcements. Sometimes I forget about this online component. It is extra for me, something that I have to tune in and be more conscious about.”

Connie was not a big fan of FTF discussions either. She perceived those as troublesome because of the time pressure they exerted on her while speaking. She felt she could not express herself in English fluently enough in fast-paced FTF dialogue. The FTF discussions between her and peers became difficult as a result of those perceptions and each time she got into discussions with them, her emotions were negatively affected, which in turn lowered her participation.

The tensions Connie experienced with FTF discussions appeared to be tied to her self esteem. Connie accepted the subject position of a foreign student who was not a legitimate speaker of English. In her words:

American students in general, not just my classmates, they presume or think that I speak English well and understand whatever they say. But actually I don’t. I am trying to understand, but I probably understand 80% of what they say. I don’t understand their jokes either. So I listen and don’t make any comments. Sometimes I pretend like I understand them in order
not to break the good atmosphere. Sometimes I realize my peers look at me like they want some comments from me and I don’t say anything.

It became evident from these statements that Connie struggled to “get it” – with “it” referring to her peers’ language in quick-paced verbal exchanges. However, language was not the only issue that limited Connie’s participation and engagement in FTF discussions. She thought the discussions were often dominated by a few students who did not give others an opportunity to speak: “In FTF group discussions typically some students were leading all the time and I was in the same group most of the time, so I wasn’t able to say what I was thinking.” At times like this, Connie found herself on the margins, feeling silenced and/or interrupted. She recalled that this kind of scenario took place very often although no one seemed to have noticed it: “It happened in the last few discussions. They [peers] didn’t know. It wasn’t bad intentions. They just don’t know.”

She confessed to me that during the FTF discussions, she was often the one who said nothing due to those peers who kept interrupting her (“Usually even though I have things to say, I don’t talk much”). To illustrate, she gave the following example from one of the FTF group discussions:

When we were discussing, two students were talking most of the time. I was trying to jump in. So even though I was trying to say something, one of them still continued talking. Then I had to cut again, but I am not that much into cutting in. When she stopped, I was going to say something but she jumped in again. I waited for that time when I could speak, but it didn’t work that way. Although I had things to say, I did not speak much because the others were doing the talking.
My class observations also confirmed this point. During my in-class observations, Connie was noticeably less vocal than her peers in small group discussions. My fieldnotes recorded that she seemed to make thoughtful contributions to the discussions when she spoke, but often “stepped back and waited others to finish talking, mutely nodding her head and smiling, showing understanding or perhaps agreement” (Fieldnotes, 2/22/2010). It appeared that just like the graduate students participating in Morita’s (2004) study, Connie was having issues with being recognized as a legitimate and competent contributor in small group discussions that took place FTF.

Connie’s problems or issues with discussions did not end there unfortunately. The issue of “feeling silenced” in the FTF discussions manifested itself in a different form in the online environment, this time taking the form of ‘being ignored.’ Connie noticed early on in the course that the first thought piece she posted to the course website received no reply: “In the first week, nobody responded to my thought piece.” Not receiving any response was very demoralizing for Connie. She felt ignored. With that feeling, she started questioning her writing: “Was my writing OK? Did it make sense? Was it difficult or too long or even too dry so people avoided responding to it? I wasn’t sure.” Up to that point in her academic life, Connie felt positive about her writing skills in English, but this experience was enough to shake her whole confidence. She started speculating:

When I am writing in my language, I have a style and I know how other people think about it or take it. But when I am writing in English, I don’t have any sense of what it is like. What is my style or tone like? How do others view it? Do my opinions come out too strong? Is my writing
immature or too academic? I know that my writing in English does not look like a daily conversation, so maybe it is boring. Is the language I use Okay? I am not sure how I am writing. But one of my colleagues recently told me that my writing is very professional. That means it is Okay, it is not weird. But maybe she said that to make me happy. Am I doing Okay or not? When I don’t get many responses or comments from other people, I start thinking maybe there is something wrong about my writing or style.

As these statements show, Connie was unable to read the situation properly. Were her peers reading her online postings? She was also aware that her late posting habits were further aggravating the situation.

Not receiving any comments was not the only issue Connie faced in the online discussions. Even when she was part of the online conversations, she felt her suggestions and comments were dismissed or received by other participants in an uncaring manner. This made it difficult for Connie to have an impact on the discussions. She cited the following example to illustrate this:

In the first online group discussion, I was the co-facilitator, co-leader. Before we started the discussion on the assigned article, the other co-facilitator and I exchanged emails. First, I shared with her three questions privately, questions that I wanted to use to start the discussion. She said she liked my questions, but posted another question to the discussion area. The question she posed was not one of my questions. It was her question. So I thought “OK, maybe for the next thread, we were supposed to have several threads, she will post one of my questions.” I thought we were co-
leaders and we agreed that we were going to post questions that we
already agreed upon, but again she put one of her questions. So my
questions were cut off. In that discussion, I was supposed to be the co-
leader, but I wasn’t there.

Connie was frustrated with this and other experiences which made her feel excluded,
silenced, and ignored. However, rather than dwelling on her frustrations, she took action
and let others know about her frustrations and challenges. She nicely did this during the
course of one online group discussion. It seemed as if the online medium empowered her
to take action in a way she might not have done FTF.

The online discussion in which Connie felt compelled to claim her “right to
speak” and “right to be heard” (Norton Pierce, 1995) as a non-native speaker of English
was initiated when the discussion facilitator posted the following quote from Helen
Keller:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Re:Second discussion thread</th>
<th>Topic: The power of our perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Ellen</td>
<td>Date: March 14, 2010 7:53 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a way over time to try to ensure that we do not lose sight of the power of our perspective? I am reminded of something that Helen Keller was quoted as saying “The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight, but has no vision.” Does this hold true for researchers? If we have sight but no vision regarding our research, what are we offering to our field of study?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Connie’s response to this post was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Re:Second discussion thread</th>
<th>Topic: The power of our perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Connie</td>
<td>Date: March 15, 2010 11:04 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As Florence stated, the perspectives or attitudes of researchers are powerful (or influential). As a researcher, I would try to be careful of anything that I have taken for granted (about events, people's behaviors, other thoughts etc.) For example, as an international student, it is always challenging to read posts by American students. I have to read several times to fully understand them. But how many American students will know (be aware of) this? In the United States, people seem to take it for granted that all international students are good at English. Understanding and experiencing cultural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
duality is powerful. If we know it, we can see it. Sight may lead you to vision.

Her action opened up interactions which made others become aware of her struggles, as illustrated in the post below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject: Re:Second discussion thread</th>
<th>Topic: The power of our perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Ellen</td>
<td>Date: March 16, 2010 10:59 AM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While posing my question and using the quotes form Helen Keller, I did consider whether this would be difficult for you Connie. I wondered if the subtle differences between vision and sight might be hard to translate or interpret. In the end I decided to take the chance that it would work out. I think you did a very nice job in interpreting and bringing forward a very important point regarding both perspective and assumptions regarding language and culture. We can’t assume that someone understands what we are saying or more importantly what we are trying to say. This is true even if both the researcher and the participant speak the same language. Our lens needs to include this cultural perspective as we move into our research.

Connie admitted that initially she was reluctant to “let others know” (“At first I wasn’t sure about whether it was OK to post it, but I felt like I had to do that. I wanted to let them know”), but then pleased to see that her action “made a difference” (“Before that I felt a little isolated. I wasn’t feeling a part of the discussions”). Following this episode, which took place in the middle of the semester, Connie felt that what she said in the discussions was heard and responded to with interest and action: “It felt good because my peers responded to it and I now realize that they are more conscious of my situation. They have a better understanding about how I feel.”

Regarding the community, which constituted the social basis of this course, Connie liked her instructor, found her knowledgeable, and enjoyed her teaching style and kind, affectionate persona. Connie also liked her peers and perceived them to be “much more tuned in” and “more knowledgeable” than her. She remarked, “They [my peers] look very competent. It is not just a language thing. When we have group discussions, they catch some concepts quickly. In that sense they are more capable and have more
strengths than I do.” Such perceptions, however, created tensions with Connie’s self-esteem as she started to question herself and her abilities (“I was thinking maybe other students are doing well and I am behind, lazy, or missing something”). She really was not sure if she was doing well, and it wasn’t until the middle of the semester that she found out she “was doing okay.” What changed her perception of self positively was the “good comments and feedback” she received from the instructor on her performance. She explained:

In the middle of the course, the instructor gave me very good comments and feedback that I was a little bit surprised. She was appreciating me a lot. I felt good. She said my contributions were always substantive and she was impressed with my work. Initially I had concerns about what other people thought about me. When the professor confirmed this, I felt good. I was doing okay.

It appears from the statements above that receiving positive comments from her instructor was important for Connie. She needed extra reinforcement and verification of her performance to fuel her motivation and interest and to feel good about herself.

Another point of tension that existed within Connie’s perceptions of the community appeared to be tied to the social distance she felt between herself and her American peers. For Connie, there was little congruence between her culture and the culture of her American peers. The differences mainly manifested themselves in their participation patterns. For example, Connie found her American peers to be “very active and very good at group activities.” As a person who was a little fearful of talking in front of others, she admired their interest and active engagement in course activities, especially
in FTF discussions. Yet, she was a little bit disturbed and discouraged by the manner in which they performed those tasks. The following comments from Interview Two articulate her concerns:

When I am having discussions with my peers, I have to jump in. They keep talking, cutting in, and jumping and I never get the time to talk. I am not good at cutting while the other person is talking. But here I realize that many people do that. I mean it is natural but in my culture, if someone is talking and if I am cutting in and jumping in, it is not good. You have to listen until the person finishes. Even if you cut in, you have to do it nicely. In our group discussions, even though I have something in my mind to talk about, I can’t jump in. So I listen and get bored.

For Connie, there existed a cultural etiquette to be observed in the discussions. She confessed to me that she lost many opportunities to participate in FTF discussions because of her peers who kept breaking that etiquette.

Finally, another contradiction that Connie experienced emerged within the division of labor – the roles the students and the instructor played in the course. This contradiction can also be interpreted as a tertiary contradiction, one that exists between an activity in the way it has been experienced and its possible forms in more advanced states. Before coming to this course, Connie had participated in numerous Ph.D. courses, both inside and outside of her program. In those classes, the norm was that the instructor should “evaluate students’ performance.” In contrast to those courses, this class used a division of labor concept especially when it came to evaluation and assessment. Through
the use of peer-reviews and self-evaluations, the students played a central role in evaluating their own performance as well as the work of others in the course.

Connie was frustrated, at least initially, because she was engaging in unfamiliar activities that she believed were “too student centered” and “unusual.” The differences between the norms she was accustomed to regarding the roles of the students and the instructor in her previous classes and the differentiation of roles in this course led to conflicts. After the first peer-review activity, she complained about not getting adequate feedback from her peers: “Actually I didn’t get good feedback. One person didn’t understand my study so she was pointing to things that were not related to my study, and the other person only told me to narrow down my questions.” This experience led Connie to question the purpose of the peer-review activity. Just like peer-reviews, Connie did not see any value in self-evaluations mainly because she did not find herself confident enough to evaluate her own performance. She added, “I am not excited about the self evaluations we will have in the next few weeks. I don’t know the purpose of those exactly. I don’t know if they are necessary.”

The interviews suggested that the mismatches between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ were at the root of her conflicts. That is, the expected norms and activities in this activity system in terms of evaluation and assessment conflicted with those of the old activity systems within which Connie had previously functioned (“I am taking a course like this for the first time”). However, when Connie realized that self evaluation and peer-review activities helped her with her learning (“They worked well. I had difficulty doing those assignments, but in the end I learned a lot from them”), the conflict was ameliorated. Looking back on the experience, Connie said:
I was sure she [the instructor] had a reason for doing these [peer-reviews and self-evaluations], but I wanted her to share with us why she was doing it that way. She should have explained to us her experiences and philosophy. I wanted to hear those in the beginning or at the end. It would help with my confidence. I was feeling like this was kind of an experimental class. I did not know how long she had been teaching it this way. We don’t have classes like this in our program. This is not a typical course. In my program instructors lead the courses. Jumping into this class was a little bit challenging, but it was doable even though I was not sure in the beginning.

There was clearly a mismatch between the style of teaching favored by the course instructor and Connie’s preferred ways of learning. These mismatches were eventually resolved when Connie was able to adapt her style to the instructor’s requirements. For her, accommodating to new styles of learning was challenging, but doable.

Summary

Like Jen, Connie felt her learning in the course was a success. She thought the course challenged her, yet provided her with new knowledge and understandings. She attributed much of her learning to the instructor-mediated activities that took place in the FTF components of the course. While she understood and acknowledged the value of the online discussions, she did not perceive them as useful resources that contributed directly to her learning. Her lack of appreciation of those discussions seemed to be connected to the unfavorable assumptions she held regarding the value and place of discussions in learning.
Connie began the course with a strong motive and need to learn qualitative research. As the course progressed, however, her activities shifted from a need state to ‘business as usual’ (such as completing tasks to meet the course requirements), then to a state of aggravated tensions. One of the major conflicts she experienced in the course emerged from language issues. She felt pressured and uncomfortable while communicating with her peers in real-time, FTF discussions. Those feelings affected both her enjoyment of the experience and her learning through those discussions. Additionally, the cultural mismatches, her doubts about her skills and knowledge, tensions within the division of labor were all other factors that influenced her engagement and participation negatively in the course.

The Case of Kelly

I present, below, the case of Kelly which illustrates how a student’s learning in a blended course was shaped by her actions and interactions with collective others and by the tools used within that course context, and how personal understandings or situations developed in and out of that context became sources for contradictions for this student. Kelly’s case is not a representative case out of which generalizations can be made to other doctoral students. However, it is a “telling case” which allows one to make connections to the themes and threads running through the theories in which this study is grounded.

As was the case with Jen and Connie, I followed Kelly over a semester. I interviewed her three times, observed her in class, and looked at her contributions in the online components of the course. The following passages include the constructed nature of my findings. I present them in three sections: Kelly’s stated beliefs and perspectives about learning; perceptions of her learning developing through the online and FTF
interactions and activities in the course; and her lived experiences that shaped her
engagement and participation. Before I present these findings, I want to set the stage for
readers to learn about who Kelly is. Thus, at the very beginning of her case, I provide a
brief profile.

Kelly’s Profile

Kelly was a second year Ph.D. student with a unique background. Before joining
the doctoral program, she had spent considerable amount of time in the business field and
also engaged for a time in teaching in a local school district. While teaching, Kelly was
aroused by a realization that the research she had read did not really match what actually
happened in her classrooms. This realization motivated her to quit teaching and become a
full time doctoral student; she wanted to engage in research rather than just read about it.
Overall, Kelly was happy with this decision. She liked the school, the faculty, and the
classes: “I think for the most part, it has been a great experience.”

It is not exaggerating to say that Kelly was enamored with learning. Her
comments below testify to that:

I love going to school. I would make a great forever student. There are
always things that interest me. I am the person, that is you know, I am
interested in physics so I will go buy Stephen Hawking’s books and I will
read those in my rare spare time. Now I have this whole stack of books
that I am “Okay, I will get to those.” I am that kind of person. My desk is
stacked with articles and books and papers, and I love learning just for
learning’s sake.
For Kelly, a great deal of her learning in life had so far been non-formal, arising in the course of events. The most significant understandings that she had come to, she had not achieved from books or role models, but from experience. She believed in her abilities “to adapt and get through” life events with minimum guidance: “I love figuring out things. I like the stuff I can’t figure out probably more because I always think of myself as someone who will figure it out, but it will take some time. And eventually I do.”

Kelly was functioning in multiple contexts and in multiple roles. The little time she had was divided among her children, spouse, classes, and her graduate assistantship which entailed research and administrative duties. For Kelly, the parenting role was the most important of all, because she believed it informed her other roles. She said:

Parenting role really is about being responsible where you are really the end. You know the ultimate decisions are yours. The ultimate responsibility is yours. At the end of the day, I know it is me. I look at myself as being the one who is responsible. It is my responsibility to schedule, to plan, to know what this assignment is, to figure that out on my own, whereas a lot of graduate students struggle with that. When you are a parent, you just become naturally responsible.

Speaking of herself as a student, Kelly said she was a “cynic” who tended to look for “the fault in everything.” She liked to engage deeply with the words and ideas to find the gaps present in texts. She explained, “I don’t read to get through the reading. I read to understand what it is. I don’t take anything for granted. Just because a book says “This is the way it is,” I don’t necessarily believe that.” She felt such cynicism helped her to get
the most out of the course texts and materials by forcing her to ask questions and decide what ideas or knowledge to pursue next and what to drop.

In her professional life, Kelly had developed an “in charge” relationship (“My history is I was the person who took charge. I am so used to being in charge”) and reluctantly carried this attitude to her graduate work: “I don’t want to be in charge and I purposefully push it off. But it happens naturally. I don’t want to be the person that always speaks up, but I end up being that person.” My in-class observations also confirmed this. During the group activities in which each group had to report back their ideas to the larger group, Kelly was always the spokesperson, summarizing her group’s discussion. She was definitely one of the most active students, volunteering frequently and taking on a leadership role during group work or discussions. She seemed to enjoy being an influential member in the classroom.

Kelly’s research interests were influenced by the quantitative training she had received over the years, building on a background and interest in science. In her mind, quantitative research made sense: “I love quantitative research because in my mind, because just the way my mind works, it makes sense.” She saw some value in qualitative research (“I have a growing appreciation for what qualitative research can do”), but at the same time acknowledged its “dark side” (Seidman, 2006) – the time when, while working with data, the researcher wonders whether she/he is making it all up, and feels considerable doubt about what she/he is doing: “I think you are putting a lot more of yourself into it. I think you will probably always have that questioning where you go ‘I wonder if that was really the way I believed it was’.”
There appeared to be two reasons for Kelly’s hesitation and doubts about qualitative research. The first and greatest concern was her lack of trust in her ability to interpret qualitative data: “I guess my own interpretive skills in dealing with qualitative analysis still makes me nervous.” She was afraid of reading too much or not enough into a situation. Feeling nervous about her interpretive skills, Kelly wanted to take the quantitative route for her dissertation, but also considered adding a qualitative phase to it.

The second concern stemmed from her epistemological orientation. For Kelly, the products of qualitative research were not truth, but provisional arguments, which would render knowledge fallible. She explained:

- Asking participants questions will never give you the right answer.
- Sometimes I think what people miss is that just because you think there is no right answer that is not necessarily a true answer. You are getting the answer they have at the moment. If you ask them on Friday night or Monday morning, there might be completely different answers.

This belief led Kelly to question the credibility of qualitative research: “I still struggle with how I can make it credible.” Overall, these comments indicate that Kelly had mixed feelings about qualitative research. On the one hand, she appreciated what its methodology can offer. On the other hand, she struggled with confusion and hesitation about its highly interpretive nature.

Kelly also had some mixed feelings about blended instruction. For the most part, she thought it had “great potential” as she loved “the idea of having [a combination of] online and FTF meetings.” Some previous blended courses, which she thought were “excellent,” seemed to have reinforced those positive feelings. Besides those excellent
blended courses, however, Kelly also had some others which were “disconnected,” “chaotic,” and “oddly structured,” and made her question the potentials and possibilities of blended instruction. According to Kelly, the disconnect in those courses occurred because of a lack of integration between the online and FTF elements. In one course, for example, Kelly felt the online discussions were treated as a “separate entity from the rest of the class” and were “never brought back together.” She remarked, “I think being able to integrate them [online and FTF components] together and bringing them back together would be better.”

Kelly expected this blended course to have a “coherent” and “integrated structure,” one that successfully connects FTF and online elements. She also expected to see a good balance between online and FTF contact in the course. Reflecting on her previous course experiences, she noted:

I think blended courses have great potential when they meet FTF every other week because I think the break time from the FTF meetings is really important. It gives the class a different tone. There is almost an appreciation for everyone when everybody comes back together that you lose every week. It becomes tedious meeting every week. But when it is so spread out such that you see each other only for a few times then you don’t see each other again for the rest of the semester, you lose all of those connections.

Kelly’s highlighted comment about “losing connections” in absence of FTF contact parallels Brown and Duguid’s (2006) claim that online “technologies are adept at maintaining communities already formed. They are less good at making them” (p. 206).
On the survey questionnaire, which I handed out to class on the first day of the course, Kelly indicated that she was taking this course because it was required for her graduation. She also chose the option “completely agree” for the item “My aim is to pass the course while doing as little work as possible.” Her response was intriguing. During the first interview, I asked Kelly what she meant by that. Here are her justifications:

As little work as possible would be within the confines of the requirements of the course. I am the type of person I don’t need to have a 20 page paper due at the end of the semester in order to learn something from the course. I want as little work as possible because I think that gives me the flexibility to do things that are more meaningful as part of the course. So it is not that I want to do as little as I can just to get by, but I want to have as little requirement as part of the course as possible so I can really get something out of it. Sometimes the requirements of the course limit what you can learn. If you require someone to do a five page paper every week they are going to invest their time in writing the paper, whereas I would rather do a five page paper once a month and really enjoy and understand the material.

When asked what other expectations she had from the course, Kelly said she wanted it to keep her “in the moment” (“I always have these little branches that I want to explore. How do I stay right here? How do I stay in this moment? That’s what I am hoping this course does”) and also provide her with “a great deal of practical knowledge” about how to do interviews, observations, and analysis.
Kelly’s Stated Beliefs and Perspectives about Learning

To Kelly, learning meant “gaining knowledge and insight about something [one] knew less about when [she/he] started.” When asked how she learned best, she answered, “My best learning probably comes from repetitive reading and then writing about what I have read, because it is a reflective piece.” Yet, she also had a clear understanding that when learning is too theoretical and is not linked to practice, its impact or transfer is minimal. She explained:

A lot of times reading, talking, and writing about how something is going to happen may become overwhelming. I think there is also value in seeing things happen. For example, you become a better interviewer, a better researcher, or you learn to ask better questions by doing it or by experiencing it. And failure, it is the best teacher.

With this, Kelly emphasized the need to have practice activities alongside reading and writing to support learning.

Kelly also emphasized the importance of interaction in learning and said “Sometimes you can come up with completely erroneous things in your own thinking. They don’t show up as being completely unfounded until you hear yourself talk about them with someone else.” She also added that she liked “the open-endedness, the debate, challenging questions, different points of view” and was looking for “conflict” in interactions.

Conflict never seemed to be an issue for Kelly. According to her comments in the interviews, if she had a disagreement with someone or something, she would throw it out there without hesitation (“I have no problem putting my opinions and agenda out there’’).
She said she really enjoyed vigorous scholarly debate, but felt she could do that with only “few graduate students.” She noted:

I feel that a lot of times people hold stubbornly to their perspectives and don’t necessarily hear what others are saying. They are afraid they are going to be told they are wrong. They are also afraid of saying someone what he/she said is wrong or doesn’t make sense. And if they do, they do it in such a way that it doesn’t feel right. That gets agitating. If you don’t agree with me, tell me. I want that confrontation. I value the things they [my peers] bring to the table, but they tend to bring them so cautiously sometimes that you are not necessarily sure you are getting it. There isn’t a lot of honesty in that world. The instructors are usually more honest and real.

These statements and others clearly indicate that for the most part, Kelly did not acknowledge peer input or feedback legitimate: “Peer feedback tends to be shallow and non-committed. It tends to be very much in the feelings of the other person.” Her lack of appreciation for peer input/feedback had nothing to do with an ignorance of its potential. Rather, it had to do with what she assumed to be reliable and accurate.

Kelly’s comments in the interviews revealed that she valued and trusted the opinions and input of only few peers in the program: “There are some people I find very bright based on what they say. They will throw it out there and say, ‘I disagree’ because they really feed on that scholarly debate.” She found interacting with such peers always rewarding (“I learn more with them than I could on my own”) and wished she could feel
the same way with all peers. She expressed frustration with those who she thought were not so committed to learning:

I have been surprised at the different levels of interest across graduate students. I assume that by the time you get to your doctoral studies, there will be a certain general commitment to education for its own sake. There is still a good proportion of students that are just getting through the day just to get a good grade. I find that really surprising. A lot of times it becomes difficult to work in groups with these people. I like discussing things and sharing ideas, but I tend to really delve deeply into what meanings are there within sentences and words. It is difficult to do that with such people because discussions become more of a fluff thing with them.

These comments suggest that for Kelly not all interactions with peers provide opportunities for learning. She thought that depending on the group dynamics, some interactions could detract rather than enhance her learning. It is worth mentioning here that Kelly is not alone in her thinking. In fact, other research (e.g., Crossouard, 2008) also highlighted students’ concerns with peer feedback, interaction, and input at the doctoral level.

Kelly’s beliefs and assumptions about her peers in general also paralleled those she held about her instructors. Like her peers, Kelly thought she had some instructors who she believed constructed limitations, while others gave her opportunities for her learning. Speaking of her expectations from instructors, she said:
I think a lot of teachers wind up being half informed or isolated in their information. And they are afraid to get outside of the box. I like teachers that are willing to be mavericks. I like having teachers that say “You questioned that. Why would you question that? I am looking for conflict more than support.

These remarks show how much Kelly valued opposing views and alternative opinions. For her, examining those critically was the best route toward learning and understanding.

Kelly’s appreciation of conflict in learning appeared to be connected to her dislike of “structure.” For Kelly, when learning was embedded in routine practices, she felt she was “pigeonholed” and “restrained.” She said in such situations she always felt the need to disrupt the monotony by challenging and questioning things and people. She explained:

If I am in a class and we always do the same thing, I will be the person who finds fault with the articles. I will look for very specific things and I will say “I don’t agree with this. And here is why.” I will try to cause conflict to stop that boredom that is drudgery.

Clearly, while many students find conflict uncomfortable, Kelly found it stimulating. She felt it enabled a “free-flow” of ideas that could lead to better learning.

*Kelly’s Perceptions of her Learning Developing through the Online and FTF Activities and Interactions in the Course*

Kelly seemed to have appreciated the course a lot. In the last interview, she repeatedly said things such as “I thought the course itself was really good,” “I have enjoyed the course more than I expected,” “I would say I learned a lot in the course,
especially about interpretation.” What she really liked and enjoyed about the course was that it allowed the class the diversity of topics that represented the common elements within qualitative research and still enabled tightly focused conversations on its essential, core issues. She explained:

I think the part where we read then responded to the readings and then came together and discussed allowed for diversity to happen within the classroom. We were able to go different directions, yet focus on single aspects. I think that has made it better rather than worse. For instance, one week we were asked to talk about the Kvale book on interviewing. A lot of what Kvale wrote about was very broad, but we got into much more specific topics. We ended up talking about text and discourse analysis which was maybe three pages of the hundred something pages we read. I think our conversations became much more focused.

Kelly said through such focused conversations, her thinking about qualitative research had evolved and changed substantially. She was now thinking about it in terms which even surprised her:

My thinking of qualitative research has been an evolution this semester taking this course. Going into it, I very much had the scientist mentality about it. I was not very disconnected from it, but I always thought it was kind of cute. And I always hated the way people presented it, because it seemed so fluffy. I have appreciated qualitative research and its mystery more with this course.
During the interviews, I asked Kelly how she perceived her learning developing through the online activities and interactions in the course. Kelly began by commenting on the online dialogues on assigned readings, which included the thought pieces and responses. She acknowledged the benefits of having to write a thought piece after reading an assigned text and then posting it online to the group. She understood that posting a thought piece online served a purpose: “Thought pieces served as markers for the classroom discussions.” She also acknowledged that preparing the thought pieces put her in situations which compelled her to read, think deeply, and write. She said:

The thought pieces forced me to think about what my thinking is, which is interesting because I always start the readings thinking “Am I going to get anything out of this?” Then there will be some interesting things and I will jot them down. With the thought pieces, I was able to focus on couple of really important themes and tie them all together. That definitively helped me form my learning into some form of an artifact that we could reference during the class discussions.

These comments suggest that Kelly saw the thought pieces as legitimate artifacts, those that “served as a good starting point for in-class conversations.” In that sense, the benefits of the thought pieces for Kelly can be better understood if we consider them as the reification (“making into a thing”) of understandings (Wenger, 1998) which together with participation (“to take a part or share with others”) led to creation of meanings within the classroom community. To illustrate this point, below I provide an example of a thought piece posted to the online forum by Kelly. This thought piece is followed by a response from a peer. Next, I show a brief snapshot of how these artifacts (the thought piece and
the response), more specifically the ideas discussed in them, were used as a tool for reinterpretation and meaning making in the classroom (Class Two).

In the thought piece below, Kelly talked about a realization she made while reading that week’s reading assignment: the inappropriateness of force-fitting the research questions into theories.

| Subject: Kelly’s thought piece on Patton Ch 3 | Topic: Thought Piece 2/5 and Response |
| Author: Kelly | Date: February 5, 2010 8:45 PM |
| In reading these two very dense chapters I found both clarity and confusion. First for the confusion, I thought chapter 4 was extremely arduous to read and very uninformativa. For me, it fell somewhere between a cursory listing of past applications and a collection of ideas in the works. I found it never fully extended the descriptions to an educational level and danced between examples and justifications. Perhaps, as the book evolves it will reintroduce many of these examples to provide a more practical feel for the qualitative applications at play. The clarity comes in the form of a personal realization that emerged as I read chapter 3. I have heard the statement dozens of times that choosing a method for qualitative studies is a critical component and determined by your research question. I have always had an order problem in the way I looked at this statement. It was out of the many names, categories and framework discussions mentioned in Patton that I really began to see the connection. I now feel that there is no truer statement but the theory doesn’t precede the question, as I had always tried to envision (which always seemed like something between pigeonholing and clairvoyance to me). The research question determines the framework because it determines what you’re asking about; a people, an organization, an event, etc… This may seem a small connection to have made but it is the first time (since prior to the beginning of 777) that I understand the relation between research question and theory. |

Kelly’s thought piece received a response from Tamra who shared Kelly’s dilemmas.

| Subject: Kelly's thought piece on Patton Ch 3 | Topic: Thought Piece 2/5 and Response |
| Author: Tamra | Date: February 6, 2010 6:08 AM |
| Kelly, I am struggling with that very concept. I am being asked over and over "what is your theoretical framework”? That we can't have a question until we have a TF. So, I am wondering if maybe we are misinterpreting what Patton is saying? Or maybe Patton goes against the philosophy of our program? Either way I am interested in finding my way to the answer to this question. If your have no TF then isn't that Grounded Theory? |

Tamra
In the FTF class (Class Two) that followed this online exchange, the instructor asked the students to get into small groups and discuss the ideas put forward in the thought pieces. The students were then asked to report their discussion to the whole-class. During the small group discussion activity, Kelly and her group spent some time talking about the position of the theoretical framework in qualitative research. When it was time to report back to the larger group, Kelly became the spokesperson and posed the following problem to the class, referencing her thought piece:

*Kelly:* In our group, we talked about theoretical frameworks. I have the impression that the questions rule the framework (reads parts of her thought piece out loud to class).

*Instructor:* Research questions are where doctoral students usually get stuck because questions control a lot of things. How you ask questions is huge. It will determine what data you collect. Ideally, the questions grow out of the theoretical framework.

*Kelly:* It seems to me that when you start with the framework, your questions are not formed the right way.

*Instructor:* It can. Methods are all guided by theory.

*Kelly:* If you have a really good question, how much of the rest of it really matters? I think the methods I would put foremost because methods are linked to how you are answering the question. But putting the theory or frameworks in front of everything else … I guess this is probably going to be an ongoing conflict in my mind forever.
(The conversation continued with a few other students offering their take on this ‘theory versus questions’ debate).

This is an illustration of just one instance showing how reification and participation (Wenger, 1998) came together in the course with the thought pieces serving as reference points for the in-class dialogue. There were many more instances like this one throughout the semester as the thought pieces were consistently used as tools that provided direction for in-class discussions.

Kelly acknowledged and understood the purpose and benefits of the thought pieces and responses, yet called them “the necessary evil” and said she was doing them because she “had to.” She added, “I am not a big fan of the thought pieces and responses. I don’t know if they help my learning. They are kind of fluff and there seems to be a lot of nicety in them.” It became apparent with this statement that as a person who found conflict invigorating and stimulating, Kelly was troubled by the form the thought pieces and responses had taken. She felt there was plenty of nicety, blandness, and harmony in them and very little, if any, intellectual conflict. As a result, she did not feel as though she had learned from them. She wished her peers had taken bolder stances in those thought pieces and responses, articulated their different opinions, and produced dialogues that allowed more room for negotiations and intellectual surprises.

This was only part of Kelly’s critiques. She also felt that the online dialogues on assigned readings (thought pieces and responses) were “so small.” By “small” she meant their closed-ended nature which disallowed back and forth interaction (each thought piece was expected to receive only one response). She noted: “If they were more interactive, they would probably have more substance.” For Kelly, the thought pieces and
responses were more like a one-time statement of each person’s point of view or understanding. She wanted more back and forth movement between them and thought that the way they were structured did not offer possibilities for productive dialogues. She believed opening thought pieces and responses up for more interactive discussions online would have given the class “a lot better view of those.” She explained:

When we brought those thought pieces and the responses back to the discussion in the classroom, we talked about one topic at each table in 20 minutes with the same three or four people. If we were to discuss them online, we would have more opportunities to expand on a lot of different ideas with more people. Also, even when we discussed two or more topics in our small groups FTF, we were sharing only one of them with the whole class. And that really wasn’t an interactive discussion either. It was very much focused toward the instructor commenting on what we were saying. It really winded up being almost like a very traditional kind of feel in the way those discussions took place rather than being a lot more open.

Kelly also believed that making the thought pieces and responses more interactive would have freed up some class time: “I think if we had confined the thought pieces and responses to the online portion of the class, we could have done more things in the FTF sessions, like simulation activities or watching videos.”

Compared to the online dialogues on course readings (thought pieces and responses), Kelly seemed to appreciate and like the online group discussions, where students discussed articles of their choice in groups of four online there times in the semester. She said, “The article reading discussions made more sense. I got a lot more out
of those than the online dialogues on course readings.” She admitted that it was by nature of the group she was in that the online group discussions really made a difference. She said:

The group I have worked with has been pretty good. They are a group of people that I know at least casually for the most part so we seem to interact a lot more comfortably. Having their insights into things has been very helpful. We really got into a lot of detail about certain facets and skipped over things that we did not seem to think were that important. I always got something out of those discussions.

To Kelly, the online group discussion activity provided an opportunity to extend and deepen her understandings by discussing material “to the point of exhaustion” with a supportive group. She explained:

We were taking a 20 page article and talking about it probably the equivalent of 35-40 pages of text as opposed to taking a 200 page book and reducing it to a page of text as we did with the thought pieces. So I guess in that anti-reductionist kind of way, it was great that we were really expanding on a lot of ideas. And because it was so stretched we winded up doing a lot more interpretation and a lot more searching for things beyond the paper than you get to do in other type of format.

My analysis of interaction patterns in Kelly and her group’s online discussions demonstrated that they referred to one another’s messages, adding on and building on ideas posted, and clearing up each other’s confusions, concerns, and misunderstandings. The following thread from one of Kelly’s group’s online discussions confirms her point
that the online group discussions enabled opportunities for Kelly and her peers to analyze and dissect ideas and issues, thus deepening their own understandings of qualitative research.

The thread began with the following post by Tamra in which she problematized the idea of “reflexivity” in qualitative research and invited her peers to consider its application in real research situations.

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<th>Subject: my initial thoughts</th>
<th>Topic: Article 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Author: Tamra</td>
<td>Date: March 15, 2010 11:48 AM</td>
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<tr>
<td>The more I read about interviewing the more it scares me. I could easily see stories of sexual abuse or harassment coming up while interviewing about experiences women had with mathematics. The procedural ethics seem pretty straightforward and would work nicely in a perfect, neat world, but the “practical ethics” are tough. The discussion on reflexivity brings back to the forefront not only the importance of choosing our theoretical framework but also how closely all the decisions we make are connected to our personal values and beliefs, which in the end are the ethical decisions we make. Taking a step back and critically looking at our research as a way to ensure validity is still clouded by being able to actually remove your self and be objective. I see reflexivity requires you to think on the spot. I imagine this comes from practice but how can we, as newbies, not inadvertently make any practical mistakes that might potentially damage a participant? Should some type of training in interviewing, that gives us different scenarios and an opportunity to see how we would handle them, be part of our program? This article refers to research as knowledge construction while the Interview book (Kvale) alluded to several different views of research. Does reflexivity only apply if you view research as knowledge construction?</td>
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In the next two responses, Kate and Kelly attempted to respond to Tamra’s questions by exploring the ideas they had read in one of the course texts.

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<th>Subject: Re: my initial thoughts</th>
<th>Topic: Article 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Author: Kate</td>
<td>Date: March 15, 2010 8:18 PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think reflexivity applies whenever you do any kind of research. I view research as a knowledge construction process whether for myself or for others. I liked that the authors linked reflexivity, not just to rigor in qualitative research, but to ethics. I hadn't thought about it in that way before. I thought it was interesting the way the authors distinguished between the 'big ethical issues' (pg. 265-266) such as those we encounter in bioethics and the use of philosophical tools to negotiate these issues and microethics-the ethics of 'clinical practice'. I felt the authors might be making the argument that microethics serves as a framework for ethics</td>
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in practice. A sort of foundation for one to draw upon in ethical moments-moments of ethical decision making and provides a sort of conceptual bridge for linking procedural ethics and ethics in practice. What do you think? Am I overthinking this?

**Subject:** Re: my initial thoughts  
**Topic:** Article 2  
**Author:** Kelly  
**Date:** March 16, 2010 5:41 PM

I actually thought that they were saying that the ethics in practice encountered by qualitative researchers is the same as what has been termed microethics in other types of research... I'm not sure however whether microethics itself can be viewed as a framework. My impression, and maybe I need to read more closely, was that microethics concerns itself with the in-the-moment issues that arise in the course of interacting with people in intimate relationships and as a result of the fiduciary role that researcher and subject develop. But, I'm not sure how it bridges procedural ethics and ethics in practice other than addressing the same general problem.

Next, the fourth member of the group, Kim, joined the discussion. She drew attention to one of the risks involved in qualitative research: the risk of breaching confidentiality in the reporting of research findings. Concerned with the breach of “ethically sensitive” data, she called on peers to help her with her confusion.

**Subject:** Re: my initial thoughts  
**Topic:** Article 2  
**Author:** Kim  
**Date:** March 17, 2010 1:26 AM

Most of my reading doesn't deal with ethics, but I did a little searching on micro-ethics, while I don't see it as a frame, I did find mention of it in medicine. AW Frank quotes Komesaroff, stating "The job of the clinician... cannot be formulated in terms of broad principles, bioethical or otherwise, but only as a series of practical tasks." He goes on to include the tasks, "the most appropriate way to approach the patient, to talk with him, to allay his fears, and to establish the common ground on which mutual decisions can be taken."

I want to know how we go about doing the last part! I know that we have a meta-dialogue with our interview participants prior to the first real interview session, but how do you breach the ethically sensitive stuff if you aren't a mandated reporter?

Kim’s question received a response from Kate. In this response, Kate presented her personal opinion about breaching confidentiality and showed her appreciation of this discussion by saying “I am thankful for the opportunity to discuss and think about these things now before they come up.”
I think, in any type of research, the researcher can break confidentiality, but should they when confronted with an 'ethical moment' depends a lot upon circumstantial factors that only the researcher is privy to and how the researcher deals with these moments is in part based on experience.

I am thankful for the opportunity to discuss and think about these things now before they come up. As I am sure each of us will be faced with a difficult situation. It also makes me appreciate the IRB and think of them more as a friend than foe.

What was interesting to me about Kelly’s group’s online discussions was that unlike other groups where participants were composing long posts that included lots of references to outside resources, the responses in this group’s discussions were less formal and more conversational, with few citations to class-texts or outside resources. It was almost as if the group decided to use the online discussion space to work out their own meaning makings rather than displaying information or knowledge. When I asked Kelly how she felt about that, her response was: “I think it is better that way.” She added:

I am not one of those highly thought-out responders either. I read others’ posts and hit reply. It is more natural that way. It becomes more like “How did you feel about what you read in the post?” as opposed to the other side of it where you really are trying to reduce it to the overall big picture. In those discussions we are not forcing ourselves to do that, to structure it down that far.

When I asked Kelly whether significant learning had occurred for her in those discussions, her response was interesting:

I think they have all been informative, but I don’t recall any light bulb moments of learning in them. I think they informed in overall sensation of understanding more than anything else. They were immediate, very in the
moment things. I don’t think they were necessarily meant to be educational moments. I think they were meant to ponder and expand. I don’t think they were meant to teach, just to explore a little.

Overall, Kelly expressed positive feelings and experiences with the online group discussions and wished they had not been condensed to only three times in the semester. It seemed apparent that being able to interact with a group of people who she shared “similar interests and ideas” with made these online group discussions pleasurable for Kelly. Also, the fact that these discussions were not text-based but article-based seemed to be another factor which may have added to her pleasures. The following comment from Kelly provides support to this:

I tend to like discussions better that are more article-based, where you are reading more current articles, because then you are really critiquing more. Whereas in discussions that are textbook based, like the thought pieces and responses, you are kind of stuck and isolated almost kind of looking conceptually at it rather than really getting to the heart of the doing.

In my analysis, I found that although conceptual arguments were part of Kelly and her peers’ talk in the online group discussions, their use was limited. The kind of talk that seemed to dominate their discussions revolved around practical issues. For example, in their first article discussion, the discussion leader posed the following comment to the group: “I’d love it if we could share and work on our research questions, if you all don’t mind.” After that, the whole discussion space was devoted to ‘practice’ rather than to ‘conceptual meaning making.’ The two other discussions ensued in the same way with
the students working out connections between the article read and their research. Kelly seemed to enjoy this kind of talk and perceived it relevant to her learning.

In addition, during the interviews, Kelly also commented on how the activities and interactions that took place in the FTF components of the course helped her learning. She started out by saying, “For the most part, I think the FTF sessions have been good.” She thought there was “a little bit more flexibility built in them” than it seemed on the surface. As a person who did not like structure that much, this was a relief for Kelly (“It has not created the need to rebel or to create conflict. I enjoyed the FTF sessions”).

My fieldnotes recorded that Kelly was coming to class early, at least ten minutes prior to each session began, sitting with the same group of people from her department, and engaging in conversations with them about matters related to school, family/children, research, and sometimes entertainment (e.g., discussion of movies, TV shows, music, and celebrities). She seemed to get along really well with the people she sat with in class. During the course of the semester, I did not see her change her seat except for a few occasions when the instructor asked everyone to mingle and find different partners to complete certain tasks. No matter who she was working or sitting with, Kelly seemed to display a comfortable presence in the class. She seemed active and engaged, and always made her thoughts public, a reality which she explained as “I like to be out there. I want my voice to be heard.”

When I queried Kelly about the effectiveness of the activities that took place in the FTF sessions, she said she perceived the simulation activities most beneficial for her learning. She thought engaging in data analysis, focus groups, and interviews in class offered an authenticity that made learning relevant for her. She also felt the same way
about the video activities, where the whole class watched clips from real interviews or real-life situations from news and documentaries and talked about their relevance to qualitative research.

For Kelly the appropriate training for qualitative research had to do with doing it, which included experiencing collecting real data and doing real analysis with the guidance of the instructor. In her mind, an ideal blended class on qualitative research would be the one which used the online component as a venue to talk about “grandiose themes and ideas” and used the FTF component as an opportunity to do “what people are really doing, the research itself.” Speaking of the FTF component of this blended course, Kelly said, “It was a little disconnected from doing. We kind of did things, but it was very superficial.” She thought the class missed so many opportunities to do “more practical and useful” activities in the FTF sessions. Here are her reflections:

The video clips we watched in the class … I think those might have been a lot more interesting to expand upon or maybe even to do some work with. We could have easily spent two class periods on them. It would have been better if we had taken the idea of what type of research we could do with them and ask ourselves what type of questions we would frame around those types of situations and what we would be looking at. We actually could have developed a whole research study based on that secondary data. I mean it was raw data for the purposes of what we were doing. I think with that experience we might have gotten more out of than talking about the things brought up in readings.
As Kelly noted, she enjoyed and appreciated most of the activities in the FTF portions of the course (“I enjoyed the video clips and liked the instructor’s exemplifications), but felt something was missing: the experience of doing. As she explained, “It seemed like we were looking at the background of research methods. A methods course like this should really be about getting to the nuts and bolts of doing research.”

 Kelly also had a few things to say about the class discussions that took place FTF. She found the small group discussions, where each group talked about their individual topics, informative: “We really got to deeply discuss certain topics when we were having small FTF group discussions.” As for the whole class discussions, where the small groups were reporting their ideas back to the class, Kelly felt those were a bit “awkward.” She really did not get a sense of openness in them: “Those discussions tended to be in the form of teacher-group or group-teacher talk with not a lot of group talking.” According to Kelly, this format hindered the discussions’ free flow. She admitted that she would have gotten more out of those discussions if they had been more open. She felt they read about big, grandiose ideas, but talked about them “in kind of small ways” because of her perception that there was little or no openness in the larger group discussions.

 In sum, for the most part, Kelly perceived the FTF sessions beneficial for her learning. However, although she appreciated the theoretical foundation those sessions provided, she constantly expressed the need for them to focus more on the practical aspects of conducting qualitative research.

*Kelly’s Lived Experiences that Shaped her Engagement and Participation in the Course*

Kelly said her experiences in the course were generally positive as she thought the course and its elements were supportive of her learning. However, given that learning
contexts are characterized by contradictions (Engeström, 1993, 2001), I frame the analysis below around the contradictions that emerged from Kelly’s data as central to her engagement and participation in the course.

A major contradiction Kelly reported was the issue of insufficient time for dealing with the responsibilities and requirements of the course. She repeatedly articulated her frustrations in this respect:

The readings are long enough to take time. I am trying to squeeze in things to my schedule and I try to keep weekends as free as possible because of my family, so anything I am going to get done for the class happens on Thursdays and Fridays. Since I took my graduate assistantship position I have been tied up in at least two days a week at school which means I lose that time. So trying to balance time has been the biggest conflict because there are so many things I want to do but very little time.

This course was not the only one Kelly was taking at the time of the study. She was also participating in one other course and conducting an independent study where she was building her own research project. Added to these were her responsibilities at home as a parent and a spouse as well as those in her assistantship. Juggling these multiple roles and responsibilities was presenting conflicts for Kelly as they competed against one another for her attention, energy, and time. At times, gaining full control of her learning in this course and others was difficult because it demanded concentration of the mind. Kelly remarked, “But I get distracted too easily. I have too many other things going on.” This contradiction about the issue of time that Kelly experienced is reminiscent of that felt by other doctoral students in Beauchamp, Jazvak-Martek, and McAlpine’s (2009) study,
suggesting that it is not an uncommon experience among doctoral students who possess various academic and non-academic identities.

Another issue that created a constant source of dissonance for Kelly was the way qualitative research was presented in the course, especially about the position of theoretical framework within the actual research. She found it misleading and at odds with real practice: “What we learned is contrary to what the experts in the field do.” She added:

It is explained wrong all the time. They say “You have to find the theory first.” I doubt seriously that the practitioners have that happening. Interestingly what I learned from most readings is that you have to find the right question. Your question determines your framework and all other things. So it is a backwards position. It is not as formalized as they teach it and I think they need to do that for the people who are sitting there just willing to take. I think it really happens in real world the other way. I would doubt seriously if you were to look at 100 best qualitative researchers in the world if any of them start from that grandiose theory and work their way down to the research questions. I am sure a lot of times people get in the middle of a study and realize that the question was not asked right. As they change the question, it changes the theory.

From the perspective of activity theory, this contradiction that Kelly experienced can be interpreted as a “quaternary contradiction,” one that exists between the central activity and the neighboring activities. In Kelly’s case, the quaternary contradiction emerged from the difference she perceived in the way qualitative research was taught in class and
its application and use outside of it. Kelly’s reaction to this dissonance was questioning.

One example that may help to illustrate this occurred in Class Two, the topic of which was qualitative research design. In this class Kelly openly declared her dilemma about the position of theory in connection to the research questions and posed that as a controversy to the class. However, this caused immediate rebuttal from the instructor and other students. In Kelly’s own words:

> When we discussed it in class, people got excited at first but then the instructor was kind of like “No, the theory has to come first,” and others said, “Oh well then.” I think the people in the class were stuck on how the theory informs the question. They were into that systematic way of looking at it, whereas I was taking a much more casual approach.

The statement above points to another contradiction Kelly experienced in the course, one within the classroom community. Kelly said for the most part she liked her peers: “They are a very interesting group.” She admitted she got along well with the people from her department, but had “issues with certain members of the class” that came from other departments and fields. She contrasted herself with those people and said, “I have less experience in qualitative research, but more confidence. There is a mismatch between what our ideals are.” She believed some people in the course had a “very uninformed view of the world” and that they tended to be “very structured” to the point that they forgot to “employ common sense sometimes.” This bothered Kelly and to a large extent impacted her engagement and participation in the course because it created a dilemma: She did not want to intentionally avoid responding to those people or to their posts in the
discussions, but when she did respond, she said she had a hard time finding an acceptable way of “doing it without creating any type of conflict.”

Kelly’s resentment toward some of her peers who did not employ common sense and those who did not pull their weight in the course led to other tensions, such as those Kelly experienced with one of the tools, namely with the online dialogues on assigned readings. It was quite a challenge for Kelly to engage in meaningful and educationally valuable dialogues with such peers whose posts, according to Kelly, contained a lot of “fluff and stuff.” This condition, which lowered Kelly’s enthusiasm about the online dialogues, engendered a contradiction between the use value and the exchange value of her participation. She participated in those dialogues not because she thought she learned from them, but because she felt obligated to do so to meet the course requirements.

Summary

Like the other two participants, Kelly also left the course with new understandings about qualitative research. The course’s emphasis on discussions was an added plus for Kelly who appreciated collaborative negotiations as a way to learn the content. Among the activities in the course, online group discussions were what she favored the most as she saw them as instruments that allowed her and her group members to ponder and expand upon the course materials in unrestricted ways. Kelly also appreciated what the interactions and activities in the FTF sessions had to offer him, but believed they felt a little short of her expectations in terms of their coverage. Kelly’s least favorite activity in the course was online dialogues on assigned readings. She did not see them benefiting her learning as much as she would have liked.
Contradictions in various forms were also part of Kelly’s learning activity in the course. Sometimes these contradictions interfered with her learning and engagement in the course, but for the most part they helped her engage with ideas and information in more critical and thoughtful ways.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the individual cases of the three participants, Jen, Connie and Kelly, according to the main research inquiries. Each case was categorized into three sections: participants’ stated beliefs and perspectives about learning; their perceptions of learning developing through the online and FTF interactions and activities in the course; and their lived experiences that shaped their engagement and participation. At the beginning of each case, I also provided a brief profile of the participants. In the following chapter, I will offer a cross-case analysis and discuss the significance of the study findings for theory, practice, and for future research.
CHAPTER V
CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

In Chapter Four, I presented a description for each participant in the study, concentrating on understanding their experiences and perceptions of learning in the course fully. In this chapter, I provide evidence for similarities and differences across the three participants through a cross-case analysis. Following the cross-case analysis, I discuss the significance of the study findings for theory, practice, and for future research.

Cross-Case Analysis

The cross-case analysis I present below is organized around the two research questions guiding this study: (1) How do doctoral students perceive their learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in the FTF and online components of a blended research methods course? (2) How do their lived experiences shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in the course?

Participants’ Perceptions of Learning Developing in the Course

In response to the first research question, all three participants reported positive experiences with the FTF components of the course, and reflected on the wide variety of ways in which the FTF interactions and activities benefited their learning. For Jen and Connie, the FTF environment afforded particular practices that might have been difficult to carry out online, such as performing in real research scenarios where they could integrate knowledge and skills. Additionally, they thought instructor mediated FTF discourse provided them with tailored guidance and advice. They also found instructor’s presence in FTF sessions valuable as it gave them confidence, a sense of closeness, and rapport.
To a large extent, Kelly shared Jen and Connie’s thoughts and feelings regarding their perceptions of the benefits of having FTF contact in the course. She believed most interactions and activities in FTF sessions were fairly well oriented toward her learning. For example, she found simulation activities and post-video debriefing exercises valuable because she thought they provided her with opportunities for practice-based learning, and thus allowed her, in part at least, to build connections between what she learned from the books and what happens in practice. And for the most part, she thought small group and whole class discussions FTF enabled her and her peers to reflect upon, evaluate, and expand their assumptions about and understandings of qualitative research.

While all three participants converged in their views on why they appreciated the FTF contact in the course, their responses regarding how they perceived their learning developing through the online interactions and activities revealed differences. As mentioned earlier, two activities took place online in the course: dialogues on course readings, which included the thought pieces and responses, and online group discussions, where students discussed articles of their choice in self-selected groups.

Jen reported positive learning experiences with the online dialogues on course readings. She felt producing the thought pieces assisted her in the exploration of her ideas in depth. She also benefited from reading her peers’ thought pieces and responses because she felt hearing different interpretations and voices in them helped her to extend her understandings. On the other hand, she spoke less favorably about the online group discussions. She did not think any significant learning occurred for her in those discussions, yet saw them as “useful exercises” that had the potential to be mediating tools for thinking and learning.
Kelly’s perceptions were just the opposite of Jen’s. She liked the online group discussions, thinking that they provided dialogic opportunities for her and her peers to explore ideas in-depth without any temporal constraints, but she absolutely disliked the online dialogues on course readings (thought pieces and responses). Calling those dialogues “the necessary evil,” she mentioned several times in the interviews that she participated in them not because she wanted to, but because she had to.

In contrast to Jen and Kelly, Connie had the least favorable perceptions about the contributions of the online element to her learning in the course. She acknowledged the benefits of having online interactions and activities, yet did not connect those benefits to her learning in specific ways. As a result, she saw participation in those online tasks and activities as an obligation rather than an opportunity to enhance her learning.

**Participants’ Lived Experiences Shaping their Participation and Engagement**

The second research question guiding this study was concerned with how participants’ lived experiences shaped their interactions, engagement, and participation. As mentioned in Chapter One, the term ‘lived experiences’ refers to the key aspects of participants’ experiences in the course – these aspects being the contextual and affective dimensions.

The data revealed that affective factors of emotion exerted varying degrees of influence on each participant’s actions and interactions in the course. While emotional factors were not visible in Kelly’s case, they were central in Jen and Connie’s situations as these two participants’ emotional states constantly fed back into the attitudes and actions they brought to the course. In Jen’s case, the positive emotions she experienced consistently throughout the semester made her feel good about herself as well as her
academic abilities. This ‘feeling good’ became the driving force behind her active engagement and participation in the course. Unlike Jen, however, the emotions Connie experienced throughout the semester were somewhat negative. For instance, the conflicts she had while interacting with peers in the online and FTF discussions led to negative emotions, which then resulted in her limited engagement and participation in those discussions.

Participants’ motivation resulting from emotional payoffs and gains (or lack thereof) was also a significant factor influencing their actions. For example, Jen felt rewarded when the online and FTF course activities and interactions consistently helped her with her understanding of and learning about qualitative research. This emotional payoff was the source for her continued motivation which positively influenced her participation and engagement in the course. On the other hand, in Connie and Kelly’s perspective, online dialogues on course readings (thought pieces and responses) helped them learn only little. Connie also felt the same way about the online group discussions. These negative feelings led to a continuous production and reproduction of negative motivation, more significantly in Connie’s case, which resulted in some degree of disengagement.

The findings revealed that participants’ actions in the course were also influenced by their self-concept. All three participants called on a history of successful performances when describing their beliefs about self. The successes they experienced repeatedly in various situations in the past appeared to have raised their self-efficacy beliefs as well as their expectancies of successful learning in the course. Comparing their abilities to those
of their peers, Kelly and Jen felt more confident. This positive self image exerted a
positive influence on their participation and engagement in the course.

On the contrary, Connie compared herself less favorably with more-capable peers. It was disconcerting to her to see her classmates do better than her with the course tasks and readings. For quite a long time, she was not sure whether her performance was up to par. These negative assessments and comparisons led to a low self-esteem. She constantly questioned her abilities, felt unrewarded and unfulfilled by her participation and, with it, she became disengaged. She needed support, reassurance, and empathy from peers and the instructor to feel confident and good again. Those were the sources that gave Connie the extra push she needed to maintain her engagement.

In addition to the affective factors of emotion, motivation, and identity, participants’ actions and interactions in the course were influenced by the contextual dimension of their experience. This contextual dimension manifested itself as contradictions participants experienced with various components of the context (such as the object, tools, community, division of labor) as well as those they encountered between their beliefs and prior ways of learning and the ways in which the course was run.

The most interesting contradictions, at least in Connie’s case, appeared to be the conflicts between “the use value and the exchange value” (Engeström, 1993, p. 72). I found that such tensions arose when the course activities and interactions did not meet her expectations. For example, she believed online dialogues on course readings (thought pieces and responses) and online group discussions helped her learn only little. Not receiving any benefit or payoff from those discussions undermined the use value of her
participation in them. That is, she participated in the discussions not for learning’s sake (the use value), but to fulfill the course requirement (exchange value).

Contradictions with the use value and the exchange value of participation were also apparent in Kelly’s talk about the online dialogues on course readings. The root of this contradiction lay with Kelly’s mistrust of her peers’ (not all, but some) knowledge. Such issues of mistrust led her to see the content of some thought pieces and responses as “fluff.” As a result, she lost interest in the activity, and engaged in it not because she wanted to, but because she had to.

Unlike Kelly and Connie, however, Jen positioned herself as being strongly use-value oriented. She expressed feelings of fulfillment, confidence, and growth gained through her participation in the course activities and interactions, both online and FTF.

In addition to the conflicts between the use value and the exchange value, some of the contradictions participants experienced in the course took the form of tensions within various components of the course, such as tensions within the object (the course content), tools, division of labor and the community. The first one (within the object) was manifested within Jen’s repeated talk about qualitative research as being a difficult subject to learn. The second (within the tools) was manifested in Connie’s and Kelly’s talk about the online activities of the course as not being helpful for their learning. It is important to mention here, however, that while Connie felt this way towards all of the online interactions and activities in the course, Kelly made this assessment only about one activity: online dialogues on course readings. She felt content and happy about the other online activity, online group discussions, which she participated in with a select group of peers.
The third contradiction (within the division of labor) was manifested in Connie’s discomfort when instructor authority and judgment was replaced with those of peers through peer-review activities. The fourth (within the course community) was manifested in all three participants’ perceptions of how their own knowledge and performance compared with those of their peers. For example, as Kelly and Jen elaborated on the details of their learning, the issue of trust became evident in their accounts. It appeared that interactions and activities with peers did not help Kelly and Jen learn unless they were carried out with those peers who they regarded as “knowledgeable.” The opposite seemed to be the case with Connie who tended to have a very high opinion of others. Her thinking of her peers as being more capable than her created tensions as it negatively influenced her estimation of her own abilities and self-efficacy beliefs.

In Connie’s case, tensions also appeared when a new form of assessment was introduced to her existing form of learning. In the classes that Connie had previously taken, it was the instructor’s responsibility to evaluate students, whereas in this course, the students shared this responsibility with the instructor by conducting self-evaluations of their performance. This new form of assessment, which was at odds with what Connie was used to, created tensions for her as it disrupted her view of the instructor as the authority.

Moreover, tensions with the English language were additional challenges that interfered with Connie’s participation in the course. Admission into graduate studies at this particular university requires all non-native English speakers to score 213 or above on the Internet-based TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), a score which is considered to be predictive of academic success at this level. Connie apparently met this
requirement, but still experienced language related issues in the course. For example, she had to spend considerably more time than her English-speaking peers reading and understanding the course texts, had difficulty understanding her peers’ FTF speech and online postings, especially if specific cultural terms and expressions were used in them, and had a hard time expressing herself in English in FTF conversations with peers. These language issues prevented Connie from participating in course interactions and activities as much as she would have liked. In addition, her belief that her use of the English language represented who she was to peers (“They see me as a foreigner”) limited her ability and desire to be an influential member in the course.

Another contradiction that was prominent in Connie’s case emerged from the mismatches between her and her American peers regarding the cultural etiquette for conducting FTF conversations. Connie felt the frustration of being silenced among those peers who constantly interrupted her and made her feel as if she could not give her opinion. These negative experiences made Connie uncomfortable. They also became detrimental to her participation and engagement in the course.

Compared to Connie, Jen and Kelly experienced fewer contradictions. The most prominent ones in their cases were the tensions within the community, as well as those within the object (Jen), the tools (Kelly) and the contradictions between the use and the exchange value of participation (Kelly). In Kelly’s case, time was also a powerful factor that needed to be dealt with. As she was carrying out her tasks and responsibilities in the course, she was grappling with multiple roles (mother, wife, graduate assistant) which provided competing demands for her attention. The ambiguities resulting from such multiplicity of roles negatively influenced the time she spent on the course. Additionally,
another contradiction for Kelly was caused by a mismatch she realized between the rules and norms of qualitative research as they were talked about in class and those according to which qualitative research is conducted in real research world. She felt that with its overemphasis on theory, the qualitative research training she was receiving in the course was in some ways disconnected from actual practice.

All in all, these contradictions were a source of trouble for the participants, but for the most part, they were a source of change. All three participants were aware of the contradictions in their learning activity and saw most of those contradictions as situations that had to be dealt with so that they could not lead to further conflicts. For example, Jen’s perceived contradictions with the object (qualitative research) demanded changes in her existing ways of learning. She responded by rethinking her tools and strategies and trying out new ways of dealing with the object to support her learning. Contradictions with language and culture also made transformations a necessity for Connie. She could no longer tolerate being silenced or ignored in FTF and online discussions, so she responded by making available to others her struggles. And the contradictions Kelly experienced between what she was learning about qualitative research in the course and how that research is produced in practice led to critical reflection and questioning. It also pulled her and her peers into a zone of proximal development where they engaged in a discussion about those matters.

Significance of Findings

The evidence from this study raises some important issues to be considered for theory, practice, and research in higher education, especially at the doctoral level. In the following sections, I focus on these issues.
Theoretical Considerations

Engeström’s (1993, 2001) and Roth’s (2007, 2009) versions of activity theory as well as Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notions of legitimate peripheral participation and community of practice influenced various aspects of this study. Drawing upon these frameworks provided different focuses for my analyses. Combining Engeström’s and Roth’s versions of activity theory provided complementary perspectives that allowed me to attend to both the contextual and affective aspects influencing participants’ perceptions of learning as well as their actions and interactions in the course. And Lave and Wenger’s notions of legitimate peripheral participation and community of practice afforded another perspective that helped explain the process of learning taking place both for the participants and other students. Nevertheless, although the notions of legitimate peripheral participation and community of practice were very helpful conceptual tools in considering how learning was unfolding, they were not a perfect fit for my data. In fact, as I explain in the sections below, the findings raised some issues about these frameworks and suggest possible revisions of them.

Within the frameworks of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation, learning is conceptualized as a process where individuals move from a peripheral position to a more central one through social participation and engagement with practice. Therefore, in some ways, this framework suggests a somewhat straight path for learning where individuals move through and come out at the end as possessing the knowledge and competencies of an expert.

This conceptualization, however, provided only a partial (albeit very important) support for what was taking place in my data. What I found was that although legitimate
peripheral participation came into being in the course with students becoming a resource for each other, their movements were not as linear as this framework implies. Findings from the fieldnotes and online transcripts showed that the students were alternating ‘learnerly’ (peripheral) and ‘teacherly’ (central) positions simultaneously in the course. For example, the same students who were adopting the role of teacher (e.g., offering explanations and advice) in one instance were also positioning themselves as learners (e.g., asking a lot of questions, requesting clarifications) all within the same context. Because their teacherly and learnerly positions were intermingled with each other this way, the process of learning for students did not follow a simple, one-way movement from the periphery to the center as depicted by Lave and Wenger.

The results also revealed that participants’ learning trajectories in the course took complex turns because of the various forms of contradictions and complications that emerged at different levels, from the individual level (including their emotions, self-efficacy beliefs, motivations) to the broader context of learning (including the object, tools, rules, community, and the division of labor, etc.). These findings indicated that learning is not always as smooth as is suggested within the frameworks of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation. Rather than following a neat trajectory, participants’ learning took unpredictable and unexpected directions with contradictions that came along the way.

Finally, the results uncovered in this study also problematized the social claims Lave and Wenger made about learning. For example, Jen and Kelly’s accounts regarding how they viewed themselves in relation to their peers in the course pointed to a vertical dimension within the course community. This vertical dimension was not just about the
students’ diverse perspectives and trajectories of scholarship, elements which Wenger (1998) sees as crucial in the functioning of a community of practice. Rather, it was about a hierarchical ordering wherein these participants classified their peers from trustable to untrustable. This classification, which manifested itself as a contradiction within the course community, became an interfering factor in their learning from peers especially during activities, such as online discussions and peer reviews, where instructor presence was non-existing.

Issues of trust, however, were not the only factors that undermined students’ social learning within the course community. Unlike Kelly and Jen, Connie, for example, had favorable opinions about her peers’ knowledge and skills, yet she did not believe that the peer to peer discussions and interactions, especially those in the online context, had much value in her learning in the course.

These are important considerations that point to the need for modification of the legitimate peripheral participation and community of practice frameworks. Rather than simplifying the learning process by presenting it as a one-way progression developing through social participation, these frameworks do need to take into account the complicated nature of learning and interaction. Incorporating elements and ideas from activity theory, which articulate how contextual and affective factors influence learning and interaction, will prove to be useful in this modification.

Considerations for Practice

Participants’ accounts of their perceived learning in the course gave evidence of knowledge growth, suggesting that the course helped them construct new meanings and understandings about the material (qualitative research) studied. For example, Kelly
admitted that her assumptions about qualitative research evolved during the course, making her appreciate its value more. Jen conveyed her new insights that led her to see qualitative research from a more complex perspective. And Connie indicated that learning occurred for her in the course as she felt she became more knowledgeable and familiar with qualitative methods.

Observational and interview data revealed that participants’ learning in the course was fostered as they dealt with the practical aspects of conducting qualitative research (such as how interviews should be done, how data should be analyzed, etc.) through discussions and practice in the FTF sessions, and as they talked about its epistemological and methodological principles on the online discussion boards. Both sets of practices, online and FTF, seemed to mutually support one another, forming an interconnected milieu for participants’ learning.

An important aspect of the course was that the FTF and online components were very much connected to each other. There was a constant flow of ideas especially from the online discussions to the FTF ones through ‘revoicing.’ Bringing the ideas that had been raised previously in online discussions back to the FTF ones enabled further extension of those ideas. This activity of revoicing, bringing back, and expanding online contributions should not however be viewed as a fundamental aspect of every blended course. In fact, participants’ accounts of their previous experiences provided evidence that not all blended courses involve a harmonious use of online and FTF interactions. It is therefore fair to say that the activity of revoicing was a function of the way the course was structured and taught. This adds to our understanding that a mere blend of online and FTF contact does not always result in a continuous course of learning unless it includes
deliberate and systematic application of design procedures that allow revoicing to come into being.

As I pointed out in Chapter One, blended instruction is embraced in doctoral education because of its community-building potential, namely its ability to provide the necessary structure and organization for supporting and sustaining connectedness among learners and the instructor. In this study, blended instruction appeared to allow students to build sustained relationships around the common interest of learning qualitative research, but its benefits did not end there. My observations revealed that with its online and FTF elements, this blended course provided a rich array of opportunities for learning.

The interactions and activities in the FTF components of the course permitted students to reflect and expand upon their ideas and knowledge as well as practice skills. The online components, on the other hand, allowed spaces for students where they could delve deeply into the theory material in ways that is expected of them at this advanced level. This observation is consistent with Agee and Uzuner’s (in press) findings which indicate that having doctoral students discuss theoretical knowledge and information online allow them to engage in understanding and critique of the theory material in more thoughtful ways.

It is fair to argue that the FTF and online components of the course had different functions, but they seemed to complement each other in ways that provided the necessary conditions for students’ socialization into the qualitative research theory and practice at the doctoral level. These findings suggest that blending online and FTF instruction constitutes a promising model for meaningful learning in doctoral education.
Additionally, the findings revealed some important considerations instructors should take into account when teaching doctoral students. The first is the need to link the epistemology of research with its practice in courses such as this one where there is not only a knowledge component, but also a practice component. As the interview data showed, one common thing across all three participants was that rather than simply reading and talking about research, they wanted to practice it. They appreciated theory and practice connections and loved the possibility of addressing questions close to the research practice.

The second important consideration concerns the need to provide not only intellectual but also emotional support and reinforcement to doctoral students. The general consensus about these students, at least in public and in literature, positions them as “self-sufficient, self-motivated, and independent-minded” professionals (Becher, 1993, p. 136). However, the similarities between two participants (Jen and Connie) in terms of their need for both intellectual and emotional support and encouragement help us expand our understandings of these students from self-sufficient individuals to those who need varying degrees of reinforcement and support throughout their learning trajectories.

Last but not least, one participant’s (Connie) struggles with the English language in this reading and discussion based course draw our attention to the false generalizations and taken for granted assumptions we have about ESL students in U.S. doctoral programs. Connie’s case illustrated that reaching an advanced level of study does not render ESL students capable of dealing with advanced reading in English. Considering Jen’s struggles with reading and understanding qualitative research, one might conclude that having troubles with advanced reading is not an experience reserved for ESL
students only. However, it seems likely that such struggles are greater for ESL students than their English-speaking peers. One thing instructors could do to help those students who are struggling with advanced reading at the doctoral level is to provide them with pre-reading guidelines that would help them complete the reading process with ease. These guidelines might include questions that orient students toward the specific information they need to get out of the readings. Another strategy might be to reduce the intensive reading load to a more manageable and achievable level for these students.

The language and culture related challenges Connie experienced with participation in small and large group FTF discussions (e.g., feeling silenced and ignored) reminds us that ESL and mainstream students do not come to the discussion activities as equals, even at the doctoral level. To promote equitable participation among students in discussions, instructors should make efforts to create working groups where all members have a shared understanding and agreement about conducting respectful and courteous conversations.

**Considerations for Future Research**

An important insight from this study is that the parts of students’ learning experience, such as their beliefs and theories about learning, past experiences, feelings, motives, identity, and the learning context (including its subjects, object, tools, rules, community, and division of labor), all combine to make up the overall experience. This finding suggests that any focus on students’ experience and perceptions of learning at the doctoral level, or at other levels, must be done in light of potential influences from the context and learner characteristics. Research that does not consider the interactive nature
of these influences will produce incomplete results, and thus give us only part of the picture.

Finally, through the findings evidenced in this study, we learned that participants gave credit to the benefits of discussing course material online. However, they did not connect those benefits specifically to their learning. Although previous research (Balaji, 2010; Kay, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Wu & Hiltz, 2004) indicated a strong connection between participation in online discussions and enhanced learning, such connection was not always apparent to the study participants. This brings up an important question that future research focusing on students’ online learning in higher education should target: To what extent what is discussed in online discussions become meaningful learning for students?

Conclusions

This study has extended prior research in several ways. It provided significant insights into the experiences and perceived learning of doctoral students, an overlooked population of learners, in a course that used blended instruction. Unlike previous research which has mainly concentrated on discovering the advantages of learning online, this study looked at the full scope of doctoral students’ perceived learning developing through the interactions and activities taking place in both the online and FTF components of a blended course. Furthermore, it offered understandings on the ways in which the contextual, affective, and social factors influenced students’ participation and engagement.
References


Appendix A

Instructor Consent

Title of Research: Doctoral Students’ Perceptions of Learning in a Blended Research Methods Course: Three Telling Cases

Name, Department, Phone Number of Investigator: Sedef Uzuner, Department of Educational Theory and Practice, (518) 442-5090

I have been asked to give permission to the investigator to gain access to my XXX course to conduct a dissertation study that has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at SUNY Albany.

The purpose of this study is to explore eight doctoral students’ perceptions of learning and the particularities of their lived experiences that shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in a blended research methods course. The students that will be invited to participate in this study will be from the XXX course that I will be teaching in Spring 2010 at the University at Albany.

I understand that:

1. Eight students from my XXX course will be asked to participate in this study. During the course or even afterwards, I will not know who will be participating in the investigator’s sample of 8.

2. The research time frame for this study will be one semester.

3. During the semester, the investigator will observe my XXX course both in the classroom and online. While conducting the observations, she will not participate in any of the course activities or discussions.
3a. For classroom observations: The investigator will observe all face-to-face (FTF) sessions but will not audio or videotape them. She will keep field notes to document course happenings and activities.

3b. For online observations: The investigator will obtain a student guest/auditor account which will allow her to observe the online portions of the course. With the guest/auditor account, the investigator will only have access to whole-class and group discussions in online discussion areas. She will not have access to email correspondences between me and the students, students’ assignments, grades, or feedback they receive from me or their peers.

4. During the online observations, the investigator may look at my online interactions with the students in whole-class or group discussions in order to use the data for her sample of eight.

5. The investigator will use the course syllabus and final course evaluations as part of her data sources.

6. During the study, the investigator’s role will be that of a researcher. She will have no responsibility for teaching or grading the students before, during, or after the study. She will not interfere with the natural sequence of events or classroom happenings, assist students with their projects, or attempt to change the manner in which the class is taught.

7. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board, the sponsor of the study (e.g. NIH, FDA, etc.) and University or government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records.
8. Participation in this study will not directly provide any benefits to me. However, others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained from this research.

9. The investigator will be presenting the study results to her dissertation committee. She is also anticipating presenting and publishing the study results in academic journals and conferences. In any publication or presentation based on the study, student and teacher names and other potentially identifying information will be omitted or changed.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at SUNY Albany. For research-related problems or questions, I can contact IRB through Judy Guldenstern, Research Compliance Assistant, at 518-442-9074 or jguldenstern@uamail.albany.edu.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I agree to give permission to the investigator to gain access to my XXX course to conduct this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professor’s name</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>__________</td>
<td>__</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator’s signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>__________________</td>
<td>__</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Participant Consent

Title of Research: Doctoral Students’ Perceptions of Learning in a Blended Research Methods Course: Three Telling Cases

Name, Department, Phone Number & e-mail of Investigator: Sedef Uzuner, Department of Educational Theory and Practice, (609) 922-4508, usedef@yahoo.com

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand doctoral students’ perceptions of learning and the particularities of their lived experiences that shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in a blended research methods course. The study will be used by the investigator, Sedef Uzuner, to prepare a dissertation which will be submitted as fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

Anticipated Number of Participants

Potential participants will be eight volunteering students from this XXX course.

The Research Time Frame

The research time frame for this study will be one semester.

Procedures

For this study, the investigator will schedule three interviews (one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of the semester) with volunteering participants to understand their perceptions of learning and the particularities of their lived experiences that shape their interactions, engagement, and participation in the
online and face to face components of the course. Each interview will last between 60 – 90 minutes.

In addition to the interviews, which will form the primary data source for the study, the investigator will observe the class and its activities throughout the semester both in the classroom and online. During the online observations, the investigator will only access whole-class and group discussions. She will not have access to email correspondences between the students and the instructor, assignments, grades, feedback students receive from the instructor or peers, or any other online materials.

The Role of the Investigator

During the study, the investigator’s role will be that of a researcher. She will have no responsibility for teaching or grading the students before, during, or after the study. She will not interfere with the natural sequence of events or classroom happenings, assist students with their projects, or attempt to change the manner in which the class is taught. During the online and in-class observations, she will not be participating in the course activities or discussions.

Potential Risks & Discomforts

The investigator does not anticipate any risk in volunteering students’ participation other than they may become uncomfortable answering some of the questions in the interviews. To minimize this risk, the participants can refuse to answer any question that they do not wish to answer.

Potential Benefits

The investigator anticipates that participating in the interviews will provide the participants with opportunities to see how the interviewing techniques (e.g., Irving
Seidman’s three interview series), which they will be learning in the course, are utilized in actual qualitative studies.

Confidentiality of Data

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board, the sponsor of the study (e.g. NIH, FDA, etc.) and University or government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records.

The professor will not know who has been or not been chosen to participate in the investigator’s sample of eight. Participants’ identities or any identifying information that could be linked to them will not be revealed to the third parties during the course or afterwards.

Data will remain in the direct physical possession of the investigator. Recorded interviews and consent forms will be kept in a safe and secure place, and they will not be shared with the professor or the dissertation committee. No one other than the investigator will have access to the data sources. Data will be discarded upon acceptance of the dissertation. No one will assist the investigator with the data analysis and interpretation.

The investigator will be presenting the study results to her dissertation committee. She is also anticipating presenting and publishing the study results in academic journals and conferences. In any publication or presentation based on the study, all names and other potentially identifying information will be omitted or changed.
Audio/Video Recording of Participants

An audio device will be used during the interviews. The recordings and transcripts made from the recordings will be destroyed upon acceptance of the dissertation. No audio or video/recording device will be used during the investigator’s observation of the face to face components of the course.

Compensation

Students who wish to participate in the interviews will be compensated with a gift certificate of their choice (in the amount of $30.00) for their participation at the beginning of the study.

Contact Information

One copy of this document will be kept together with the research records of this study. Also, you will be given a copy to keep. If at any time you have questions regarding this study or your participation in it, you should feel free to contact the investigator. Her contact information can be found on the first page of this consent form.

IRB Contact Information

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University at Albany’s Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at 518.442-9050 or orrc@uamail.albany.edu.

Voluntary Nature of Participation

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even after you agree to participate in the research or sign the informed consent document, you may decide to leave the study.
at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise have been entitled.

Consent

I have read, or been informed of, the information about this study.

(Please initial your choices below)

Interviews

_____ I voluntarily agree to participate in the interviews.

_____ I do NOT agree to participate in the interviews

Audio recording of interviews (for students who have agreed to participate in the interviews)

_____ I am willing to have the interviews audio recorded

_____ I am NOT willing to have the interviews audio recorded (You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded)

Online observations

The Institutional Review Board at SUNY Albany requires the investigator to obtain consent from everyone in the class to observe the online portions of the course.

_____ I agree to the investigator’s observation of the online portions of the course.

By choosing this option you are agreeing that the investigator may look at all discussion postings and interactions within the online whole-class and group discussion areas in order to use the data for her sample of eight.

_____ I do NOT agree to the investigator’s observation of the online portions of the course.
By choosing this option, you are not giving the investigator permission to look at discussion postings and interactions within the online whole-class and group discussion areas.

Name __________________________ Signature __________________________ Date __________________________

If you wish to participate in the interviews, please complete the brief survey that is accompanying this form.

If you do NOT wish to participate in the interviews, you will not complete the survey.
Appendix C

Survey

Please answer each item in this survey if you have agreed to participate in the interviews. Do not worry about projecting a good image. Your answers are CONFIDENTIAL.

Prior Experiences with Blended Courses

1. Please indicate the number of blended courses you have taken. If you cannot remember the exact number, provide an estimate.
   
   ___ 0  (skip question 2)   ___1/2   ___ 3+

2. Generally, how satisfied are you with your blended course experiences?
   
   ___ Completely satisfied
   ___ Mostly satisfied
   ___ Somewhat satisfied
   ___ Dissatisfied
   ___ Very dissatisfied

Course Value

3. I am taking this course because …
   
   (choose the one most appropriate response)
   
   ___ It is required for my graduation
   ___ I am interested in the content of this course.
   ___ It is important for me to learn the material in this course.
   ___ I am considering doing a qualitative dissertation
   ___ My peers/faculty/advisor recommended it.
4. My aim is to pass the course while doing as little work as possible.

___ Completely agree
___ Mostly agree
___ Neutral
___ Mostly disagree
___ Completely disagree

*Self-efficacy*

5. Even in the face of technical difficulties, I am certain I can learn the material presented in the online components of the course.

___ Completely agree
___ Mostly agree
___ Neutral
___ Mostly disagree
___ Completely disagree

6. I am confident I can learn without the presence of an instructor to assist me.

___ Completely agree
___ Mostly agree
___ Neutral
___ Mostly disagree
___ Completely disagree

*Attitudes toward Peer Learning*

7. I view my peers as a source for learning.

___ Completely agree
8. Discussing material with my peers is the most valuable strategy for my learning.

___ Completely agree
___ Mostly agree
___ Neutral
___ Mostly disagree
___ Completely disagree


___ Completely agree
___ Mostly agree
___ Neutral
___ Mostly disagree
___ Completely disagree

10. I prefer instructor feedback to peer feedback

___ Always
___ Almost always
___ Sometimes
___ Rarely
___ Never
Information about you

11. What is your current program of study?

12. Degree you are currently working on:

   ___ Ph.D.
   ___ CAS

13. Are you:

   ___ a part-time student (taking less than 12 credits per semester)
   ___ a full-time student (taking 12 or more credits per semester. Students who hold
   teaching or research assistantships and take 9 credits per semester also fall into
   this category)

14. How long have you been a student in your program?

15. Are you:

   ___ a U.S. citizen (if yes, skip question 11)
   ___ a permanent resident
   ___ an international student

16. Where are you from originally?

   How long have you been in the US?

17. [For US citizens] What is your ethnic background?

   What cultural background do you identify yourself with?

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Your
participation is MUCH appreciated. Please return this survey with the attached
consent form that has your name and signature. Thank you.
Appendix D

Interview Questions

First Interview

Revisit the survey questions that need clarification and/or a follow up.

1. How would you define your identity (e.g., as a doctoral student, teacher, mother, novice scholar)? Why?
2. Which adjectives would you use to describe yourself as a student? Why?
3. What is your preferred style of learning? Why?
4. How do you view the role of the teacher in your learning?
5. How do you feel about peer learning? How do your peers help you to learn?
6. What are the common methods of teaching and learning in your PhD program?
7. How do you feel about these methods?
8. Why do you take this course? What factors motivated you to sign up for the course?
9. What are your expectations from the course/your instructor/peers?
10. How do you feel about qualitative research methodology?
11. How important is learning qualitative research for you?

Is there anything you would like to add?

Second Interview

1. Tell me about your experiences in this course? What is it like to be a student in it?
2. How do you feel about the amount of readings you do/the number of online posts you are expected to make?
3. How, if at all, do the thought pieces help you with your learning?

3a. What sort of things do you do (or not) do in your thought pieces?

3b. How do you view your learning developing through the interactions you have with your classmates on the thought pieces?

3c. Tell me about a specific instance where you felt significant learning occurred to you during these interactions.

4. Tell me about your classmates. How would you describe them?

4a. How would they describe you?

4b. Who do you usually interact with?

4c. How do you view yourself in terms of your knowledge and expertise in qualitative research methods in relation to your peers?

5. How do you view your learning developing in the online article discussions?

5a. What advantages or disadvantages about these discussions do you experience?

5b. What sort of things do you do (or not) in these discussions?

5c. Tell me about a specific instance where you felt significant learning occurred to you during these interactions.

6. How do you view your learning developing in the FTF components of the course? Why?

7. Please indicate any difficulties, tensions, or contradictions you are encountering in the course. Tell me the sources of those tensions.

---

Third Interview

1. How do you define learning?
1a. Based on that definition, can you say you learned a lot in the course?

2. What do you think about qualitative research now? How did the course influence your thinking and beliefs about it?

3. What stood out for you about this course? (e.g., learning activities, assignments, activities, interactions with the classroom community, technology use, etc)

4. What, if any, conflicts or contradictions have you experienced in the course?

   4a. What did you do to overcome them?

5. What did you think of the comments/FB/grades you received from the instructor on your performance? How did you feel? Did you do anything particular in response to those?

6. What, if anything, would you like to improve about this course in general? Why?

7. Is there anything you would like to tell me about your experience you have not told me already?

8. Can you tell me your experience of being in this study? What worked well, what did not?
### Appendix E

**Coding Protocol for Fieldnotes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socially oriented talk</strong></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td><em>Student A:</em> You are a teacher, right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-task talk or talk that</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Student B:</em> I am a teacher. I look like a teacher (laughs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helps promote</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Student A:</em> You look nice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Student B:</em> Oh, thanks. I start the day at 5 am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-task planning/Task setting</strong></td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>OK, I have given you a short story. Take a few minutes and read it. Make a few notes before we talk about it. Your notes should be about how you feel about the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining and setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>priorities for classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Promoting interaction</strong></td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>As soon as you are done (reading), start splitting up in groups of four then share your views with others. See how your views compare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing opportunities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for open dialogue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Probing</strong></td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Let’s talk about a theory. I am not going to tell you that. What is a theory?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiate a discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructing</strong></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td><em>Student A:</em> When I experience panic crying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**interpretations**

Giving an explanation or building personal interpretations based on individual experience, observations, or readings in a child, I can’t move fast enough. Oh my God! You’ve got to get to this kid and see nobody? My first thought is, who left you alone? I am taking you home.

*Student B:* Where is this kid’s mom and dad? The whole scenario is strange. I did not feel comfortable with the other woman. Maybe it is a cultural reaction. Maybe in other cultures, it is OK to leave kids with strangers.

**Task Chairing**

Instructor

Controlling/moderating discussion

Instructor

Interesting. These are cultural assumptions we bring. Let’s start with the narrator.

**Inviting**

Instructor

Social welfare people, how did you feel?

Encouraging students to talk

Instructor

Also, we haven’t heard from some people that have children.

**Give and take of negotiating**

Instructor

*Student:* How long should a research question be? Is there a length?

Students &

*Instructor:* Questions should not be packed like three questions in one. Avoid that.

*Student:* When you do cross case analysis, is it essential that the subjects’ characteristics are the same?
Instructor: That’s part of your selection. Are you looking at information rich cases or extreme samples?

**Tying FTF discussions to online discussions**

Making explicit connections to topics discussed online

**Mini lectures**

Lectures of a few minutes in length outlining important points related to the readings

Instructor

This goes back to the researcher’s instrument which came up in the thought pieces.

I wanted to tell you about focus groups. They have been around for a long time especially in the business world. They are used in a number of settings, sometimes in psychology. Focus groups are an interesting data source that offer triangulation to get different views.

**Exemplifying**

Providing illustrative examples from personal experience

Instructor

You can do a stage study. I did that for my dissertation. First stage I studied the class then next term I focused on individuals.

**Explaining**

Providing explanatory structure to assist others in understanding,

Instructor

When doing a case study, you have to establish criteria. It is like putting up a fence and say these are things inside the fence that I will look at.
organizing, restructuring

knowledge OR

statements that use

metaphors and analogies
to explain

**Procedural questions**  Students  Are final projects posted publicly?

Questions about assignments or tasks

**Procedural**  Instructor  Let’s take it step by step. How many of you choose assignment option two? This is a literature review, but different. So pay attention to how it is different. You will look at articles that interest you. The idea is …

**Giving timely reminders**  Instructor  Looking ahead of the schedule, we meet next week then we will have a winter break. Then you will have your papers due.

**Directing**  Instructor  I want to have you discuss in groups. Decide what you want to discuss. I don’t want you to go to the qualitative versus the quantitative debate. Stay away from that one.

**Troubleshooting**  Instructor  There was some confusion about posting
Dealing with technical online and I apologize. There was no reply (Blackboard) issues box for posts. Here is a post that is done correctly. First time was messy. Any questions?

**Reporting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reporting</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>We were talking about positivist and constructivist paradigms. We were wondering which one we should lean to.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reconvening for an open discussion as a large group</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>That brought us back to the role of the researcher. Do we contaminate?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Asides**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asides</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Ethnography is a specific kind of study where researchers spend a large amount of time in the field. It is usually not good for a dissertation (class laughs).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remarks directed at humor or jokes &amp; Instructor</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Ethnography is a specific kind of study where researchers spend a large amount of time in the field. It is usually not good for a dissertation (class laughs).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Making references to external material**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making references to external material</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Yin is not the only person that talks about case studies. Other book you might want to look at is by Merriam. She is a major person in the field. Her book is more specific to qualitative research.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifying useful resources for further reading</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Yin is not the only person that talks about case studies. Other book you might want to look at is by Merriam. She is a major person in the field. Her book is more specific to qualitative research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Statement of fact**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement of fact</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Instructor: Research is political. There will always be gatekeepers.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making statement of fact &amp; Students</td>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Instructor: Research is political. There will always be gatekeepers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Instructor: Research is political. There will always be gatekeepers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Asking questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asking questions</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>How many data sets is important in case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Requesting information, affirmation, or explanation

Making recommendations
Proposing suggestions, giving tips

Technology integration
Use of media in the classroom

Checking for understanding
Ensuring understanding

Sharing
Providing ideas or insights

Eliciting information
Requesting information

Using simulation
Providing students with realistic situations

Instructor
It is important to map each question protocol to your research question. You should not ask questions in interviews that don’t relate to your research questions.

Activity
Students watch a video clip on autoethnography and then discuss what they have seen in it.

Instructor
The research question in this assignment is about the article. It is not a research question you will ask for a larger study. Does that make sense?

Students
Can I tell you what I got out of reading this chapter? There is always going to be people who value qualitative research …

Instructor
Let me give you some pointers. In terms of looking at a proposal as a professional, one of the things you expect to see is … what?

Activity
Having students perform qualitative interviewing in class.
Feeding back after a simulation
Debriefing after a simulation activity

Problematizing
Making the given as problematic

Expressing confusion
Explicit statement of confusion

Instructor & Students
Student A to B: I think some of your interview questions were so direct. Kind of like yes/no questions so they led to short answers.

Students
Setting parameters in case studies. I have concerns about it. What if it changes?

Students
I got lost in Yin’s terminology.
Appendix F

Coding Protocol for Online Transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problematizing</strong></td>
<td>Due to the fact that the researcher is participating, it is likely that the issue of social desirability brings impact on the research outcomes. The author suggests “empathic neutrality” and maintaining balance as a good quality of researcher conducting qualitative research. However, it is still challenging to maintain such empathic neutrality while being involved in a certain circumstances with human beings. This is why the secondary trauma of social workers has become a serious issue in the last decades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting a topic as a</td>
<td><em>controversy OR making the given as problematic</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working out a connection</td>
<td>Among the various theoretical approaches that Patton elaborated in Chapter 3, I found that either narratology or grounded theory would be appropriate to my research in that I am more interested in hearing from people’s stories (their own perspectives) and in inductive inquiry of unknown lives of these people rather than deductive theory testing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making links to one’s own</td>
<td><em>research, practice/field, experience OR making links to other literature</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making a discovery</td>
<td>Until reading this I have been considering the component parts of research as separate. Got the questions…check, decided on a methodology… check, have the protocols prepared… check. I see now how the pieces fit together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing a conceptual</td>
<td><em>change, framing new links between related but</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
previously unlinked ideas and relate to one another, and especially why jumping in to the interviews without proper planning will undermine a study.

**Planning/Proposing a set of operations** I was amazed at how easily swayed I was with each theoretical framework that Patton presented in Chapter 3. While I originally thought that I might be interested in developing a proposal for a case study during this semester, I have changed my thoughts after reading Chapter 3. I now think that a phenomenological study will probably work better for my area of interest . . .

**Making references** I’ve been doing a lot of searching out and reading articles in preparation for my project and just out of interest. One article I recently found is by Joseph Tobin entitled Strengthening the use of qualitative research methods for studying literacy (Reading Research Quarterly, January/February/ March, 2005). This article makes interesting points about such things as . . .

**Asking questions** What are the criteria or guidelines that help us choose "appropriate" methodology? How could we know if this approach is appropriate (pragmatic) or not, especially when the topic is not clear cut.

Confirming/checking understanding, testing the limitations and possibilities of understanding of content
### Explaining

Constructing meaning for a given question, showing relationships between two or more ideas, and/or using metaphors, analogies, representations, stories, and images to make clear, to elucidate

One story about the leading question is in a Chinese restaurant that sells the noodle soup, the waiter or waitress always asks the customers "Do you want add one egg or two eggs in your soup?" after they ordered certain noodle soup. The waiter or waitress does not offer the option that "no egg in the soup" at all, and spontaneously most of the customers accept adding eggs in their soup, which increase 20% to 40% payment in their bill ( one noodle soup is 50 cents, one egg is 10 cents ).

### Weaving

Picking up threads contributed by others and moving the discussion on

For me, this means that the research needs thoughtful questions which serve a purpose. Agee (2009) cites Marshall and Rossman (2006) in discussing their view that the functions of research questions are either "exploratory, explanatory, descriptive, (or) emancipatory”. I think that this addresses Lori’s question of "When does the research “make a difference” to others besides just other scholars?"

### Agreement/Disagreement

Reference to previous message followed by explicit statement of agreement/disagreement without substantiation

I also thought that the purpose of research is the key (or flash light) to determine design, sample size, and other methodological issues whether it will be quantitative or qualitative.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Point of view</strong></th>
<th>There really isn't such a thing as &quot;proving&quot; anything in qualitative research, I think.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giving opinion, taking a stance on an issue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Building on</strong></th>
<th>Regarding not being able to understand a phenomenon that you haven’t experienced directly; I disagree. I think having directly experienced something gives you a depth of understanding (personally – your view) but phenomenologists combine many lived experiences and look for the commonalities. By having some distance (I would think) they are more capable of seeing the “Major Effects” without being too deeply held by their own experience…</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reference to previous message followed by substantiated agreement or disagreement</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Revoicing</strong></th>
<th>The piece we read &quot;Baby on the Beach&quot; in class reminded me of how interpretation can influence conclusions without looking at the details of description first.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Making reference to ideas discussed in the FTF meetings OR making references to ideas discussed online</td>
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<tr>
<th>references to ideas discussed online</th>
<th>Do you ever have a week where it feels as though everything boils down to semantics? In our discussion on Agee’s article on research questions, Tamra, Kate, Kelly and I have engaged in some discourse on how simply changing a word can clarify a whole research problem. Kvale brings up wording within the interviewing process at some junctures, but p. 171 struck me the most…</th>
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<tr>
<td>Articulating thought</td>
<td>Like Patton states, that good research adds to knowledge, I guess we should be thinking, &quot;What can be learned from this study?&quot; and &quot;Why do we want to know this?</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Referring to one’s own thinking</td>
<td>My emerging thinking reared its head several times over the course of this reading and seemed to be substantiated the further I read. In interviewing, it seems it would be prudent to wrap up open ended interview questions with a simple closing question to ensure understanding. For example, if you asked someone how they felt about a particular learning treatment compared to what their normal classroom experiences had been, you may close with, “so am I to understand that overall you felt it was a positive experience?</td>
</tr>
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| Exploring | I must admit, my thought as I approach the idea of collecting data is: what happens if I don't ask the right questions? And, what happens if I'm not adaptive enough to respond to issues that I did not expect to arise in the interview? The authors consider interviewing to be a craft and, as a craft, the best way to acquire the tricks of the trade is to watch experts. |
| Examining ideas in the production of a particular understanding | At the same time, I see Patton’s explanation of Chaos/nonlinear dynamics to be about finding order and |
affirmation, clarification

patterns… this seems very inductive and grounded theory to me… What am I missing???

**Offering suggestions**

Your sampling strategy does seem to represent a bit of a challenge for you. It makes sense to use intensity sampling group if you specifically want to study those clients that reflect the true characteristics of the disease. I think the stratified sampling strategy might also work for you as you look at your study subjects, and establish the criteria for each subset in the study. I don’t think the convenience sampling applies to your study since your selection has an explicit purpose.

**Inviting**

I invite the responder of this post to think about how the questions on page 181 could be used to have teachers reflect upon their practice and what benefits this line of questioning may have on the educational field.

**Expressing emotions**

After reading the first chapter from Patton, I feel much more confident that I understand the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, and through them I am getting closer to grasping the nature of qualitative inquiry.

**Self-disclosure**

Wish me luck getting back into the US! Just heard about the big snowstorm.
Expressing appreciation

I greatly appreciated the chapter sequence Patton makes in 3 to 4 offering a connection from theory to meaningful practice. As an educator of the visual arts and someone whose strongest language is in the visual, observational and reflective, Patton’s “Summary Checklist of Particularly Appropriate Uses of Qualitative methods” (p.204) made me feel as though my intuitive assumptions of using qualitative inquiry in my own research was one that I could feel confident in, and well worth the effort to devote my attentions to in order to approach a study with quality, validity and rigor, three attributes research design should have.

Expressing concerns

I found it helpful to read about all the different types of sampling, research categories and breadth vs depth as it is helping me see what choices and decisions I will need to make. It also seems very overwhelming to me and I wonder how I will finally put all the pieces together.

Evaluation

I have often found the side bars/notes in text books to be highly distracting from the flow of the text. Patton successfully weaves quotes, case studies, humorous "wisdom" from our Sufi researcher Halcolm and summarizes his points in very helpful tables.

Social cues

Hi Tracy!
Greetings, closures,
compliments, and language
used to thank someone

**Earlier orientations**

Presenting earlier beliefs

I started ETAP 777 in the quantitative analysis camp. My experience with qualitative research was strictly through a business lens. As a marketing and business teacher I have used case studies to teach business strategy and taught the importance of using focus groups and interviews to gain a deeper understanding of customer’s needs and wants. In each of these situations I saw a reason and purpose for the research. As I learned about the use of qualitative analysis in social research I found myself asking so what? What is the purpose if you can’t generalize it across populations?
Appendix G

Subjectivity Statement

In this statement, I make explicit the activity of the Epoche, bracketing. The presuppositions I bracket here are those based on theories, those based on previous research findings, and those drawn from my personal knowledge and experience.

Bracketing Presuppositions Based on Theories

I grounded this study in Lave and Wenger’s notions of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation, and activity theory as articulated by Engeström (1987, 1993, 2001) Roth (2007, 2009). Lave and Wenger’s notions of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation offer a model of learning that is idealized in much discourse about doctoral students’ research learning. They provide a lens to understand how doctoral students learn through ongoing participation within the activities of a specialized community, in this case a blended course community. Engeström’s version of activity theory places the emphasis on the context and offers an analytical framework to understand how the tools, community, and rules of a contextualized activity mediate the relationship between the subject and his/her outcome, both enabling and limiting that relationship, and Roth’s articulation of activity theory includes the inclusion of emotions, identity, and motivation within that relationship.

Realizing the need to set aside theories to enter anew into the study and to see just what is there meant moving Lave and Wenger’s notions of community of practice and legitimate peripheral participation and Engeström’s and Roth’s articulation of activity theory to the background. From that position, these theoretical frameworks informed my understandings, but they did not presuppose the existence of a particular
pattern in participants’ experiences. Following Ablamowicz’s (1992) advice, I refrained from using these theories as a norm to judge what I was seeing in the data.

**Bracketing Presuppositions based on Previous Research Findings**

Previous research on doctoral students’ learning in blended courses is remarkably sparse in the literature and typically involves the description of the benefits derived from the use of technology. Doctoral students’ experiences in blended courses encompassing the contextual and affective dimensions are not addressed in any of the research that I have seen. The fact that the available research literature says nothing about these topics justifies the significance of my study. More importantly, it prevented me from postulating hypotheses that could distort my observations, analysis, and interpretations. In that sense, working on a topic that has not been previously explored allowed me the opportunity to approach this study with an open mind.

**Bracketing Presuppositions Based on Personal Knowledge and Experience**

Maxwell (2005) contends that complete objectivity is impossible in qualitative research and that pure subjectivity can create selective vision. Therefore, the researcher needs to find the right balance between using primary experience and knowledge as part of the inquiry and not being swept away and overwhelmed by it. My personal views, beliefs, and experiences about blended courses, which are mostly positive than negative, are in fact what drove me to this study. Therefore, they are something that I appreciate. However, I also appreciate other positions and experiences that stand in contrast to mine. I feel that each has its own rightness, integrity, and validity.

In my case, blended instruction supported my learning in much more effective ways than fully FTF instruction because its online component provided me with
increased opportunities for interaction and reflection – elements which I find crucial for my understanding and long-term retaining. At the same time, compared to fully online instruction, the FTF components of blended instruction allowed opportunities for instructor and peer immediacy, which I value in my learning as well as in community building. In that sense, I am biased in viewing blended instruction as an effective mode of delivery. However, my biases do not mean that I view the opposite view as invalid, because I operate with the understanding that “each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as another” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). My gravitation toward such a view, a constructivist view, was the driving force behind my decision to pursue this qualitative study. I understand that realities are multiple, context-bounded, and are shaped by personal, situational, and affective factors. It is with this belief and assumption that I investigated how different individuals perceived their learning developing in a blended course environment and how their lived experiences influenced their engagement and participation in it. Accepting the idea of multiple, context-bounded realities instead of one objective reality prevented me from projecting my beliefs onto the data. I made every effort to keep my experience and knowledge of the phenomenon aside and stayed close and true to the original data to make sure that my analysis and interpretations become free as much as possible of my prejudices.