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# Exploring Factors that Help Students Feel More Connected to Their Online Instructors

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Exploring Factors that Help Students Feel More Connected to Their Online Instructors

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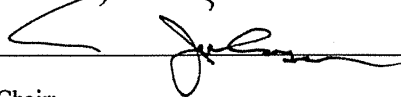
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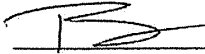
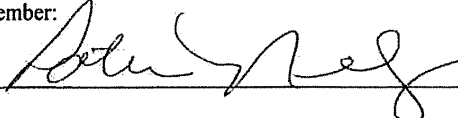
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### Abstract

This research explores business students' perceptions of connectedness with their online instructors in higher education. The results were analyzed to discover the basic constructs of these perceptions. The findings will help faculty understand how they can improve their connection with students in an online environment in an effort to form stronger relationships with students and better their teaching practice. Students across multiple sections of introductory level business courses at Portland Community College were asked to participate in this qualitative study. Narrative research methods were used to best understand the complexities of the students' lived experiences. Journey maps and interviews were used together to tell the stories of how students experienced connectedness with their instructors. This was an attempt to help the instructors understand what students perceive as good or bad connections, as well as factors that form connection with their online instructors. Basic principles of connection were mentioned: consistent and personalized communication, the instructor's availability, thorough feedback on assignments and discussions, feeling of care from the instructor, and flexibility in the course. Participants in the study reported that creating a connection with their instructor was important and that was most inherent in the relationship developed with their instructor. The findings suggest that instructors who provide personalized feedback to students consistently throughout the course create an environment that is motivating for students and one in which students are more comfortable asking questions. As a result, students perceive greater care.

*Keywords:* connectedness, online learning, journey maps, teaching best practices

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## **Chapter 1—Introduction**

As online education becomes a more viable option for students worldwide, online educators need to better understand, embrace, and address the complexities of teaching and learning in an online environment. Instructors need to be able to connect with their online students to form relationships and facilitate open lines of communication and contact. Forming a connection between instructor and student in the online modality can be a difficult and prodigious challenge for some students and instructors, particularly when the student and instructor may be separated by significant geographical and cultural differences. For example, an online classroom may have students from the U.S., Kenya, and Malaysia enrolled in the same course at the same time. This level of diversity means the instructor must understand the complexities of each situation to employ practices that enable connections with each of these students.

There is significant research on how to engage students in traditional and online courses but less research on what factors help form and/or improve the connection between instructor and student in the online environment (Atchade, 2002; Collins, Weber, & Zambrano, 2014; Dixon, 2012; Samson, 2015; Wankel, 2013). As an experienced online instructor and instructional designer who is fluent with technology, I know that technical skills are not enough. Online educators need to know more about how to create significant connections with students to make students' lived educational experiences much more meaningful. Without the benefit of facing students in a

classroom, online educators must rely on other, less obvious factors to determine the level of student interest, engagement, and persistence.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

Educators face challenges in getting to know their students and connecting with them in a way that is meaningful to create a bond that enhances the students' learning potential. Online educators are faced with an even more difficult challenge in connecting with their students due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and the asynchronous nature of many online programs (van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). In a 2012 survey, online students perceived the lack of instructor-and-peer interaction as the biggest disadvantage of online education (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). This research suggests that students want to be more connected to their online instructors.

Studies have shown that students are more motivated and adjust more readily to school when they feel they are a part of a community of learners (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011; Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009; Glaser & Bingham, 2009; Kegelman, 2011). Furthermore, community college students who have greater social and academic engagement are more likely to persist in their academic program beyond the first year (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2010). Evidence suggests that instructor presence in online courses is of high value to student engagement (Shea, Sau Li, & Pickett, 2006). However, little research has been done to determine what connection means to students and what students perceive as contributing factors to connectedness to their online instructor.

Online higher education has grown significantly from, 9.6% to 32% of total enrollment between 2002 and 2011, and is projected to continue to grow further (Allen &

Seaman, 2013). In 2014, 32% of more than 20 million higher education students took at least one online course (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015b; CollegeAtlas, 2014). Sixty percent of online students work at full-time jobs while going to school and 20% are employed in some capacity, so there is a need for more flexibility and access for their education pursuits (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; CollegeAtlas, 2014; F. D. Smith, 2014). Sixty-eight percent of online students say they choose the online modality so they can balance their work, family, and school priorities. As online higher education continues to grow on a rapid scale, and as accreditors and educators are looking to ensure the quality and validity of online degrees, it is imperative that online educators understand how best to reach and teach the online student. By making connections with students, instructors have more opportunities to interact with them to ensure that the students are thinking critically about the content and subject matter in a way that facilitates true learning and application.

Because the online modality is typically asynchronous and provides few if any opportunities for face-to-face interaction among instructors and students, the online classroom is less personal than an in-seat classroom (Hew, 2012; Prasuhn, 2014). One of the challenges online instructors face is attaining strong connectedness with their students (Orleans, 2014). Learning what students perceive as contributing factors to forming greater connections will help instructors understand how to form those connections to encourage and facilitate greater student engagement to enhance learning. It can be difficult to get students to connect with the instructor and their peers when visible presence is low, particularly when most or all of the experience is asynchronous (van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). Learning how to better connect with online students will help

online faculty create relationships with their students and improve their online teaching practice.

### **Research Question**

What factors in the asynchronous online classroom experience contribute to students' perception of connectedness to their instructor in an online course?

### **Definitions of Terms**

Online education—Courses offered by an accredited institution through a learning management system (LMS) with a live instructor that are specifically not correspondence and not synchronous.

Asynchronous—Participation and activity within a classroom that is done whenever the students and instructor are available. For example, while all students will be working on the same work or in the same discussion thread each week, they will enter the online classroom at different times throughout the week.

Connectedness—The perception of being connected to another person, forming a relationship, and knowing something about the other person. Connectedness includes relatedness and interactivity with another person.

Engagement—Interaction with course content and the learning community.

Online education—Courses offered by an accredited institution through a learning management system via the internet with a live instructor.

Online learning community—Instructor and peers collaborating in an online environment.

Perception—Sensing, feeling, noticing, understanding, and recognizing something. Perception is how one sees something and may not necessarily be reality.

Relationship—A bond formed through connection.

Social presence—A virtual presence that leaves an impression or imprint of a real person.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Online education has progressed over the past 15 years, as our understanding of the challenges and capabilities of teaching and learning in the online environment has grown. Even so, the field of online education is relatively new and there is much to learn about how to make online education robust and most effective for online students. The researcher has been an online learner for the past 15 years and an online instructor and an online education administrator for the past 10 years. This experience has aided the researcher in forming underlying assumptions about online higher education that lay the foundation for this research.

Students in online education often experience a feeling of being disconnected from their instructors and classmates or being a lone learner, isolated in cyberspace (Bibeau, 2002; Raymond, Jacob, Jacob, & Lyons, 2016). This feeling of isolation can lead to students losing interest in the course content, losing track of their progress, and dropping out of the course. Students feel more supported in their learning process when more connected to their learning community (Swayze & Jakeman, 2014). Students want more from their online instructors and great focus on the student will help them succeed (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012, Cooper, 2010). Creating a stronger connection between instructor and student can help improve student focus and provide the students more instructor contact in their learning process. For these reasons, it is assumed that best practices for connecting with online students are not common across online faculty, so

there is a need for more understanding and development in developing best practices in the area of student/instructor connectivity.

This study was conducted using business students in a community college setting at Portland Community College, enrolled in an online section of introductory level business courses, which are typically their first business courses. Portland Community College enrolls over 1000 students in online courses each term (Portland Community College, 2015). Twenty-five percent of those students are enrolled as full-time students and over 40% are at least half-time. Roughly 75% of enrolled students are between 20 and 39 years old, with an even spread across the age range. For some students, this could be their first online course. Many of these students also take in-seat classes and are not enrolled in a fully online program.

Community college students make up almost half of all undergraduate students in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015b). Research indicates that community college students need more support to persist in higher education (Adams, 2015, Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Becker, 2015). Therefore, it is assumed that focusing on business students within a community college setting for this research would provide useful and beneficial information that could be applied on a broad scale.

This study will look specifically at student perception of connectedness by examining student interactions and engagement with their instructors. Other factors that could influence student perception of connectedness, such as issues with technology, connections to their peers, and the student's final grade in the course, will not be

examined. The survey questions and journey map instruments are specifically focused on student/instructor interaction to streamline the results.

### **Significance of the Study**

According to a report produced by the National Center for Education Statistics, total enrollment in higher education increased 46% between 1996 and 2010 and that number is projected to increase another 15% between 2010 and 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). The percentage of total online higher education enrollments is outpacing that of higher education enrollment growth (Allen & Seaman, 2013). With online education enrollment steadily increasing, it is imperative to form and share good practices for teaching and learning that will create better learning experiences for online students.

Students are more motivated and adjust more easily to school when they feel they are a part of a community of learners (Glaser & Bingham, 2009; Karp et al., 2010). Furthermore, community college students who have greater social and academic engagement are more likely to persist in their academic program beyond the first year (Karp et al., 2010). Considering completion rates of less than 20% for community college students, increasing student persistence is critical (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015a). Research indicates that instructor presence in online courses is of high value to student engagement (Atchade, 2002; Hung & Chou, 2015; Leong, 2008; Shea et al., 2006; Song, 2004; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Del Valle, 2004). However, little research has been done to determine what connection means to students and what students perceive as contributing factors to connectedness to their online instructor.

The more faculty members know about connecting to online students, the better prepared online instructors will be in improving connection with students. As students perceive a stronger connection with their instructors, they may be more likely to seek guidance when needed, they may feel more motivated, they may feel their instructor cares more about them and their progress, and they may perform better in the course. Understanding student perceptions of connection to their online instructor will help faculty develop best practices for reaching and engaging their online students. This project may also uncover future areas for research, such as student connectedness and relationship to course performance. This research will also explore specific factors of connectedness, such as types of connection, quality of connection, and quantity of connections.

### **Researcher Bias**

This researcher has been an online instructor for over 10 years and has also taught students at the community college and taught some of the same courses of the students who were interviewed. Although none of the researcher's students were included in the results shown here, the researcher may have some biases related to a deeper understanding of online teaching and learning and previous action research done through her own teaching practice. This researcher may also have some pre-conceived notions about how to form connections with online students based on her own experiences with students.



## **Chapter 2—Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Educators face challenges in getting to know their students and connecting with them in a meaningful way to create a bond that enhances each student's learning potential. Online educators are faced with an even more difficult challenge in connecting with their students due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and the asynchronous nature of many online programs (van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). In a 2012 survey, online students perceived the lack of instructor-and-peer interaction in their online course as the biggest disadvantage of online education (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). This research suggests that students want more contact and connectedness to their online instructor.

Because of the continued growth in online education (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.), it is imperative for instructors to develop best practices for online teaching and learning. This study explores online business students' perceptions of connectedness with their online instructors as a means to better understand how faculty can improve their teaching practice.

### **Online Education**

Online higher education has realized significant growth in the past decade and continued growth is projected (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Sixty percent of online students work at full-time jobs while going to school, creating a need for more flexibility and access for their education pursuits (CollegeAtlas, 2014, Smith, 2014). As online higher education continues to grow on a rapid scale, and as accreditors and educators are

looking to ensure the quality and validity of online degrees, it is imperative that educators understand how best to reach and teach the online student. By making connections with students, instructors have more opportunities to interact with them to ensure that the students are thinking critically about the content and subject matter in a way that facilitates true learning and application.

This research specifically examines online education as it is offered by an accredited institution through a (LMS) with a live instructor in an asynchronous environment. More specifically, online education referred to in this body of research examines teaching and learning practice related to connectedness on a credit-bearing course basis and not an entire program. This research will also not include unaccredited, individual courses or training programs and courses.

### **The Growth of Online Education**

According to a report produced by the National Center for Education Statistics, total enrollment in higher education increased 46% between 1996 and 2010 and it is projected to increase another 15% between 2010 and 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). The percentage of total online higher education enrollments is outpacing that of higher education as a whole (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Online enrollment as a percent of total enrollment grew from 9.6% in 2002 to 32% in 2011. In 2012, over 21 million students were enrolled in higher education courses (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.). In that same year, 12.5% of all enrolled higher education students were enrolled in exclusively online courses and another 13.3% were enrolled in at least one online course. This means that over 5.4 million students were enrolled in online higher education in 2012. In 2013, that number grew to 6.7 million students, which represented 32% of all students enrolled

in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In 2012, over 69% of higher education academic leaders reported a belief that online education is critical to their institution's long-term strategy. With this data in mind, it is clear that effective online teaching and learning strategies are crucial to the development of sound higher education practices.

### **Pedagogical Teaching Practices for Online Education**

Using sound pedagogical practices for creating and teaching online courses is also a key to being an effective online instructor (Bailey & Card, 2009). Experienced online educators report that building courses to encourage frequent interaction and communication, active learning through discussions and exercises, and timely feedback, all delivered through appropriate technology, are fundamental best practices for online educators. Effective instructors for online education have evolved from practicing a teaching role to becoming more of a facilitator of online learning. A facilitation teaching model requires a connection to participants in a way that enables open and constant communication.

Excellent communication, facilitation, fluency with technology, strong organization and efficiency are crucial skills for online educators (Bailey & Card, 2009, Meyer & Mcneal, 2011). Faculty also need to be able to connect the course concepts to real-world application in a way that provides experiential learning and increases students' involvement in order to increase student productivity in the course (K. A. Meyer & Mcneal, 2011). Some instructors even believe that the online modality has less distraction and can encourage all students to participate more effectively than in a face-to-face classroom.

Research suggests that students are more satisfied with an online courses that is well-designed, with clear assignment instructions, rubrics, the instructor's knowledge of the content, and constructive feedback from the instructor (Lee, 2014; Lee & Robbins, 2000; Mapson, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2008). Students also desire instructor participation in the online discussions within a course (Hung & Chou, 2015; Mastel-Smith, Post, & Lake, 2015; Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009; Wise et al., 2004). Other studies indicate a need for a variety of instructional design and delivery mechanisms in order to meet the varying needs of students (Ekmekci, 2013; Hadsell, 2012; Mapson, 2011). For example, some students learn best with a more visual context, such as video announcements and imaging in the online classroom, while others learn best through text and reading. Some students need a more hands-on approach to learning through the completion of a project or tasks that are more tactile, while other students can apply the concepts by relating to past or current experiences.

Effective teaching requires a variety of skill sets for all educators (Hildebrand, 1971; Stanford University, n.d.). The following are key characteristics of effective university teachers:

- Organization and clarity
- Analytic/synthetic approach
- Dynamism and enthusiasm
- Instructor-group interaction
- Instructor-individual student interaction (Hildebrand, 1971)

These characteristics are critical to teaching in any modality and are possibly even more critical for online teaching, where the lack of face-to-face interaction is not present.

Perhaps one of the best environments to explore best practices for effective teaching is an online community college classroom.

### **Community College Students**

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) reports that in 2014 12.3 million students were enrolled in community colleges, representing 45% of all U.S. undergraduate students (AACC, 2016). Furthermore, adolescents 21 years and younger account for 43% of community college enrollment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the graduation rate for two-year post-secondary schools is 29% and the graduation rate for four-year post-secondary schools is 59% (NCES, 2017). These numbers suggest that students enrolled at two-year institutions are at greater risk of failure to graduate than students enrolled at other universities and colleges. Further evidence suggests that students in community colleges are more likely to drop out and not complete their degree or program than in other higher education institutions (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). A lack of persistence in community college education may be due, in part, to their open admissions policies that provide opportunities for prospective students that may not be found elsewhere. However, community college students who took online courses early in their program had a significantly better chance of earning their degree or certificate than community college students who did not take online courses (Shea & Bidjerano, 2014).

Considering the high number of adolescents aged 21 and younger enrolled at the community college level, it is important to recognize age and developmental issues for this age group (Ahern & Norris, 2011). Studies show that the developmental challenges faced by the 21 and under age group can be further complicated by the pressures of

college enrollment, thereby creating a need for faculty to be more connected to these students. Through closer contact with community college students, faculty can help build resilience in their students creating greater opportunity for overall success in their college programs.

If students in community colleges are at greater risk and students who take online courses may have a better chance of earning their degree, it is prudent to understand more about how to care for online community college students in a way that helps them stay in school and succeed in their educational goals. One study aimed at identifying factors contributing to student success for community college students looked specifically at social capital garnered through developed relationships and interactions with people in the students' support systems, such as faculty, family, and school support resources. Information was gathered through focus groups with students and through examination of student success in courses, student retention and graduation rates, and student persistence through continuous enrollment. Researchers found that students overwhelmingly reported that relationships with their instructors were instrumental in their success (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014). Other studies also suggest that when students feel they are connected to their online instructors and their needs for communication and care are being met, they are more satisfied and perform better (Ekmekci, 2013; Hadsell, 2012; J. Lee, 2014; Mastel-Smith et al., 2015).

Ekmekci examined the literature, asking the question, "Do students really know their instructors are there for them?" (Ekmekci, 2013). He was particularly focused on how course structure facilitates instructor presences in the asynchronous, online learning environment. He found that instructor presence is a vital component of a healthy online

classroom and that instructors must maintain constant communication with their students in a way that facilitates feedback loops and shows students they are on the journey with them.

Lee surveyed more than 80 graduate students, examining human and design factors related to student satisfaction in their online courses (Lee, 2014). Students reported instructor availability, grading feedback, clear and open communication, and prompt replies to questions as important factors in their satisfaction with their online courses. Lee concludes that online courses are learner-centered and therefore the instructor's ability to effectively communicate with students and be highly available to students is critically important.

Mastel-Smith et al. (2015) conducted research specifically focused on how instructors communicate personal presence in their online classrooms to show care for their students. They interviewed online faculty, asking about their perception of how that care is demonstrated in the online environment. They concluded that communication tone, open dialog, balanced feedback including both positive and improvement areas, and student affirmation were all strong contributing factors to showing care for the student. Faculty reported that being a real person, communicating regularly, and student affirmation were prominent factors in student success in their online courses.

The literature indicates that relationships between faculty and students are important considerations for sound teaching practices (Ekmekci, 2013; J. Lee, 2014; Mastel-Smith et al., 2015). In a face-to-face classroom, faculty can show care by talking with students face to face, showing an interest in them and their work, and facilitating classroom communication in real time. This is more difficult online where most, if not

all, of the activity takes place asynchronously and it is more difficult to demonstrate physical presence, caring, and facilitation. Online faculty can improve and maintain their relationships with students by having a sense of immediacy when responding to students, being active on the discussion boards in the online classroom, creating an open communication environment where students feel safe, and by expressing care and concern for their students. Online faculty members need to be highly available to demonstrate physical presence when visual presence is not possible. While it may be difficult to measure levels of relationships, results of strong relationships should be evident by way of improved student outcomes in the course.

At City University of New York (CUNY), a program was implemented to provide extra academic, financial, and career support to community college students (Mangan, 2015). In addition to three years of financial assistance and enhanced career planning to prepare them for work after graduation, students in this program received intensive academic support to help them stay on track to graduation. The academic support they received included consistent communication and contact to review progress, identification and remediation of additional academic support needs, and extra care and advising to ensure student progress toward their goals. By providing enhanced support, CUNY realized greater graduation rates within three years, 40% for students in the program vs. 22% for students not in the program, while reducing overall institutional cost. These statistics suggest a need for enhanced support for community college students. Instructors who are able to connect more effectively with their online students and maintain connectedness throughout their course can help provide enhanced support to students.



**Motivating the Adult Learner**

In seeking to understand the motivations of adult learners, Cyril O. Houle (1961), three types of learners were identified: goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented. Houle contends that all three types of learners pursue group or interactive engagement in their learning process. In online learning, this points to a need for proactive connections in the online classroom in order to facilitate the interactive engagement.

Wlodkowski (2008) suggests instructors can be more motivational to their adult students when they understand each learner's goals and objectives for the course, adapt their instruction to each learner's skill and ability, and continuously explore each learner's feelings and perceptions. This requires constant communication with students, inferring a constant or frequent connection that facilitates the communication. Creating and maintaining relationships with students is essential here to facilitate open communication channels between online instructors and students. Wlodkowski also points to instructor empathy and enthusiasm for both the student and the curriculum as strong motivators for adult learners. Empathy and enthusiasm for online students can be communicated through active discussion boards in the online classroom, frequent email contact with students in which instructors address specific strategies for each student based upon their performance and skill indicators, and phone conversations when necessary to provide another level of depth to conversations. For example, struggling students may need specific time management strategies to help them be more successful, and a top performing student may be motivated by an instructor who reiterates to the student what factors they see as winning strategies for their continued success.

**Student-Centered Learning Environment**

Carl Rogers (1951) developed psychology theories pertaining to adult therapy and then applied them to education, resulting in his student-centered learning and teaching theory. In his hypothesis, he states “the educational situation that most effectively promotes significant learning is one in which the threat to self of the learner is reduced to a minimum.” He also discusses the learning process as being controlled by the learner and effective when the learner engages with the environment (p. 1441). This implies that an instructor who creates a space where the student feels safe to inquire and express thoughts and ideas is going to be more successful in achieving a more productive learning environment. Safe spaces in the online environment can be created by an instructor posting expected behaviors such as mutual respect for all participants in the online classroom, the instructor modeling desired behaviors such as willingness to listen and engage in an open discussion of all perspectives on a topic, and an instructor who is quick to deal with bullying behaviors on a discussion board.

In an online learning space, the environment consists of the virtual classroom, online content, primarily asynchronous discussions with peers and instructors, and connecting with instructors and peers virtually through email, telephone, and video conferencing tools. A learner who effectively engages in this type of a learning environment can be more effective when there is a strong connection between the instructor and student. Teachers must also understand the underlying motivations of adult learners in order to create an online learning environment that will draw students in and help them engage. In order to understand the motivations of their students, teachers must be able to cultivate relationships that help them know their students through regular

communication, listening and probing for understanding, and through substantive interaction in the online classroom.

### **Teaching as Facilitation of Learning**

Lindeman (2013) suggests that adults learn best when their instructors interact with them in a way that encourages mutual growth and understanding through inquiry and response rather than in a telling method. If instructors think about teaching as facilitating the students' learning rather than teaching as imparting knowledge, their approach to teaching changes to one that puts the instructor in a facilitation role and the student in a more active role in their own learning process (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2015). Knowles describes this transition as shifting the role from "content transmitter to process manager and—only secondarily—to content resource" (p. 246). In an online environment, students are more in control of their own learning. They may not need in-depth instruction in some areas and they may need more depth in other areas. In the online world, they have more choice in how they spend their "class" time. If students are more actively controlling their own learning, facilitated by their instructors, the instructors must be highly connected to each student so they are hyper-aware of each student's progress. In some cases, students in the online environment could receive more individualized support from their instructor, as opposed to the classroom, where everyone receives the same message. This directly implies a very strong connection throughout the course of teaching that can be maintained through frequent and direct communication between instructor and student and through strong instructor presence in the online classroom, such as frequent exchanges on the discussion boards. Instructors can develop deeper connections with students through personalized feedback on student work,

personalized emails regarding student progress throughout the course, and prompt replies to student questions. These strong connections will help online students and instructors stay bonded throughout the course even though they are in a virtual world separated by distance and perhaps time.

### **Transactional Distance Theory**

Transactional distance, as defined by Moore (2002), involves structure, dialog, and learner autonomy through the course of interaction between instructor and student engaged in a learning environment (Aluko, Hendrikz, & Fraser, 2011; Moore, 2012). Moore refers to distance as a separation of understanding and perception in addition to geographical distance ( Moore, 1991; Moore 2012). Moore's (2012) theory of transactional distance identifies the space in online education through the context of the psychological and communication distance as an important factor in teaching and learning in an online environment. Moore proposes that students who need more support require more structure and dialog, increasing the transactional distance; as they become more experienced learners, they become more autonomous, thereby decreasing the transactional distance.

Because of the physical distance that exists in the online education environment, Moore suggests students have greater transactional distance and require more structure and dialog (Moore, 1991). Dialog and interaction between instructor and student are important aspects of online education and are identified by scholars as one of the great challenges in online education (Reyes, 2013). Moore proposes an instructional design and teaching approach that puts an emphasis on dialog in the online classroom (Koslow & Pina, 2015; Michael Grahame Moore, 2012). Forming connections with students

through interactive dialog can create and increase relationships in the online environment. The findings of another study focused on transactional distance suggest that a teaching and learning model designed around the student consuming information rather than constructing information through engagement and interaction might be less successful (Goel, Zhang, & Templeton, 2012). These findings also suggest that instructional design and instructor/student connectivity are important factors in successful student outcomes. Research suggests that sound instructional design for online education includes layout consistency, clear assignment instructions, rubrics that clearly indicate who student work is assessed, and clear expectations for coursework and performance (Lee, 2014; Lee & Robbins, 2000; Mapson, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2008).

### **Connectivity**

Hundreds of quantitative studies have been conducted to examine connectedness (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Through these studies, it is clear that researchers have an increasing awareness that connectedness is important in satisfying controlling human needs for psychological development and a sense of well-being (Jordan, 2013; Lee & Robbins, 2000). Connectedness involves individuals relating to, depending upon, and/or engaging with one another. The literature suggests that this type of connectedness is important for well-balanced, interpersonal relationships. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that regular and ongoing connectivity is core to human wellness and that, without it, negative mental and health consequences such as feelings of isolation and lack of motivation can develop. Individuals who feel isolated and disconnected may become reclusive and disengaged (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In education, this could produce a student who is not successful or who lacks the motivation to continue.

Studies have shown that students are more motivated and adjust more readily to school when they feel they are a part of a community of learners (Glaser & Bingham, 2009; Wankel, 2013). Students feel more connected to their academic programs and are more likely to persist when they are connected to other learners. Furthermore, studies also show that community college students who have greater social and academic engagement are more likely to persist in their academic program beyond the first year (Karp et al., 2010). Multiple studies examining community engagement in an online environment have determined that instructor presence in online courses is of high value to student engagement (Hung & Chou, 2015; Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Schutt et al., 2009; Shea et al., 2006; Wise et al., 2004).

Hung and Chou (2015) conducted a quantitative study to examine factors of student perceptions of instructor roles in online and blended learning environments. They examined five roles of the instructor: course designer, discussion facilitator, social supporter, technology facilitator, and assessment designer. There were slight differences in the findings reported between students from a blended learning environment and students from the online learning environment; the only difference that was statistically significant was in the role of discussion facilitator. Students in online courses reported more positive presences of their instructors as discussion facilitators than those students enrolled in a blended environment course. This is a strong indicator of students' perceptions of instructor presence in their online courses. Hung and Chou conclude that instructors need to develop relationships with their online students in order to facilitate students' sense of belonging and to show care in their role as social supporter.

Mastel-Smith et al. (2015) conducted qualitative research specifically focused on how instructors communicate personal presence in their online classrooms to show care for their students. They interviewed online faculty, asking about their perception of how that care is demonstrated in the online environment. They concluded that communication tone, open dialog, balanced feedback that includes both positive and improvement areas, and student affirmation were all strong contributing factors to showing care for the student. Faculty reported that being a real person, communicating regularly, and student affirmation were prominent factors in student success in their online courses.

Schutt et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative study to examine instructor immediacy as it relates to student motivation, outcomes, and satisfaction in the online learning environment. Some students in that study indicated that instructors who demonstrated immediacy behaviors such as expressing emotion, encouraging students to talk, and answering questions seemed more like a real person. The results of this study also indicated that, when instructors display immediacy behaviors, students perceive them as having a strong social presence even when the communication is not face to face.

Shea et al. (2006) conducted a quantitative study of 1067 students from 32 colleges to examine whether or not instructor presence in an online course helps in the development of a learning community. They explored instructor presence in the context of trust, collaboration, shared objectives, learning, and support. The researchers found a clear connection between the students' sense of learning community and perceived instructor presence. They also found that students were much more likely to perceive instructor presence when they also perceived the course as being organized and displaying good instructional design. However, they found that effective, directed

instruction was a higher contributing factor to students' sense of connectedness and learning than other factors.

Wise et al. (2004) examined instructor social presence in an online course through a qualitative study using 20 subjects who were enrolled in such a course. Social presence was examined in the context of message friendliness, instructor friendliness, and knowing the instructor. The results of this study indicated an increase in instructor/learner interactions and student perception of instructor trust when social presence is more evident. The researchers concluded that, while social presence does not appear to be causally related to learning, trust and learning intentions can potentially impact student performance in a course.

These studies suggest that students are more successful when instructor presence is high in the online classroom and when instructors exhibit care and concern for their online students (Hung & Chou, 2015; Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Schutt et al., 2009; Shea et al., 2006; Wise et al., 2004). The results also suggest that students desire connection and communication with their instructors, which helps demonstrate care and concern. However, little research has been done to determine what connection means to students and what students perceive as contributing factors to connectedness to their online instructor.

In a study aimed at identifying instructor and student perceptions of factors present in an online learning environment that contributed to a community of learning, researchers found little alignment between instructor and student perceptions (Costello & Welch, 2014). While both students and instructors felt that it was important to perceive caring from instructor to student, students were more focused on sustaining factors such



as relaxed tone and prompt responses and instructors felt motivation factors such as valuing students and friendliness were more important. The results showed that students indicated consistency and promptness of communication in an open and relaxed but structured environment as most critical while instructors felt that accessibility and friendly and positive behaviors in a relaxed and open environment were most important. An important note in this study is that there was no agreement between students and instructors on the most important factors contributing to the community of learning. This finding suggests a need to look more closely at student perceptions to gain a deeper understanding of how to address student needs in an online learning environment.

### **Connectedness in Online Education**

Research indicates that social interaction in an online learning environment has a positive impact on student outcomes (Hull & Saxon, 2009). Students do see themselves as connected to people v. the institution, so it is important to understand the personal relationship aspect of the connection (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011). One study indicated a higher degree of learner satisfaction and reported learning levels in classes where there was a higher degree of social connection, both with the instructor and with the other students (Grohnert, Carbonell, Dailey-Hebert, & Segers, 2013). Grohnert et al. (2013) found that learners in an online environment felt an environment where safe communications can facilitate knowledge sharing contributes to greater satisfaction with their learning environment. They also found that the instructor's role in creating an environment of communication and connection was critical and, where learners perceived a safe communication environment where connectivity was evident, there was increased learner perception of a need for collaboration in the course.

Students perceive feedback and availability of the instructor as the most critical factors for improving their perceptions of the online learning experience (Downing, 2012, Labarbera, 2013, Sharp, 2014, Woods, 2002). In one study, students identified authenticity, validation, and reinforcement as factors that increased their satisfaction with their online instructors (Downing, 2012). Authenticity is a result of an instructor's ability to demonstrate care and concern, validation indicates the instructor is specifically addressing each student as an individual, and reinforcement is done through formative feedback and specific guidance. Students are more satisfied with personalized feedback v. collective feedback, but it is interesting to note that the type of feedback does not seem to impact the level of perceived connectedness to the instructor (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008). Students also perceive greater connectedness to their instructors through the use of personalized, frequent email as a means of interaction with their instructor (Labarbera, 2013).

Students want to feel that their instructor genuinely cares about them (Leners & Sitzman, 2006). It is a sense of caring through an empathetic perspective and a tone of appreciation combined with timeliness of communication that some students are really looking for (Leners & Sitzman, 2006; Mann, 2014; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Sitzman & Leners, 2006). Some students see the sense of caring from their instructor as a key to their success in the course (Mann, 2014; Plante & Asselin, 2014). Building on the idea of caring, another quantitative study was conducted to determine if a sense of caring led to students' persistence in a course (Smith, 2013). Smith used the Hughes Organizational Climate for Caring Questionnaire (OCCQ) to measure caring. The OCCQ uses factors within four categories for measurement; modeling, dialog, practice, and confirmation.

Questions around these factors lead to information about how well the instructors modeled caring for the students that led to building students' self-esteem. She found that a sense of caring helped build self-esteem in students' abilities, thereby helping them persist.

### **Student Interaction**

Bain (2004) suggests that the key to engaging students is getting to know them (Bain, 2004). Vella (2002) describes this engagement process as dialog education with quantum concepts such as relatedness, participation, and energy. These theories suppose a great deal of connectedness with the student when listening and getting to know the whole student are prime components of effective teaching.

Samson (2015) found that using creative problem solving as a teaching method, incorporating student experiences with the curriculum, promotes deeper student engagement by increasing student interest. Creative problem solving is done through collaboration among peers and instructor in the classroom (Samson, 2015).

Collaboration could be accomplished through group work, open and engaging discussions, and through iterative assignment work using formative feedback for deeper exploration. This approach could be beneficial when thinking about online student connectedness.

The results of one study suggest that students enrolled in an open university are more engaged in their online course when they have a greater sense of connectedness to the institution (Namin & Chan, 2004). Connectedness to the institution can be facilitated through instructor-student engagement and connectedness. Understanding students' sense of belonging, student retention in the program, and student persistence with the

institution are indicating factors of students' connectedness to the institution. Song (2004) found a positive correlation between interaction and engagement in an online course and the students' perceptions of course quality. This research suggests that, when students are more participative in an online course, they perceive the course to be of higher quality (Song, 2004).

Atchade (2002) used involvement theory research that claimed active participation in social interaction among faculty and students promotes effective learning as one of the foundations for a study in online instruction. The study concludes that technology can facilitate greater interaction among class participants and can help faculty connect with their students more readily and efficiently, particularly in online education, (Atchade, 2002). This could take the form of online discussion boards and online communication channels. Technology can also provide online instructors with data that may facilitate a better understanding of student progress and issues. This then helps instructors communicate with students in more individualized ways. Other research indicates that no particular activity creates automatic engagement but there is a high correlation between higher connectivity in online courses and multiple communication channels (Dixson, 2012).

### **Instructor Presence in Online Education**

Instructors who establish a social presence and have a greater sense of urgency in responding to their students can show that they are present and available to students, which in turn encourages a deeper level of connectedness (Collins et al., 2014). Some schools ask instructors to respond to students within 24 hours, which incurs a sense of immediacy and creates high-value responsiveness to students. Leong (2006) found that

social presence mediated by cognitive absorption impacts student satisfaction. This finding suggests that students are more satisfied with their online courses when they are more deeply involved with course content and when their instructor shows a strong social presence (Leong, 2008).

It is critical for online instructors to demonstrate strong instructor presence through timely, regular, and frequent contact with students to ensure deeper participation of the online student (Hadsell, 2012). It is also important for online instructors to find opportunities to purposefully connect with students because the online student may be more hesitant to ask questions. Making expectations clear at the onset of class, then regularly checking for understanding, is another sound teaching practice for online instructors. Students also have a higher perception of instructor presence in a course when there is a sense of high-immediacy communication demonstrated throughout the course (Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009, Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Del Valle, 2004).

Students want to know not only that their instructor is present and available to them but also that their instructor cares about them (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015). Mastel-Smith, et.al. (2015) found that providing affirmation for students not only demonstrates care but also helps to alleviate fears and elevate confidence in students. Creating opportunities for interaction among peers in a course and opportunities for personal interaction between instructor and student, and being present and available throughout the course are ways in which faculty can create an environment that demonstrates care for the student. This can be accomplished by providing avenues for class discussions; virtual office hours where students can directly contact their instructor; the instructor providing multiple methods of contact, such as phone, email, online communication, text, etc.; and

by the instructor providing a warm welcome with an introduction and encouraging students to do the same (Ekmekci, 2013; Hung & Chou, 2015; Lee, 2014; Mastel-Smith et al., 2015).

When used effectively, technology can enhance delivery for online courses (Ekmekci, 2013). The use of technology can indicate for students when their instructor is online, increasing instructor presence for students. Technology can also provide instructors with data to help them know how and what to communicate with their students. By using data, instructors can be more responsive to student needs, demonstrate more care for their students, and generally be more present by addressing each student's individual needs. Some research also suggests that course structure plays an important role in developing instructor presence (Ekmekci, 2013, Hadsell, 2012). Modular structures with weekly segments, weekly interactions such as discussions, and iterative assignments that provide ample opportunity for formative feedback and peer review are some examples of well-founded course structures. Utilizing structures that provide opportunities for greater interaction and connection between instructor and student may also increase student perceptions of connectivity.

### **Summary**

We know that instructor presence and social connectivity within the online classroom helps students engage in their online courses, increases students' perceptions of the quality of those courses, and is of high value to students (Collins et al., 2014; Drouin & Vartanian, 2010; Hung & Chou, 2015; Leong, 2008; Schutt et al., 2009; Song, 2004). Based on previous research, we know there may be a disconnect between what instructors and students perceive as factors that contribute to communities of learning in a

way that can increase connectivity between students and instructors (Costello & Welch, 2014). We also know that community college students may be younger than the average online student, may lack persistence in their coursework, and are at greater risk of failure and dropping out of their education programs. (Ahern & Norris, 2011; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; NCES, 2017). If students in community colleges are at greater risk than the average online student because they are younger, less experienced as students, and lack persistence in their programs, it is judicious to understand more about how to care for online community college students in a way that helps them stay in school and succeed in their educational goals. One of the factors to examine is the level of connectivity between the online student and instructor. Little research has been done that examines what factors increase students' perceptions of connection with their instructor. This research explores that gap in an effort to increase our understanding of effective online teaching practices and develop best practices for effective online teaching and learning.

## **Chapter 3—Method**

### **Introduction**

Educators face challenges in getting to know their students and connecting with them in a way that is meaningful to create a bond that enhances their student's learning potential. Online educators are faced with an even more difficult challenge in connecting with their students due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and the asynchronous nature of many online programs (van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). In a 2012 survey, online students perceived the lack of instructor-and-peer interaction in their online courses as the biggest disadvantage of online education (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). This research suggests that students want more interaction and connectedness to their online instructor. This research explores business students' perceptions of connectedness with their online instructors in higher education as a means to better understand how faculty can improve their teaching practice.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This narrative, phenomenological research was designed to explore students' perceptions of their lived experiences with their online instructor that helped them feel more connected to that instructor. Narrative research can be used to capture stories in order to study a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). In this study, the phenomenon examined is individual student perceptions of their experiences of connectedness with their instructor and the commonalities or themes among the participant narratives. Two forms of data were used for each participant, a "journey map" and an interview.



A qualitative study was useful here in order to examine student perceptions and to draw out factors that may be related to connectedness. Studies have shown that students are more motivated and adjust more easily to school when they feel they belong to a community of learners (Glaser & Bingham, 2009). Furthermore, studies also show that community college students who have greater social and academic engagement are more likely to persist in their academic program beyond the first year (Karp et al., 2010). Multiple studies examining community engagement in an online environment have found that instructor presence in online courses is of high value to student engagement (Shea et al., 2006). However, little research has been done to determine what connection means to students and what students perceive as contributing factors to connectedness to their online instructor.

The purpose of this study was to explore future areas of research that could be conducted to help faculty better understand how to connect to their students in an effort to create greater student interaction in online courses. This study uses several motivational theories that make up a framework of connectedness. Because there is so much to learn about student perceptions of how students feel connected to their instructor, there is a need to have open-ended research that will explore these perceptions before conducting deeper research into specific areas of inquiry. First understanding what those areas of inquiry are and examining students' lived experiences may uncover those areas of inquiry that need deeper study and analysis. The qualitative research documented a descriptive narrative of the connectedness experiences identified by the students through the use of a journey map and interview. Journey maps are particularly

valuable in providing a more complex look at the lived experiences of the students, culminating in a deeper narrative of those experiences.

### **Journey Map Instrument**

Narrative research was chosen for this study based on previous research that points to the value of stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Coulter, 2009; Everett & Barrett, 2012; Reason, 2001). Connelly and Clandinin introduced narrative inquiry as a form of qualitative research in the field of education in 1990, although it had been used previously in other disciplines. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) offer narrative stories as a way to give an account of a “temporally continuous and socially interactive” process (p. 4). There are multiple ways to capture data for a story: interviews, journal records, letter writing, documents, autobiographical writing, and pictures, just to name a few.

Journey maps, a pictorial illustration of a lived experience, were first introduced by researchers during a four-year study to better understand graduate students’ personal experiences during their educational progression to becoming college teachers (Nyquist, Manning, Wulff, & Austin, 1999). The study was designed to expand knowledge about the development of teachers in an effort to provide insight into ways to improve teaching and learning for higher education. Participants were given the choice of telling a story in words or pictures, they were given surveys, and they were interviewed. Researchers in the Nyquist et al. study found that the pictures some students presented told a surprising story with steep slopes, chasms, and traps and they lacked images of support ropes, safety nets, and help along the way. Journey maps were later used to identify factors contributing to engineering school dropouts (Meyer & Marx, 2014). Participants were asked to draw a picture representing their lived experience through their educational

journey. Meyer and Marx (2014) believe the journey maps provided better insight into the emotional aspects of the engineering students' experiences, contributing to the identification of the major themes they found.

### **Participants and Site**

The participants for this study were business students taking an introductory level business course in an associate's level program at Portland Community College. The study spanned multiple introductory business courses, each taught by a different instructor during one semester. At Portland Community College, instructors are free to develop their own courses and they have the option to use a standardized course shell. All courses are reviewed against the Quality Matters Rubric to ensure consistency to a standard level of quality for the instructional materials and course design. Eight students were randomly selected for inclusion in the study. It is suggested that for a narrative, phenomenological study, 5 to 25 participants who have experienced the same phenomenon be used (Creswell, 2012). Using a random selection of 8 students ensured a sufficient sample size to draw out themes. Data collection began approximately three-quarters of the way through the term. The courses were not yet concluded but enough time had passed in the term to give students the opportunity to connect with their instructor and form relationship.

Participants in this study self-selected into the study through an invitational email sent to them via their instructors. This may have resulted in participants who were more passionate about online education, although there was no discussion of why they chose to participate. The process also depended on instructors who were willing to contact the students on the researcher's behalf.

**Procedure**

Students were shown examples, then asked to draw a journey map of their experience in the course, creating an image of their journey that identifies their lived experience through the course related to connectedness to their instructor (see Appendix A). Students were asked to draw a picture timeline that maps the specific points, activities, and experiences they had where they felt they had connection with their instructor. Students were then interviewed so they could verbally interpret their journey map for the researcher. During the interview, specific questions (see Appendix B) were asked to draw out the student's perception of the level of connectedness, the reasons for those perceptions, and the student's overall satisfaction of their connectedness with their instructor throughout the course. To gain a sense of levels of perceptions, some questions asked the students to rate their responses on a Likert scale with a rating of 1-10, with 1 being low and 10 being high. Demographic data was collected from each student and from the instructors teaching the courses (see Appendix C).

A pilot study was conducted with a small group of online students to test the journey map and associated interview questions. The pilot study was also used to test the use of MAXQDA, the chosen research coding tool. After the pilot study was complete, analysis of the results and further evaluation of the methods were conducted and adjustments made to the methods and questions as needed.

**Data Analysis**

Results of the interviews paired with the journey maps were documented as narrative stories that explain when, how, and why students felt connected to their instructors throughout their online course experience. Data was captured in the form of

notes taken during the interviews, recordings of the interviews, and journey maps drawn by participants. Data was then organized and coded for analysis.

First-level analysis was conducted by the researcher by reading through all of the data to gain a feel for the general idea and tone of the results. The data was then coded and sorted into topic areas. The topics for coding were identified after the data was collected to allow every possibility of emerging topics to occur. A qualitative research coding tool, MAXQDA, was used to capture and analyze the data collected for this research.

To create trustworthiness of the research data, several validity checks—rich thick description, clarification of researcher bias, and peer debriefing—were employed. Rich thick descriptions provided a foundation for understanding the environment and perspective of the participants. These descriptions involved details of each participant and the college and courses the participants were enrolled in. Because the researcher is also an online instructor, any biases on the part of the researcher were documented. Finally, the researcher reviewed the findings with two peers in the online education field to validate and add an additional perspective on the findings.

A review of the evidence produced throughout this process was conducted to determine if there were emerging themes that could be used to understand what factors help students feel most connected to their online instructor. From the emerging themes, potential future research was identified for deeper analysis.

## **Chapter 4—Results**

### **Introduction**

Educators face challenges in getting to know their students and connecting with them in a meaningful way to create a bond that enhances their students' learning potential. Online educators are faced with an even more difficult challenge in connecting with their students due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and the asynchronous nature of many online programs (van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). In a 2012 survey, online students perceived the lack of instructor-and-peer interaction in their online course as the biggest disadvantage of online education (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012). The Aslanian & Clinefelter research suggests that students want more interaction and connectedness to their online instructor. The purpose of this phenomenological research was to explore business students' perceptions of connectedness to their online instructor in higher education as a means to better understand how faculty can improve their teaching practice.

**Research question.** What factors in the asynchronous online classroom experience contribute to students' perception of connectedness to their instructor in an online course?

### **Participant Reactions**

The research participants overall were very forthcoming in describing their experiences through journey maps and interviews. Participants struggled a bit with the creative nature of the journey maps but, when interviewed, they were able to confidently

describe their experience and perceptions throughout their experience in the course. The responses were primarily positive relative to their interaction with their instructors, although there were some areas where students felt they wanted more from their instructors.

**Demographics.** Eight students were interviewed, four males and four females, five white and three Asian-American. Four of the students were in the 19-25 age category, three were 25-35, and one was over 35. Three of them in were their first year, two in their second year, two in their third year, and one in their fourth year of college, as shown in figure 4-1. Of the eight students, six were in BA101, Introduction to Business, and two were in BA111, Introduction to Accounting. Four students work full-time, two students work part-time and two students do not work while they are going to school. Five students are part-time students and three students are full-time students. Most of the participants have taken between three and ten online class, as shown in figure 4-2.

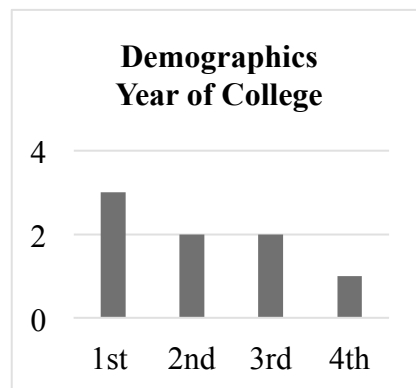


Figure 4-1. Demographics, year of college.

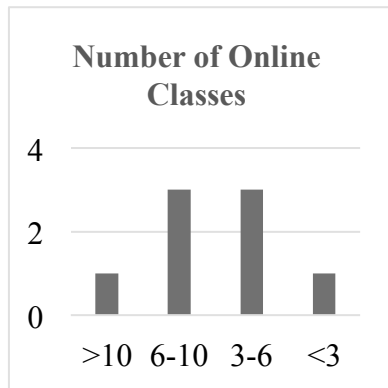
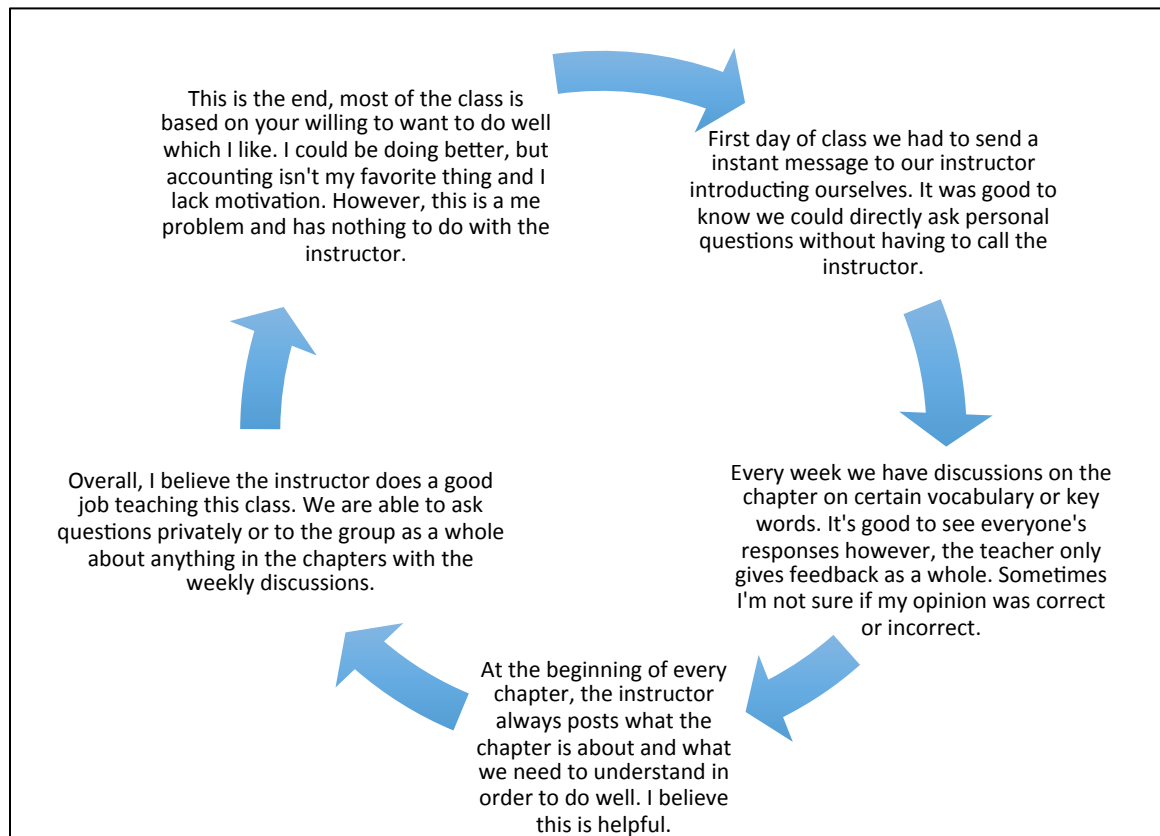


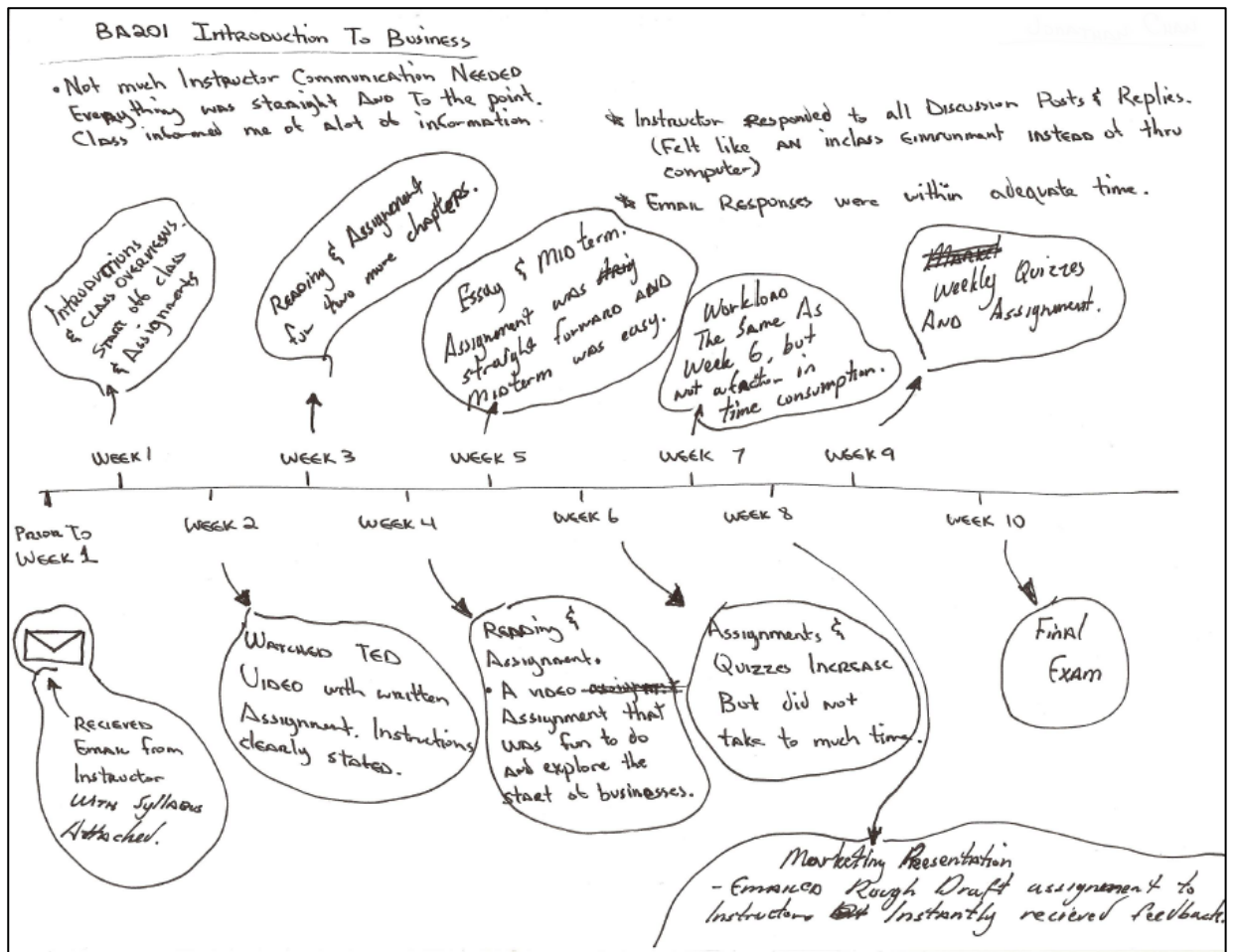
Figure 4-2. Number of online classes.

**Sample Journey Maps.** Artifacts 1, 2, and 3 are shown here as examples of the journey maps created by students in this study. All the participants interpreted the journey map exercise as a timeline and produced a timeline of events throughout their course. Even though each student produced a timeline, they were all very different in the way they portrayed the timeline.

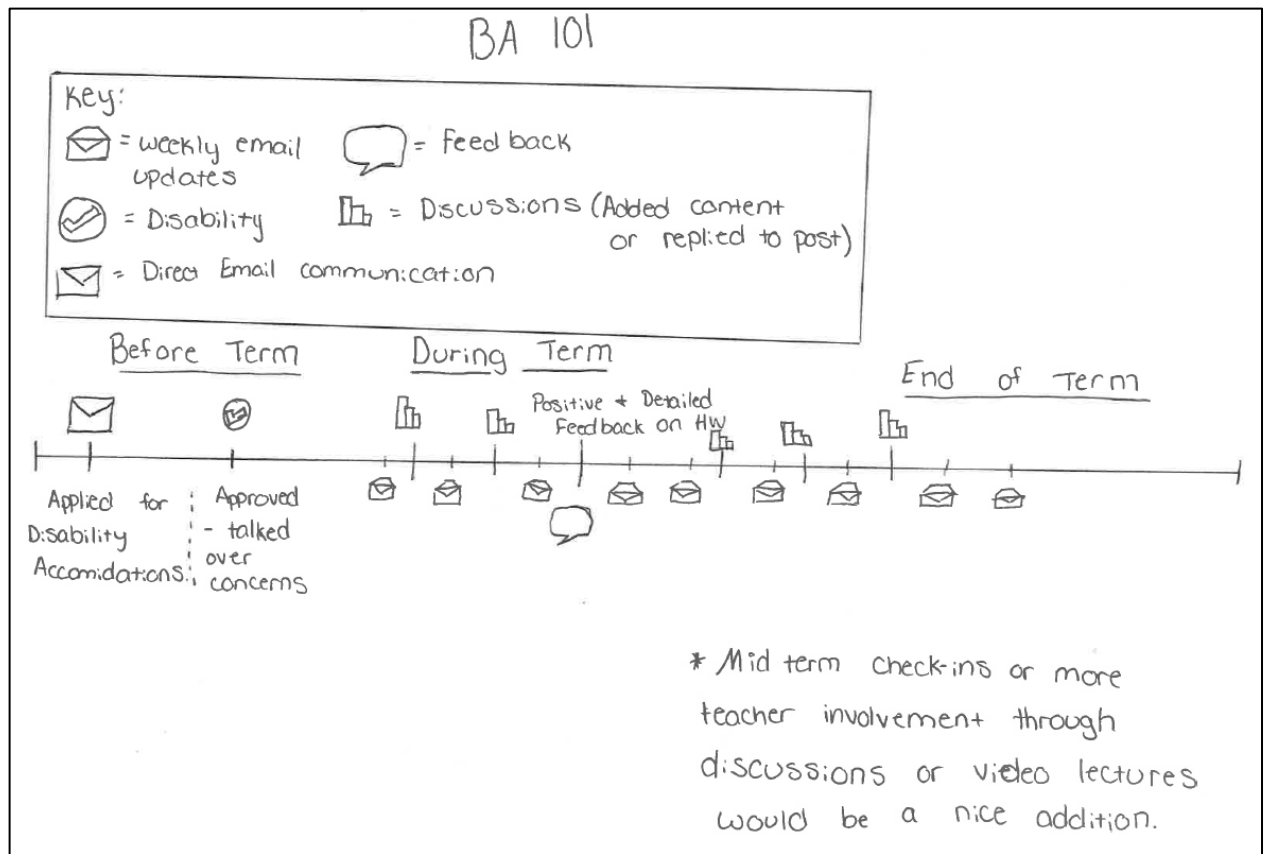




*Artifact 1. Journey map.*



Artifact 2. Journey map.



Artifact 2. Journey map.

**Student stories.** Most of the participants depicted their journey as a timeline throughout the course, showing points of their perceived connections along the way through various means. During their interviews, they expressed the high points as well as the low points of connection in the course, explaining what caused those highs and lows. As students discussed their journey maps, they also expressed their definitions of connection and their level of expectation of connection with their online instructors. The

following stories have been coded and pseudo-named to protect the identities of the participants.

**Lynn.** Lynn started out by expressing a need for connection with the online instructor due to a documented disability. Lynn felt that because of the need to connect around the accommodation documentation, the connection with the instructor started strong. The main points of connection were around weekly class emails regarding assignment instructions plus a reminder note prior to assignment due dates and weekly discussion posts. Lynn felt the most positive aspect of connection in this class was the consistent communication.

Lynn described connection as a personal connection, knowing and understanding each individual student's needs and the things that make each one stand apart from the other students in the class, such as needing extra help, etc. Lynn felt the instructor established this type of connection at the beginning of the course with responsive and direct communication.

Lynn described a feeling of disconnect during the middle of the course, when the instructor lessened their engagement on the discussion board. Lynn feels that weekly discussions are an important part of staying connected with the instructor, much as in an in-seat class, saying this could have been improved through more direct discussion board responses and personal email communication rather than global communications with the whole class. Lynn also felt the connection with the instructor could have been improved by reaching out to the instructor more frequently and asking more questions. Overall, Lynn felt that the instructor really cared about their success as students in the course.

Lynn rated the level of connection with their online instructor at 5-6 out of 10, stating s/he didn't really want more connection than that. For this reason, the satisfaction rating was 8 out of 10 because s/he experienced regular communication and felt care from the instructor.

**Pat.** Pat described an early and positive connection with the instructor that was established in a pre-term email and syllabus sent prior to the class start date. This instructor also facilitated weekly discussion boards where she posted a personalized response to every student's post. Pat described this as a strong point of connection each week that mimicked face-to-face interaction and was motivating. This instructor was much more responsive and engaged than previous online instructors, which helped Pat feel much more connected to the instructor.

Pat described connection as interaction with instructors and enough detail in feedback and communications to fully understand the message. Pat also felt the instructor's responsiveness to emails and discussion posts and in feedback about assignments contributed to a more positive experience. Pat felt that it was important not only for the instructor to be readily available and to communicate often but also to communicate clearly and follow up to ensure understanding.

Pat described the most positive aspects of the connection experiences in this course as the individualized responses in the discussion boards, the assignment feedback, and the direct email communication. Pat felt the instructor demonstrated care for the students, individually, and that the instructor took the time to thoroughly review their work. The greatest point of disconnection was when the assignment instructions were

unclear, which led to frustration and a lack of motivation to continue, although Pat felt s/he could have asked more questions to improve the connection with the instructor.

All in all, Pat felt that this was the best online instructor to date and the connection was strong, rating 10 out of 10. Pat also was very satisfied with the connection with the instructor in this course, rating the connection 9 out of 10. This was mostly due to good, individualized feedback and quick responses from the instructor.

*Alex.* Alex described the connectivity experience as a mostly positive one throughout the course. The primary reasons given for the positive experience were an early email from the instructor prior to the class starting, good feedback on assignments, and direct emails from the instructor. Alex felt the personalized feedback was of high value and was disappointed when one assignment was graded with far less care and very little feedback. The most negative experience was felt when s/he had an issue and reached out to ask a question. The feedback indicated that the instructor either didn't attempt to answer the question or didn't believe the issue that was presented, thereby dismissing the question.

Alex described connection as consistent and clear two-way communication. Alex feels it is hard to feel connected to an online instructor because of the lack of a face-to-face component. However, Alex also felt the assignment feedback was perhaps the greatest point of connection and, the more in-depth the feedback was, the more connected s/he felt and the more positive the experience was. Alex felt the connection with the instructor could have been improved through greater care from the instructor by the instructor truly listening and trying to understand the concerns presented. Alex also felt

the connection could have been improved through open office hours where s/he could have had at least verbal contact with the instructor.

Alex expressed a low level of expectation for connectivity in an online class, saying, “It is hard to stay connected to someone you’ve never seen.” For this reason, Alex rated the satisfaction with connection 8 out of 10 even though s/he rated their level of connection a 4-5 out of 10. Alex did feel the instructor cared about their success in the course because of the personalized feedback received on assignment grades.

**Jordan.** Jordan described most of the connections throughout the course as emails relating to grades and feedback received on assignment grades. Although Jordan described the experience of connectivity with the instructor as mostly positive, Jordan also felt that much of the feedback s/he received was generic and not formative enough. Jordan felt this may have been in part due to the good grades received and that perhaps there wasn’t much feedback to be given.

Jordan perceives connection as instruction through various means, such as videos and synchronous communication of some sort to provide greater context for the instruction and communication, rather than through text alone. Jordan felt the most connection at the beginning of the class when there was more communication between students and instructor regarding goals for the class and feedback on assignments. Jordan felt the connection wane as the term progressed and also thought the connection with the instructor could have been improved through better feedback with more detail on assignment grading and through video instruction to give a face to the instructor and to show more of the instructor’s passion for the subject matter. Jordan felt s/he could have improved the connection by asking more questions and asking for more feedback.

Jordan rated the connection with the online instructor 6 out of 10 because s/he felt there could have been more communication. Despite that, Jordan rated the satisfaction level with the connection a 7 out of 10 because there was good communication up front and the instructor always responded to emails within 24 hours. Overall, Jordan felt neutral about whether or not the instructor cared for them as a student.

***Jerry.*** Jerry described the connectivity journey as a very positive experience even though the experience the class had a confusing and rocky start. Some of the settings and directions in the LMS were not set correctly, causing considerable confusion for the students. The assignments were actually housed outside the LMS, which created further confusion. Because of the rocky start, the instructor took extra care with Jerry to ensure understanding and to correct any misconceptions. This helped Jerry feel like s/he was being cared for and receiving personalized attention from the instructor. This instructor was good about providing clarity in assignment instructions and providing helpful and good feedback on assignments and questions, tying the learning to personal experiences.

Jerry described connection as authentic and complete communication from the instructor to the students. Jerry felt this was an unusual experience in comparison to experiences s/he had in other online classrooms, where the instructors gave the “shortest and simplest answers.” Because the instructor’s communication was comprehensive and complete, Jerry felt most connected to the instructor when receiving comprehensive feedback on assignment submissions despite feeling a distinct disconnect at the beginning of class. Jerry felt the connection could have been somewhat improved had s/he responded more to the instructor comments and feedback to create a more interactive engagement with the instructor.



Jerry rated the level of connection with the instructor in this course a 7 out of 10 because of a lack of complete engagement with the instructor. Despite that, Jerry was very satisfied with the connection level and felt a great deal of care from the instructor, rating the satisfaction level 9 out of 10 because, despite the rough start, the instructor was very responsive and provided good communication throughout the course.

*Chris.* Chris had a rough time in this class, feeling little connection with the online instructor throughout the course. The journey map indicated several personal issues that initially caused stress for the student, causing the student to fall behind early in the class. Chris describes these issues as their own personal struggles but felt the instructor did little to assuage the student's experience or to provide enhanced help or support that may have helped the student persist in the course. Chris dropped the course two weeks prior to the end of the course to take a W rather than an F that would affect GPA.

The only point of connection Chris had with the instructor was when the instructor sent class emails. In fact, Chris said s/he felt a distinct lack of connection in this course rather than any type of a real connection. Chris describes connection as talking, sharing ideas, and communicating. In an online class, Chris felt this could be done through responses in discussion threads and being responsive via email. Chris sent several emails to the instructor that went unanswered or were answered two weeks later. S/he felt most connected at the very beginning of the term, when the instructor sent an email to check-in. Around mid-term, the instructor began to assign more work, which was a surprise to students and increased the workload significantly, thereby increasing the stress levels.

While Chris acknowledges a lack of participation in the class in general that contributed to the lack of connection, s/he felt the instructor could have done much more by way of support. This contributed to Chris feeling like the instructor did not care about student success in the course. Chris rated the level of connection 2 out of 10 and reported wanting a lot more connection than s/he received, rating their satisfaction level 4-5 out of 10.

**Shawn.** Shawn reported a low level of student/instructor interaction in this course and said the most positive experience in the course came when the instructor-provided materials were not resonating, so s/he sought their own learning resources that were approved by the instructor. Most of the interaction was conducted on the discussion boards and the instructor was good about responding quickly to student posts. Despite those good responses on the discussion boards, Shawn felt that if students in the class didn't speak up, they wouldn't be heard because there was no proactive outreach to students or "even an email asking me how I'm doing."

Shawn describes connection as having a relationship with a person and an active channel of communication between instructor and student any time of the day, any day of the week. Shawn felt the instructor could have improved connection in this course with more proactive touch points throughout the course to discuss progress and offer support. S/he also felt s/he could have improved the connection by reaching out to the instructor more. Despite this, Shawn felt the experience was okay because s/he didn't feel a strong need to connect.

Shawn said s/he did not feel cared for in this class but s/he did feel the instructor cared about the success of the entire class. Shawn scored the level of connection with the

instructor 7 out of 10 and their satisfaction with that level of connection 6-7 out of 10.

Shawn felt the instructor did the bare minimum of connecting to students in this course.

***Brit.*** Brit described a consistent communication pattern throughout the course that created connection with the instructor. Connections were made through weekly announcements, discussion boards, and the use of the instant messaging chat feature in the classroom, through which students could reach out privately to the instructor. The feedback provided on assignment submissions was personalized to the specific student submission in a way that helped the students improve their knowledge and skills each week. Brit felt the individualized feedback was the most positive experience in the course, although s/he wanted even more feedback to be sure s/he was on the right track and for the instructor to check for understanding.

Brit describes connection as a personalized experience with another person, being on the same page and, specifically between instructor and student, for there to be clarity in understanding. The highest points of connection were felt on the discussion boards, where there was more engagement and interaction. At times Brit felt somewhat isolated when trying to complete homework and therefore felt most disconnected at those points in the course. Brit felt the connection could have been improved if the instructor had reached out more proactively to check in with students and report progress. By that same principle, Brit felt s/he could have also been more proactive in their communication with the instructor, particularly when s/he had questions.

Brit rated the level of connection with the instructor 5 out of 10, mostly due to their own lack of reaching out to the instructor with questions. However, Brit rated satisfaction 7 out of 10, stating they weren't expecting much connection due to other poor

experiences of connection with instructors in other courses. Overall, Brit felt cared for by the instructor in this course because of the extensive feedback that was provided.

**Themes.** Students' ideas were grouped together into general categories of connection and perception of factors contributing to connection that formed themes. Themes emerged where more than half the students expressed ideas in their drawn journey maps and/or in their interviews. Through the journey maps and interviews, four primary categories of connection formed: 1) what connection means, 2) contributors to connection, 3) barriers to connection, and 4) perceptions of connection. Themes related to student perceptions of factors contributing to connection were: 1) consistent and personalized communication, 2) availability of instructor, 3) thorough feedback on assignments and discussion board posts, 4) a feeling of care from the instructor, and 5) flexibility in the course.

***Meaning of connection.*** Students were asked what connection means to them, what level of connection they felt with their instructor, and how satisfied they were with the connection they had with their instructor. When asked what connection means to them, students described three primary means of connection: 1) interaction, 2) communication, and 3) relationship.

Regarding their connection experiences, students expressed higher levels of satisfaction with the connection they experienced than the level of perceived connectedness, as shown in figure 4-3. This relates to some students' lower expectations of connection with online instructors.

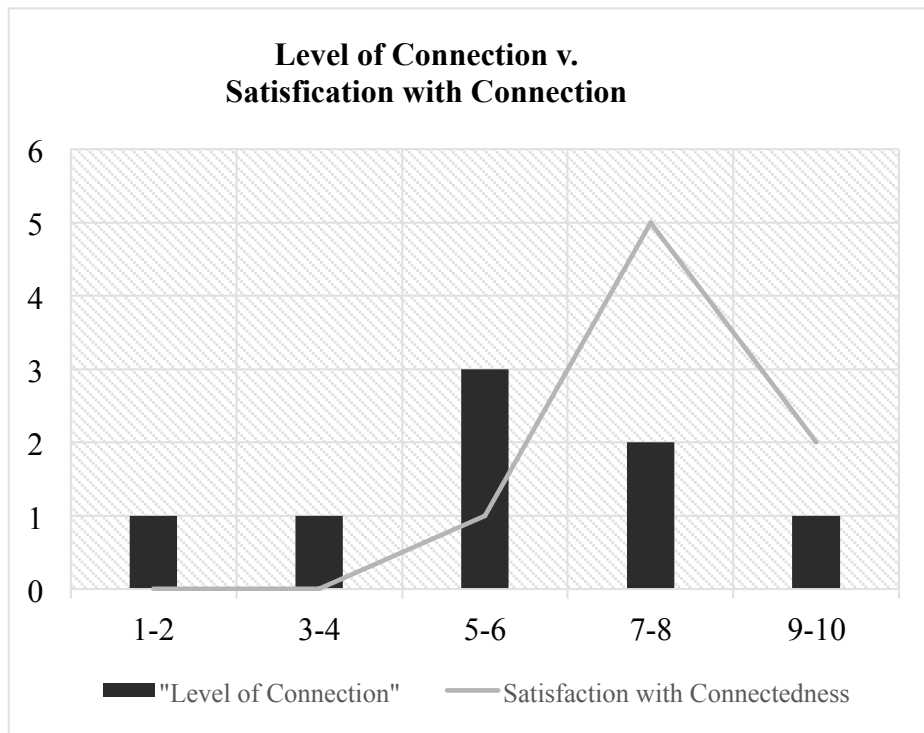


Figure 4-3. Level of connection and satisfaction with connection.

**Contributors to connection.** In reviewing their journey maps and in their interviews, students rated feedback and emails from their instructor and discussion board interaction as the top contributors to perceiving connection with their instructors. Lynn said, “Weekly discussions are an important part of staying connected to my instructor.” Students talked about the feedback they received from their instructors as being the most critical thing to their learning process and feeling care from their instructor. Students felt that, when they received feedback, their instructor cared about them and their success and

they felt more closely connected to their instructors because of this. Pat stated, “I felt most connected to my instructor every time I did my assignments and posts and received responses from her. I felt she really took the time to look at my work.” Students said that, when an instructor took the time to actually read what they had written and responded with meaningful and comprehensive feedback, they felt the instructor truly cared about them personally in a way that helped them feel more confident that the teacher would be there for them to help them succeed.

***Barriers to connection.*** Students reported points where they felt lost and/or unable to connect with their instructor. Most of these revolved around confusing direction regarding assignments and not enough personal contact from the instructor. Jordan said, “I felt a lack of connection to my instructor later in the term when comments on assignments became more generic.” Jerry stated, “I felt disconnected at the beginning of the term because there was confusion about what I needed to do.” One student mentioned a lack of personal care from the instructor that was a detractor to motivation.

***Perceptions.*** As students described their experiences of connection and lack of connection with their online instructors, there were seven basic principles of connection mentioned; felt care, consistent communication, felt lost, engaged and available teacher, felt comfortable, flexibility in the course, did not feel care. Most of the students felt their instructor cared about them and that they received consistent communication from their instructor that was two-way. One student described the feeling of care as coming from direct communication with the instructor, feeling that the instructor was actually paying attention to their work, and feeling that the instructor was responding directly to what they were saying. Several students talked about direct communication as being more

effective than group communication, although they all felt the group communication was useful in helping them understand instructions and due dates that contributed to their overall learning in the course. One of the most discussed principles of connection was the discussion boards. Students felt that when instructors directly responded to them on the discussion board, even though it was an asynchronous communication, they felt a strong connection with the instructor through that interaction. Shawn said, “The discussion boards were the main line of communication,” and Brit said, “Responses to discussion posts were quick and immediate feedback.”

Students were generally positive about their experiences of connection as shown in their journey maps. See artifacts 1, 2, and 3 as examples of this. The artifacts shown above are examples of the types of interpretations students presented as their journeys of connection throughout their courses. After submitting their journey map artifacts, students were given the opportunity to explain their journey map and answer questions regarding the information presented in the artifact. During the interviews, some students expressed a reluctance to contact their teacher with questions. Three students said they didn’t expect as much connection with an online instructor and one of those students said they felt that, if they contacted the instructor too much, they were being bothersome. Six of the participants said they felt they could have improved their connection with their instructor by asking more questions.

## **Chapter 5—Discussion**

As educators face challenges in getting to know their students and connecting with them in a meaningful way, online educators are faced with an even more difficult challenge in connecting with their students due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and the asynchronous nature of many online programs (van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). In attempting to address the research question, “What factors in the asynchronous online classroom experience contribute to students’ perception of connectedness to their instructor in an online course?” eight students were asked to draw a map of their experiences of connection throughout their course. They were then interviewed to explore the concepts presented in their maps.

The journey map method did seem to help students think more deeply about their experiences of connection in their course, although they all interpreted their thoughts and perception as a timeline rather than an experience journey, as the researcher anticipated. It was expected that students would think more about their perception of connection through an experience, drawing more from emotion to express motivation factors for persistence and factors contributing to their success in the course. Very few students got to this depth of thinking in their journey map but they were able to describe some of these feelings through the questions presented in the interviews. Overall, the goal of getting the students to think about connection more conceptually was achieved through the combination of journey maps and interviews, contributing to rich results in their explanations of perception of connection.



The findings suggest that students are not unhappy with their levels of connections with their online instructors, although they would be happier with a greater sense of connection. These findings also suggest that students are not yet sure what to expect from online instructors or that they haven't had enough experience to form expectations. Students felt that engagement by way of direct communication and interaction with their instructors was helpful in creating relationships with their instructors. Students also felt that, when their relationship with their instructor was not fully developed, they were more uncomfortable reaching out with questions. All the online students interviewed felt that, due to the nature of an online class, students need to be able to reach out to their instructors when needed in order to facilitate their own learning. Participants suggested that, while instructors carry a great deal of responsibility in developing relationships and creating connections with their students, students also bear some of that responsibility. These perceptions suggest that, when online instructors create opportunities for students to ask questions and create an environment where students are comfortable with their online instructor, students will feel more supported and cared for in their online course. Some of these findings might also suggest that instructors are building their skills in teaching and facilitating in the online modality and some may be unsure how to make connections with students where face-to-face connectivity is not an option.

Feedback was reported by the students interviewed as the greatest benefit for online students in connecting with their instructor and being successful in the course. Students discussed feedback through assignment grading, feedback through email responses to questions, and feedback on the discussion boards as the three primary areas

where feedback was given. Participants felt a strong connection with their instructor when they received personalized feedback in any of the forms mentioned. This suggests that instructors who provide personalized feedback to students consistently throughout the course create an environment that is motivating for students and one where students are more comfortable asking questions and feel students feel more cared for.

Alternatively, this could be the most common way students receive direct communication from their instructors, making it the most viable means of connection. Worth noting here is that these factors apply to all students, both those who are doing well and those who are not. There were several mentions in these interviews of how students felt they did not receive as much feedback because they were doing well, but that they would have appreciated more feedback.

### **Link to Previous Studies**

As expected, the findings here are consistent with previous studies about student experiences in the online learning environment. Students perceive feedback and availability of the instructor as the most critical factors for improving their perceptions of their online learning experience (Downing, 2012, Labarbera, 2013, Sharp, 2014, Woods, 2002). Students in this research reported feedback and instructor availability as factors contributing to their perception of connection with their online instructor. As in previous research, students also perceived greater connectedness to their instructors through the use of frequent personalized email as a means of interaction with their instructor (Labarbera, 2013). Faculty who establish a social presence and have a greater sense of urgency in responding to their students can show they are present and available to students, which, in turn, encourages a deeper level of connectedness (Collins et al.,

2014). Students want to know not only that their instructor is present and available to them, but also that the instructor cares about them (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015). Mastel-Smith et al. (2015) found that providing affirmation not only demonstrates care but also helps to alleviate fears and elevate confidence in students. In this study, discussion boards were frequently mentioned as a strong principle of connection. Students felt that, when instructors directly responded to them on the discussion board, even though it was an asynchronous communication, they felt a strong connection with the instructor through that interaction.

Students want to feel that their instructor genuinely cares about them (Leners & Sitzman, 2006). It is a sense of caring through an empathetic perspective and a tone of appreciation combined with timeliness of communication that some students are really looking for (Leners & Sitzman, 2006; Mann, 2014; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Sitzman & Leners, 2006). In one study, students identified authenticity, validation, and reinforcement as factors that increased their satisfaction with their online instructors (Downing, 2012). Students in this study also felt that instructors who can be more authentic and open with them, validating them by personally and specifically addressing them, and reinforcing the learning through specific feedback and guidance were much better at forming connection and making them feel more cared for. Participants in this study also indicated feeling care from their instructor as an important factor contributing to their level of connection with their instructor and their success in the course.

It is critical for online instructors to demonstrate strong instructor presence through timely, regular, and frequent contact with students to ensure deeper participation of the online student (Hadsell, 2012). Students in this study expressed a strong desire for

frequent communication with their instructor. It is also important for online instructors to find opportunities to purposefully connect with students as the online student may be more hesitant to ask questions. Students in this study expressed a reluctance to reach out to their instructors to ask questions.

Making expectations clear at the onset of class and then regularly checking for understanding is another sound teaching practice for online instructors. Participants in this study felt that, when expectations were not clear, it led to confusion and a feeling of disconnect with their instructor and gave them less confidence to persist in the course. Students also have a higher perception of instructor presence in a course when there is a sense of high-immediacy communication demonstrated throughout (Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Del Valle, 2004).

This research confirms what previous studies found regarding online connectivity between students and instructors. The research results provide more insight into what students perceive as creating connection: demonstrated care through personalized attention, frequent and personal communication, personalized feedback, and instructor availability. These findings contribute to a greater body of research that can help online instructors improve their teaching practice.

### **Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1: provide individualized feedback.** The highest level of satisfaction students reported regarding connection with their online instructors was through personalized feedback on their work both on the discussion boards and on their assignment submissions. Instructors should be acutely aware that students seek solid feedback that can help them grow in their understanding. When instructors provide direct

feedback to students, they are not only helping them grow and develop, but they are expressing personal care for the students in a way that motivates them and helps them persist in their ongoing education. Conversely, instructors who fail to do this can negatively impact and even hinder student persistence. This is particularly important, as faculty can sometimes lose momentum toward the end of the course. This can be perceived by students in an online environment as a lack of instructor presence and care. Some students in this study expressed a growing sense of stress near the end of the course with finals coming up. Students also indicated that instructor feedback got more generic as the course progressed. This suggests that instructors should connect more with students during this time to show more care and presence.

**Recommendation 2: encourage students to ask questions.** Some students in this study indicated that, in an online course, they were uncomfortable reaching out to ask questions of the instructor because they either did not feel a connection with the instructor or they felt they should already know the answer. Instructors could help mitigate this by encouraging students to ask more questions. One method students in this study suggested for doing this is through video announcements to create a stronger instructor presence. Other factors that could help are posting a clear and direct way to contact the instructor and actively seeking that connection with all students in the course. Students said that emails from their instructor reaching out to check on them were helpful and very much appreciated. Regular personalized emails might be a way to help students feel the instructor desires communication with them.

**Recommendation 3: provide consistent and frequent personalized communication.** All of the participants in this study indicated they desired more

communication from their instructors. When asked what instructors could have done to improve their connection, most students responded by saying they could have reached out and communicated more often. While students were happy with any type of communication, they expressed a greater perception of connection where the communication was personalized and not a generic or class communication.

**Recommendation 4: be highly available.** Several participants in this study indicated that, when they sent questions to their instructors, the responses were very slow and too late to help them when they needed it most. Other participants also indicated that past experiences with slow instructor communication led them to not reach out when they needed help because they lacked confidence in the timeliness of the response. This indicates that, if students believe they will have quick responses from their instructors, they will be more likely to reach out when they need help.

**Recommendation 5: create and maintain strong connections with students throughout the course.** Participants in this study indicated they were happier with consistent, strong connections with their online instructors. Conversely, they also mentioned that connections sometimes diminished as the course progressed and the loss of connection was evident. Students also reported that, if instructors used videos either in the classroom or in their personalized feedback, they perceived a stronger connection to the instructor. Some suggestions for instructors to create and maintain connection are provided here.

- Early, frequent, and consistent communication—both general and personal
- Clear instruction, perhaps even asking students for suggestions on improving, then updating as needed

- Progress emails to students multiple times throughout the course, even for students who are doing well in the course
- Check-in emails to students who are seemingly “absent” from the course or in their communication
- Discussion boards that are conversational, engaging, and encouraging with prolific and individualized responses
- Assignment feedback that is specific and individualized
  - Video grading can be very useful using a screen recorder to show the student while telling them what needs improvement and what they did particularly well. This can be uploaded to the cloud and a link shared with the student, using tools such as Jing and Snagit.
- High availability to answer questions within a day so students can progress
  - Using a smartphone to answer emails can provide students quick guidance without having to log in to the classroom or being on the computer in an office
- Using humor or other elements in the classroom that portray instructor personality
- Instructor-created videos where possible such as announcements, elements of the curriculum, and on the discussion boards
- More communication using open-ended questions to encourage responses

It is important to note that students in this study were generally happy with their connection to their online instructors but they also indicated they didn’t expect much.

Most of the students in this study indicated they had previously had mostly poor experiences with online instruction but they could speak about a few instructors who they felt did a great job in the online classroom environment. As instructors improve their online teaching practices, students may begin to expect more from their online instructors. It is important that online instructors not only find ways to form these connections but also that they find ways to use technological advances for communication and to form connections online similarly.

### **Limitations**

The scope of this study was limited to associate's level business students in a community college. This was perhaps one of the best types of college student audiences for this study because research has shown that community college students need more care to increase persistence in their program (Adams, 2015, Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Becker, 2015). However, the results may differ slightly if the study were conducted using a different audience, such as students in a public, four-year college; students in a private college; and/or students in a master's level program. Students in an MBA program, for example, may expect more academic challenges from their instructor and may not be as concerned about personal care to help them stay motivated.

### **Method**

Using journey maps proved effective, although not exactly what was expected based on trial studies. Students were asked to draw a pictorial story of their experience throughout the time in their class. Although they were shown examples of previous journey maps, all of the students in this study interpreted this instruction as a timeline rather than a voyage. Perhaps using more descriptive words or a bit more direction in the



process would have produced different responses. Even so, the timelines proved useful in helping the students describe their entire experience over time and helped participants get to a deeper level of description of their holistic experience.

### **Researcher Bias**

This researcher has been an online instructor for over 10 years and has also taught students at the community college and taught some of the same courses of the students who were interviewed. Although none of the researcher's students were included in the results shown here, the researcher may have some biases related to a deeper understanding of online teaching and learning, and previous action research done through her own teaching practice. This researcher may also have some pre-conceived notions about how to form connections with online students, based upon her own experiences with students.

### **Future Research**

This study was useful in discovering the basic constructs of student perceptions of connection with their online instructors. More study would be useful in determining if the same perceptions apply to upper division students and students in other college settings, such as private schools and online-only schools. Given the primary constructs found in this research, a quantitative study using the findings here would be useful in understanding a broader implication for these findings.

Further research would also be useful to determine the cause of low expectations of connection for students in online courses. This research did not attempt to answer possible causes of student perceptions or explore what students would ultimately desire

or need regarding connection in a deeper way. A qualitative study might be useful here to dig deeper into reasons for low expectations of connection mentioned in this study.

Future research aimed at understanding how connectivity between online instructors and students impacts course outcomes would also be useful to determine success factors for institutional and course measures and student persistence.

### **Conclusion**

Creating and maintaining connection with students may be one of the most challenging aspects of online teaching for instructors. This qualitative research explored student perceptions of connections with their online instructors and the factors that students felt contributed to connection. The most common perceptions expressed around factors contributing to connection were: consistent and personalized communication, availability of the instructor, and thorough feedback on assignments and discussion board posts. Students in this study expressed a desire to form connection with their instructor and indicated that a stronger connection with their online instructor led to perceived greater care from their instructor.

As online teaching and learning continue to progress, as technology develops to better facilitate online courses, and as faculty develop and improve their online teaching practice, we will continue to grow in our understanding of how best to facilitate online learning for students. Future research will also give us more information to work with as we shape our understanding of online teaching and learning best practices.

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## Appendix A—Journey Map Instructions

Thank you for agreeing to be part of my dissertation research study. I appreciate you working with me on this so I can work to bring new insight into online teaching and learning.

### What is the purpose of this project?

With your help, I will be focused on looking at ways students and instructors connect in the online world during the facilitation of an online course. I want to specifically look at connections that worked well as well as areas that are more troublesome and the causes of those experiences. The intent is to reflect on the information I get from you to find ways to make the learning process more effective for students through understanding factors that help grow relationships by creating connection between instructors and students.

### What is journey mapping?

Journey maps have been used by researchers in the past as a creative and insightful way to look at experiences and perceptions of participants throughout a journey. For example, in 2014 a study was conducted using journey maps to aid in understanding why undergraduates leave engineering degree programs (M. Meyer & Marx, 2014). Represented here are two of the journey maps gathered during that study.

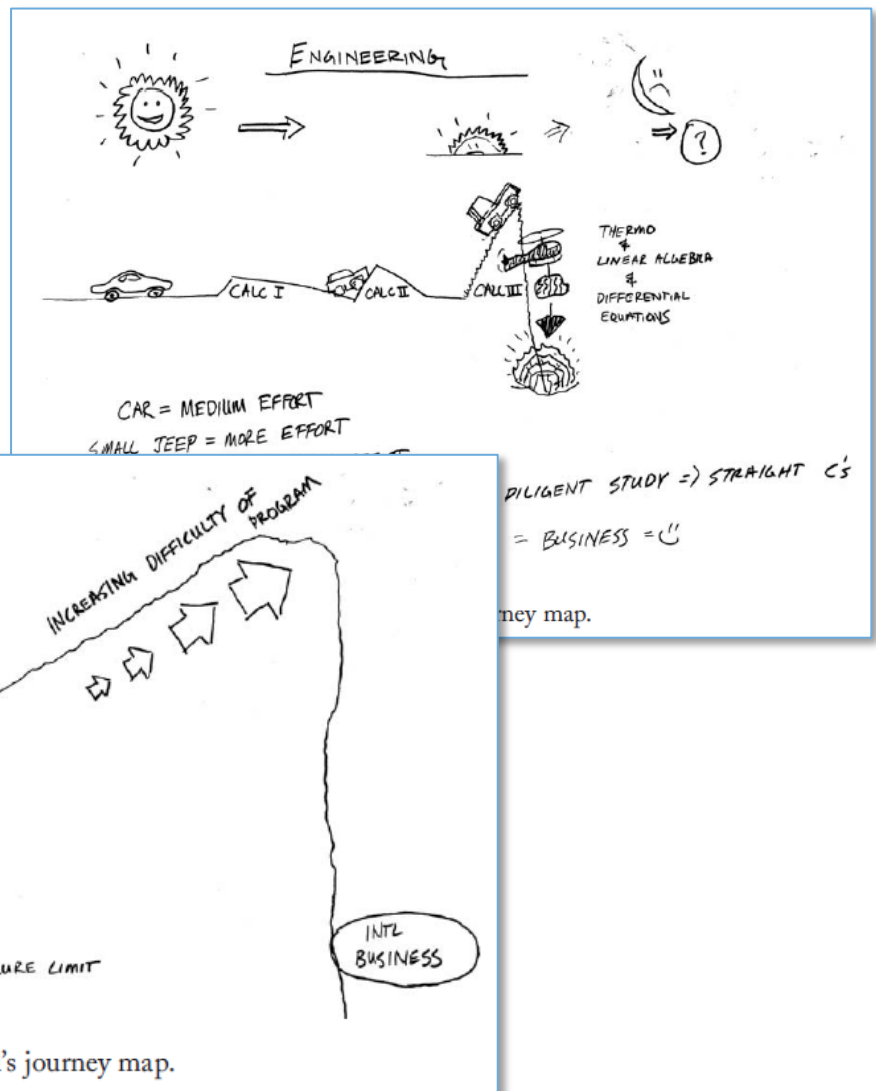


Figure 4 Karl's journey map.



**Instructions:**

1. Please draw a map of your experiences and perceptions of your connections with your instructor during your time in BA201 this term. Connections could be times when you talked with your instructor by phone, times when you received particularly meaningful feedback from your instructor on an assignment or in a discussion board, and/or times when you felt special care from your instructor. It doesn't have to be limited to these things and can include anything you feel that is relevant to your connection with your instructor in either a positive or negative way.
  - a. Draw this in a timeline like a journey from the start to the finish of the course.
  - b. You can draw this by hand as in the examples given or you can use software to create your image. How you do this is completely up to you.
  - c. Using images to tell your story, please identify parts in this journey where you experienced any of the following. Some of these areas may overlap.
    - i. Any type of interaction with your instructor where you felt connected in some way, large or small
    - ii. Instructor care for you personally
    - iii. Delight or satisfaction in instructor feedback
    - iv. Any and all communication experiences good or bad
    - v. Frustration with lack of communication
    - vi. Frustration with lack of instructor care
  - d. Please be as honest and direct as possible. Your instructor will not see your specific feedback and disclosure in this process will not negatively affect your final grade in this course in any way.
2. Send your map to me via email. If you used a hand-drawn method, please take a picture and send it to me in any format.
3. After I receive your map, I will reach out to schedule a short phone call with you.

Your participation in this project will be completely anonymous. All responses will be coded and student names removed for inclusion in the final work.

**Reference:** Meyer, M., & Marx, S. (2014). Engineering dropouts: A qualitative examination of why undergraduates leave engineering. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 103(4), 525–548.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jee.20054>

### **Appendix B—Interview Questions**

The following questions were used to draw out interpretations of the completed journey maps from students during the phone interviews.

1. Please walk me through your journey map.
2. What do you feel are the most positive and negative experiences in your journey as drawn out here?
3. What does connection mean to you?
4. Where and when did you feel most connected to your instructor? Why?
5. Where and when did you feel most disconnected to your instructor? Why?
6. What could your instructor have done to improve the connection between the two of you?
7. What could you have done to improve the connection between the two of you?
8. On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied were you with the connection you had with your instructor in this course? What are the reasons for your score?
9. Do you feel your instructor cared about your success in this course? Why or why not?
10. On a scale of 1-10, what level of connectedness did you feel with your instructor (1=low, 10=high)?

**Appendix C—Demographic Questions**

1. What year of school are you in (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, etc.)
2. What is your age?
3. What is your race?
4. What is your gender?
5. How many online classes have you taken?
6. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
7. Do you work in addition to going to school? If so, how many hours per week?