THE GRADUATE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN

ONLINE, HYBRID, AND ONSITE COURSES

A thesis presented

by

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Abstract
The growth in online student enrollments in higher education in the United States is transforming post-secondary education by making academic courses and degree programs accessible to more students. Those taking courses online are becoming a larger segment of the overall student population. Many faculty, however, do not accept the value and legitimacy of online education, and view it as inferior to traditional on-campus instruction. A divide exits between the negative perceptions of faculty and the students who continue to enroll in online courses in record numbers. This qualitative interpretive phenomenological study explored the experiences of four doctoral students who took online, hybrid, and onsite courses in a specific program. Participants were interviewed face-to-face and then by telephone about their communication, content mastery, and course workload in each of the delivery methods, and their overall sense of the program. The theoretical frameworks used in this study were constructivism and connectivism. Participants found that the online and hybrid environments provided more occasions for group learning and collaboration and felt that these methods were more effective than the faculty-led, traditional onsite courses. The online and hybrid formats were found to be better even by those who preferred face-to-face instruction. The most effective role the faculty member could play in the success of each course was that of facilitator of learning rather than teacher. Course satisfaction was more dependent on the faculty member and how they designed or lead the course, rather than the way in which it was delivered.

Keywords: online education, online courses, hybrid courses, onsite courses, connectivism, constructivism, interpretative phenomenological analysis, student centeredness, online faculty
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Franciszek and Anna Kryczka. As refugees from World War II Poland, they spent four years in a displaced person’s camp before coming to America in 1949 with no education or English language skills. They built a life for themselves and their three children. Their bravery and hard work have inspired me my whole life. I owe everything to them and the good Lord who watched over us as a family.
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A great deal of appreciation goes to the participants in my study who gladly gave of their time and spoke to me at length about their learning experiences. Without them there would be no study. Their individual insights will contribute to what we know about the student experience in online, hybrid, and onsite programs in the future. It was my privilege to have interviewed these practitioners and to be able to share their experiences with a wider audience.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In 2002, 1.6 million students enrolled in higher education in the United States took at least one online course. By 2012, that number had grown to over 7.1 million students (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Enrollments in online courses during the fall 2012 represented an increase of 6.1% over the number reported in 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Data show that the compound annual growth rate of online students reached 16.1% between 2002 and 2012, while the compound annual growth of the overall higher education student population for that same period was just 2.5% (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The number of students in 2002 taking at least one online course was 1,602,970; by 2012 that number had grown to 7,126,549. In comparison, the overall student population in 2002 was 16,611,710; in 2011 it was 21,253,086 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Online higher education is expected to continue to be one of the fastest growing markets in American higher education for the foreseeable future (Hoffman, 2012).

In 2012, despite the growth in online enrollments, less than one-third of chief academic officers believed that their faculty accepted the value and legitimacy of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In 2013, chief academic officers reported that 26% of faculty consider online learning outcomes to be inferior or somewhat inferior compared to onsite course outcomes (Allen & Seaman, 2014). An Inside Higher Ed survey conducted with 2,250 faculty at public, private, and for-profit higher education institutions in the United States reported that most faculty members (85%) say “the quality of online courses is lower than that of in-person courses with respect to the interaction with students” (Jascik & Lederman, 2013, p. 6). Faculty members are skeptical for a number of reasons. They perceive online learning as inferior and unable to replicate the rich discussion that takes place in a face-to-face classroom (Graham & Jones, 2011; Ulmer, Watson, & Derby, 2007); online technology is difficult to learn and technical support is
inadequate (Graham & Jones, 2011); teaching online requires more work which is often not adequately compensated (Graham & Jones, 2011; Shea, 2007); and online teaching may not be recognized in promotion and tenure decisions (Graham & Jones, 2011; Shea, 2007). Chief academic officers view faculty concerns about the quality of online courses as a barrier to their acceptance of their academic legitimacy and believe that faculty support is critical to adopting or expanding online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

At the same time, the growth in online student enrollments is transforming post-secondary education by making instructional resources increasingly accessible to more non-traditional students such as adults seeking part-time, continuing/professional education who are becoming a larger segment of the overall student population (Beaudoin, 2002; Moller, Foshay, & Huett, 2008). Students now have the ability to communicate and access information and knowledge from laptop computers and mobile devices at any time and from any place with an Internet connection, and are becoming more comfortable with accessing coursework via technology (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Wattwood, Nugent, & Deihl, 2009). Students increasingly can choose -- based on their time, professional and personal commitments, and their own preferences -- how, when, and where to take their coursework (Bejerano, 2008; Changchit & Klaus, 2009). This is particularly true of graduate students who are typically adults seeking part-time programs that relate to their personal and professional growth and aspirations (Cercone, 2008; Mann & Henneberry, 2012). Advances in technology (Hanna, 1998); institutional desire to reach new audiences and increase revenues (Graham & Jones, 2011; Hanna, 1998; Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003); and student demand for the accessibility and convenience offered by online programs (Hanna, 1998; Hoffman, 2012) have contributed to the rapid growth in the number of students taking courses online. The continuing negative faculty
assessment of online courseware suggests a divide between the perceptions of faculty and those of students who continue to enroll in online courses in record numbers. This suggests barriers that may diminish the effectiveness of online teaching (Osborne, Kriese, Tobey, & Johnson, 2009). Faculty and students may have differing opinions about the level and quality of communication possible in an online environment versus onsite courses, the technical expertise necessary to be successful, and the amount of work required in online courses (Osborne et al., 2009).

Research Problem

The shift from traditional, face-to-face courses to hybrid or totally online courses has produced mixed reactions, opinions, and views in the higher education community (Maguire, 2005). While many faculty remain unconvinced of the educational value of online courses and are concerned about the importance of their own role in the online instructional process (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Braun, 2008; Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002), many students find different course delivery systems to be a better fit with their personal and professional lives in which they seek to pursue their educational goals without being bound by place and time constraints (Cercone, 2008; Mann & Henneberry, 2012). The split between faculty concerns over quality and growing student enrollments in online courses requires more exploration of student experiences taking online, hybrid and onsite courses, and how these affect the total student academic experience. This study examined the graduate student experience in taking online, hybrid and onsite courses in a specific graduate degree program.

Justification for the Research Problem

Skepticism about online education has existed since its inception. Much research has been designed to examine the quality of technology delivered courses. Early studies
concentrated on comparing student outcomes with traditional, face-to-face classroom instruction and courses delivered through other methods. Russell (2001) assembled what is considered the seminal annotated bibliography in the field that examined over 300 studies which compared the learning outcomes of students studying face-to-face with those learning through technology. Comparisons included grades, test scores, and other performance measures as well as student attitudes toward course delivery and content. Russell (2001) found that no matter how a course was produced and delivered, students learned equally as well through technology as their on-campus counterparts. Additional research on outcomes has shown the same results that indicate no substantial differences between online and onsite student outcomes (Frederickson, Reed, & Clifford, 2005; Pribesh, Dickinson, & Bucher, 2006). As a result, researchers have begun to look at other aspects of online learning beyond achievement outcomes.

Rovai (2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b) has spent the last decade researching different aspects of online learning such as the concept and impact of communication and classroom community in virtual environments (Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Rovai & Whiting, 2005). Rovai’s work has increased the understanding of how course design can successfully create an online community of learners who are physically separated from each other, how to move collectively toward cognitive learning, and how to measure communication or “connectedness” online and its effect on persistence rates.

In addition to understanding the classroom community of online learners, it is important to understand the experience of students in online settings as individuals (Arbaugh et al., 2009; Deggs, Grover, & Kacirek, 2010). Research on student learning in online environments has explored students’ experiences (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Braun, 2008; Deggs et al., 2010), satisfaction levels (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Frederickson, Reed, &
Clifford, 2005; Holmberg-Wright & Wright, 2012; Kim, Lee, & Skellenger, 2012), and student expectations (Mortagy & Boghikian-Whitby, 2010). Overall, students reported a general satisfaction level with their online courses or program, found their courses to be demanding, and expected to be engaged with the online material and classmates. The online delivery method did not appear to be a significant factor in determining the satisfaction level of students with a course or program.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Little research (Boling et al., 2012; Castle & McGuire, 2010; Holmberg-Wright & Wright, 2012) has looked at how students perceive their overall academic experience if they are taking a mix of online, hybrid, and onsite courses in a given degree program. Further research is needed to better understand student perceptions about their learning in an online and onsite environment, and to address faculty concerns about quality, communication, interaction, and mastery of technology (Graham & Jones, 2011; Hiltz, Shea, & Euhee, 2010; Shea, 2007).

The graduate student experience and their perceptions of online courses in their specific degree program also need additional study. Few studies (Castle & McGuire, 2010; Rovai & Jordan, 2004) explore the extent of the student experience within a specific graduate degree program in which coursework is delivered in a variety of methods. For example, Naylor and Wilson (2009) conducted a quantitative study of graduate students in a specific master’s degree program who took both online and onsite courses in the program. The study found that there was no significant difference between student perceptions of faculty and peer contact in online and onsite courses. The study was limited to students who responded to a survey, and did not include any face-to-face interviews, follow-up discussions, or exploration of student perceptions of their total academic experience.
Relating the Discussion to Audiences

This study was intended for faculty members and administrators in higher education. With the high percentage of faculty still questioning the validity of online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2013), exploring the experience of graduate students who have taken courses in a specific degree program in various delivery formats can lead to a clearer view of the learning experience within courses, regardless of how they are delivered, and the graduate degree as a whole. An understanding of the graduate student experience in such a degree program will help faculty and administrators understand and assess the effect of course delivery on the student experience.

Significance of Research Problem

Despite the popularity of online education, questions about quality, value, and the legitimacy of online education continue to be a concern for faculty (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Many in the academic community feel the growth of online programs is being driven primarily to increase institutional revenue (Wyatt, 2005). Some equate distance learning with an “industrial production line” that requires a perilous change in pedagogy (Braun, 2008, p. 66). Early in the development of online courseware, Smith, Ferguson, and Caris (2002) reported that some instructors who teach online often felt their teaching skills were no longer relevant since their presence and oral skills could not be utilized. Ten years later, this observation appeared unchanged as a faculty member at the University of Virginia stated in a 2012 opinion piece in the New York Times:

Online education is a one-size-fits-all endeavor. It tends to be a monologue and not a real dialogue. The Internet teacher, even one who responds to students via e-mail, can never
have the immediacy of contact that the teacher on the scene can, with his sensitivity to unspoken moods and enthusiasms. (Edmundson, 2012, para. 12)

This expressed a concern from faculty members about the quality of student experiences in an online setting. Such apprehension from faculty members has not been addressed during recent years when the number of students enrolled in online courses has grown, particularly at the graduate level.

An estimated 551,000 graduate students enrolled nationwide in online courses in the fall of 2007 (Allen & Seaman, 2008). This number increased almost 17% the following year to 644,000 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education show that in the fall of 2012, 876,552 graduate students were taking some or all of their courses online. This represents 29% of the total 2,956,158 students enrolled in graduate education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The increasing number of students enrolled in online courses suggests that students will choose -- based on their time, professional and personal commitments and their own preferences -- how, when, and where to take their coursework (Moller, Foshay, & Huett, 2008). This is particularly true of graduate students who are adults seeking programs that relate to their personal and professional growth and aspirations (Cercone, 2008). Exploring the graduate student experience and perceptions of those learning in a mixed delivery degree program can provide insights for program development and evaluation.

The graduate student experience in online degree programs warrants particular analysis since it offers an opportunity to explore the experiences of students enrolled in an advanced academic area who take fewer courses over a shorter period of time than those at the undergraduate level. Since graduate students typically pursue a degree for career or professional advancement, the perceived value and immediate application of what is learned is of major
importance (Broome, Halstead, Pesut, Rawl, & Boland, 2011; Holtslander, Racine, Furniss, Burles, & Turner, 2012; Pittenger & Doering, 2010). Graduate students’ perceptions of their learning experience, therefore, may have implications beyond their academic studies as they advance in their career paths (Fuhrmann, Halme, O’Sullivan, & Lindstaedt, 2011).

**Positionality Statement**

My own professional experience with distance education is extensive, over 30 years. My first personal experience goes back even longer when I occasionally watched college courses as a youngster, broadcast into our home in Chicago in the late 1950’s, from what was then the Chicago City Junior College system. Aptly named “TV College,” courses in the humanities, biology, and social sciences were broadcast via a local station, which was then the Chicago Educational Television Association, and later a Public Broadcasting Service affiliate (Erickson & Chausow, 1960). What I didn’t know was that in 1976, my first job in higher education, fresh out of graduate school, would be with the same junior college system with the updated name City Colleges of Chicago, where I administered a program which offered credit courses via television (through the same TV College) and as well as videotaped courses for adults who desired to continue their education. From 1980 until today, I have held administrative positions at five colleges and universities where I managed the delivery of programs via distance learning technology. Since 1998, the primary delivery of courses that I have overseen has been through Internet technology.

I come to this study as an administrator of distance education programs, an adjunct faculty member who has developed and taught online courses as well as onsite courses, and as an online graduate student who has also taken online, hybrid, and onsite courses. Having had the full distance learning experience as an administrator, faculty member and student, I have my own
personal experiences with traditional and nontraditional learning. I believe, however, that every student’s online educational experience is unique because each student brings his or her own expectations and learning style into a community of at-a-distance learners (Shea & Bidjerano, 2012). This has been proven to me repeatedly as I talk with online students and distance education administrators whose opinions about these courses often differ greatly from my own. Examining the learning experiences of students in different delivery modes is a professional as well as personal inquiry for me. With this study, I hoped to satisfy some of my own questions about the overall graduate student experience of taking courses via multiple delivery methods.

Along with my experience comes the possible bias of having already formed many ideas about what works best for students based on my own experience. I believe an online environment can be as effective as a traditional classroom experience for students and faculty, although learning and teaching online may not always be the best choice for everyone. Not every student learns in the same way or needs the same support. Some students’ learning styles require a traditional classroom environment. Hybrid courses, if designed well, can offer the convenience of online as well as a face-to-face component for those who prefer some in-class instruction. I believe that, increasingly, the issue is becoming less about course delivery and more about how well any course is designed to maximize faculty and student learning, communication, and community building, whether online, hybrid, or onsite.

In my personal experience and in the literature, I have found that despite faculty skepticism, enrollments have grown online, as students increasingly choose how and where they take their courses (Aslanian & Clinefleter, 2012). Further exploration into the experiences of students taking courses online, hybrid, and onsite courses is timely. As a teacher and student in an online setting, I embarked on this study with a desire to understand the disjuncture between
negative perceptions of online learning and the beneficial educational experiences that students have come to rely upon for their higher education.

**Research Central Questions and Sub-questions**

The central research question is: *How do graduate students describe their learning experience in a graduate program that includes online, hybrid, and onsite courses?* Sub-questions include: 1) *What do graduate students describe as their learning and communication experiences with faculty and classmates in online, hybrid, and onsite courses?* 2) *What do graduate students describe as their learning experiences with course material using technology in online, hybrid, and onsite courses?* 3) *What do graduate students describe as their learning experiences and course workload in online, hybrid, and onsite courses?*

**Theoretical Framework**

The study of graduate student learning experiences was explored with both constructivism and connectivism as the theoretical lenses. Constructivism suggests that students create knowledge by taking in information and generating its meaning through testing and evaluating its use until the pieces of that knowledge make sense (Driscoll, 1994). By using the constructivist lens, this study looked at how students taking courses in multiple delivery systems perceive receiving knowledge through the different delivery methods and how the students used and internalized that knowledge. Connectivism was also chosen as a theoretical framework because it recognizes the role of technology in changing how students think and learn (Siemens, 2005). Connectivism builds upon the ideas of constructivist theory, especially social constructivism, which sees the building of knowledge in a learner-centered, social environment, (Singleton, Bowser, Hux, & Neal, 2013).
Constructivism

Constructivist learning theory applies to students as they make meaning of their learning as found in an online synchronous (real time) or asynchronous (any time) environment experience by building a unique internal representation of knowledge gained (Ritzhaupt, 2010). The origins of constructivism can be found in the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, JeBruner, Gardner, and Goodman who have studied the role of representation in learning and the resulting construction of knowledge. Bruner (1985) described the constructivist approach to learning as series of dynamic stages that changes knowledge as it is absorbed. Gardner (2011) pointed to observational learning which can occur outside of the classroom when a student views an action or a chart, a map, or a computer program and brings that information into their knowledge base. Goodman (1968) suggested that pictures act as representations and well as descriptions and can be interpreted and labeled in unique ways by each individual. These depictions of objects, can come to students in many formats—written, spoken, pictures (static or moving), and through sound (Schnotz & Bannert, 2003). This is particularly true in an online environment although it is not limited to that delivery model. All of these avenues for knowledge can be considered when examining the student learning process.

Rovai (2004) argued that constructivism facilitates deeper learning and knowledge created by the individual through their interactions with an online learning environment. He categorizes the unique aspects of an online course as active learning, collaboration, learner-centeredness, group work, and community-building. Non-classroom based learning has moved from print based, independent study to constructivist, collaborative online learning (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2012). Bell (2011) extended the concept of a learning environment to include social constructivism which emphasizes the special shared interactions that aid an individual’s
interpretation of knowledge. This is particularly important when looking at the class environment as a community, whether online or face-to-face.

Constructivism is a theory that describes learning as a process that starts with knowledge accumulating through learner-centered processes while information is gathered from various sources, which in turn enables the student to create a base of understanding (Rovai, 2004). By using a constructivist lens, I explored the student’s overall experience of learning as information is accessed both online and onsite through communication, course materials, interaction and how these processes may have differed by course delivery method. In sum, constructivism addresses how students personally make sense of information learned.

**Connectivism**

Siemens (2005) argues that older theories, such as constructivism, are limited to learning that only takes place internally. These do not address learning by way of technology that is externally delivered to the student via a network and, upon receipt, internalized. Using a connectivist lens provides a natural progression from constructivist theory which supports building knowledge internally through a personal and academic community and extends it to information and knowledge delivered externally through technology.

Connectivism’s key features are autonomy, interactivity/connectedness, diversity, and openness (Tschofen & Mackness, 2012; Downes, 2009). A technology-networked community allows information to be processed in a non-linear fashion. As individuals act autonomously, they generate a diversity of actions and opinions, which the network enables as an open exchange of new ideas (Downes, 2009). Knowledge not only stays with the individual but is distributed through the information network (Boitshwarelo, 2011). While not limited to an
online learning environment, connectivism explains and defines the unique communication process and exchange of ideas that occur online.

Dunaway (2011) posited that connectivism includes networked information technology as a significant part of the learning processes. Tschofen and Mackness (2012) put it succinctly, “Connectivism is a way to explore learning in terms of a network phenomenon, influenced, aided, and enhanced by socialisation, technology, diversity, strength of ties, and context of occurrence” (p.125). In other words, connectivism describes the multi-faceted nature of a collaborative, multi-media learning experience. It is through this additional lens that the learning experience of students taking courses in differing methods can be better examined.

Constructivism and connectivism were a natural fit for this study of the student experience using different course delivery modes because they both emphasize the need for active relationships to promote learning. Phillips (1995) compared constructivist theorists and found many acknowledged the necessity for active participation by the learner and recognized the social nature of learning. Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) viewed social constructivism and learning as a process in which a student constructs new meaning through dynamic involvement. Downes (2009), in describing connectivism’s “connected” knowledge as it emerges from a networked community said, “The knowledge produced by the community is unique, it was possessed by no one person prior to the formation or interaction in the community” (p.1). The online environment -- as well as within the traditional classroom -- is where participation between and among learners and the instructor occurs and also where from that interactivity, new knowledge is formed.

Based on my understanding of the linkages (see Figure 1) between constructivism and connectivism, I used the interconnection of these theories to explore online and onsite classroom
environments. The relationship between constructivism/social constructivism and connectivism can be seen as a mutual focus on knowledge as learner-centered, imparted through internal and external activity, and with interaction and communication critical to learning. Knowledge and learning are not only constructed but new knowledge is distributed. Rovai (2004) saw constructivism as maintaining knowledge, which is the product of “many learner-centered processes, to include the social process of communication and negotiation (i.e., the social construction of reality)” (p.81). This fits with the features of connectivism identified by Boitshwarelo (2011) as knowledge being dispensed within a group and knowledge that is dynamic, complex, and is constantly being re-evaluated by participants.
Figure 1. Constructivism/social constructivism and connectivism are related by a shared focus on knowledge as learner-centered, conveyed through internal and external activity, with interaction and communication as a key element to learning.

Constructivism/social constructivism and connectivism provided a lens to explore the total student experience including the use of technology to communicate, learn, and engage in a learning community made up of online, hybrid and onsite courses.

Definition of Terms

*Online Course* - a course that has more than 80% of its content delivered online and has no required face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

*Hybrid or Blended Course* - a course which has 30-79% of its content delivered online with a reduced number of face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

*Onsite Course* - a course which has 0-29% of the materials delivered online (syllabus/class assignments) but class meetings are all conducted face-to-face (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

*Wimba* – an online web collaboration tool which allows for voice communication (Tognozzi & Truong, 2009).

*Digital Native* - someone who has been using technology from an early age or through extensive usage is knowledgeable and comfortable with using technology extensively at work and in their personal lives (Prensky, 2001).

*Digital Immigrant* - someone who has more recently adopted the usage of technology and may not be as adept at all of its feature and applications. It can also be someone who uses technology in a more limited manner (Prensky, 2001).
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This review will explore the existing literature on the student experience in graduate courses that are offered in various delivery formats. Few studies have examined the graduate student’s experience in a specific degree program that includes online, hybrid, and onsite courses. Much research has been done, however, that looks at the online graduate student experience by individual course or by online degree program. These provided a reliable foundation for this study’s exploration of graduate students who are taking mixed delivery method courses in their degree programs, since this literature offers relevant comparisons to student experiences in hybrid and onsite courses.

Various databases were used to access the relevant literature for this study including ERIC (EBSCO), SAGE Journals Online, Academic Search Premier (EbscoHost), JSTOR, ProQuest dissertations and theses, and others. A search within each database was conducted with the terms online learning, online students, online faculty, online student learning, online student outcomes and other related terms. Through the use of published books as well as peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical articles, this review incorporates, presents, and critiques works that support the research agenda.

The increasing numbers of students enrolled in online courses each year is driving research in this area. With over 89% of public colleges and universities currently offering courses online, nearly half of all students who have graduated in the last ten years have taken at least one online course (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). While the number of online students continues to increase, many faculty and academic administrators remain skeptical about the
value and legitimacy of online education (Allen & Sherman, 2013). This has prompted more research into various aspects of the online student learning experience.

This chapter will review the existing research in light of two questions: (1) how graduate students perform in online, hybrid, and onsite courses as well as how they view their learning experience with varying course delivery methods and; (2) what other factors shape graduate students’ views of their online learning experiences. This examination of the selected literature includes the following sections: “No Significant Difference” and comparison research; graduate students and online courses; graduate students’ perceptions of the course environment and quality; importance of delivery method in overall learning; and the academic value and legitimacy of online courses and programs.

“No Significant Difference” and Comparison Research

In response to the concerns raised by faculty and administrators regarding the quality of technically delivered courses, early studies concentrated almost exclusively on outcome comparisons between students enrolled in online and face-to-face courses. These studies were designed primarily to determine equivalency—i.e., the ability of online courses to produce at least comparable outcomes to traditionally taught courses. The amount of research completed in this area over the past 15 years is extensive and its importance to the research body of knowledge cannot be overstated.

Russell (2001) assembled what is considered the seminal annotated bibliography of outcomes of students taking courses via technology, as compared to the outcomes of those taking courses delivered by traditional face-to-face instruction. After examining over 300 studies that compared the learning outcomes of students in both groups, Russell concluded that no matter how a course is produced and delivered, students learn equally as well through technology as
their on-campus counterparts. This was the first large scale study to conclude that there is no significant difference in student outcomes among delivery systems. The “no significant difference” phenomenon in learning outcomes has continued to be shown in numerous other comparison studies (Hoch & Doughe, 2011; Kummerow, Miller, & Reed, 2012; McLaren, 2004; Neuhauser, 2002; Pribesh et al., 2006; Russell, Carey, Kleiman, & Venable, 2009; Sussman & Dutter, 2010; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006; Tucker, 2001). Variations on this research have continued as skeptics remain among faculty and administrators who still doubt the value of online learning.

Research comparisons to show equivalent outcomes have extended to beyond online and onsite courses. Arbaugh et al. (2009) found no significant difference in outcomes between online and hybrid courses. Other studies (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, & Nygren, 2012; Ho, Lu, & Thurmaier, 2006) found no significant difference in outcomes between students taking hybrid and onsite courses. Larson and Sung (2009) established that there was no significant difference in outcomes of students taking a business course offered in all three delivery modes; online, hybrid, and onsite. Ritter, Polnick, Fink, and Oescher (2010) also found no difference in the perceptions of learning among students taking courses in all three delivery modes. Because multiple studies have found that learning context -- online, onsite, or hybrid -- does not make a difference in student learning outcomes as measured by exams and final grades, there is an increasing realization that continuing to conduct course comparisons of grade outcomes between online and onsite students may add little new insight or information about the actual experience or perceptions of students or faculty involved in different modes of delivery (Arbaugh et al., 2009; Deggs et. al, 2010). More research that explores students’ perceived learning experiences
in mixed delivery programs would add needed information to our understanding of these various learning environments.

Some studies that have expanded beyond just exploring grade outcomes have also consistently pointed to similar results of no significant difference. Arbaugh (2000) measured the level of class discussion and student attitudes towards learning in two Master’s of Business Administration courses -- one online and the other onsite -- and concluded that there was no significant difference in student course interactions. In looking at the effectiveness of online and onsite accounting courses, Schwartz (2012) argued that students learned equally well in either delivery format regardless of their learning style. Topper (2007) established, in examining two years of course evaluations in a master’s program in education, that there was no statistical difference in student perceptions of quality between graduate degree courses offered in online and onsite formats. Naylor and Wilson (2009) posited that graduate students in a Master’s in Public Administration program perceive no significant difference in faculty support or peer contact between their online and onsite courses. Other studies of student perceptions of online instruction show the same results (Bernard et al., 2004; McGorry, 2012; O’Brien, Hartshorne, Beattie, & Jordan, 2011; Ward, Peters, & Shelley, 2010; Wyatt, 2005). No significant difference research remains supported in a number of areas that compared course deliveries.

Some comparison research has, however, found differences. A study of 800 students who assessed their own online course experience compared to their onsite experience found that one-third felt that their online courses were a poor educational choice for them (Bristow, Shepherd, Humphreys, & Zeibell, 2011). Other studies indicate a mixed result in comparing student perceptions of online and onsite courses. Frederickson et al. (2005) described students in a graduate education psychology course as less satisfied with faculty input in their online course
but more satisfied with the level of collaboration with classmates. Kock, Verville, and Garza (2007) contrasted and compared student perceptions and grades in different sections of an information systems course, both online and onsite. Students who studied online perceived difficulty communicating with faculty and peers and received lower grades at mid-semester than those onsite, although by the end of the term, these variations had disappeared and no significant differences were found between the two groups. Mortagy and Boghikian-Whitby (2010) described online students as perceiving faculty to have higher expectations of online students than those onsite. In addition, some studies have found that online graduate students scored higher grades than onsite students (Ferguson & Tryjankowski, 2009; Lapsley, Kulik, Moody, & Arbaugh, 2000; Vogel, 2011) and believed that their online course experience was better than that of onsite students (Robertson, Grant, & Jackson, 2005). This is further supported by an analysis commissioned by the US Department of Education which examined the impact of online and hybrid courses on learning outcomes. The analysis found that both online and hybrid courses have a significant positive impact on learning outcomes, although hybrid courses have a greater impact (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). This study also suggested that online learning might be slightly more effective than face-to-face instruction.

Even when the mixed results of these studies are considered, overall research has shown that the online course experience is perceived to be as good as a traditional campus-based experience. This has done little to move skeptical faculty toward accepting that online courses can provide a level of effective interaction and communication comparable to a traditional classroom environment (Graham & Jones, 2011; Wickersham & McElhany, 2010). As a result, comparison studies continue to be conducted, although new contributions to the already existing literature appear limited.
Graduate Students and Online Courses

Due to their sheer numbers, most studies of students taking courses online have focused on undergraduate students. Of the 6.7 million students enrolled in online courses in 2011, an estimated 80% or 5.3 million were undergraduates (Allen & Sherman, 2013). Research on graduate students taking online courses, however, is increasing as their numbers have also grown, as reported by the Department of Education to be 876,552 in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2014). Some of the research on graduate students has been quantitative in nature and limited to general surveys of student experiences or perceptions. Castle and McGuire (2010) note that graduate students in their study preferred online courses to hybrid courses. Martínez-Caro and Campuzano-Bolarín (2011), in a two-year study, found graduate students to be more satisfied with their hybrid courses than their onsite courses. Other studies posit that graduate students prefer online courses if they have introverted personalities (Harrington & Loffredo, 2010) and rate online courses highly if designed well and foster communication (Boling et al., 2012). Each of these areas require further investigation to see if these results are similar with larger samples and whether course design and the role of faculty contribute to these results.

Studies do show that graduate students choose courses based more on expediency and how they fit into their career goals than how they are delivered. Dutton, Dutton and Perry (2002) found that convenience is the major factor for all students enrolling in an online course, although this is especially true for graduate students who are seeking advanced degrees for job advancement (Holtslander et al., 2012). Students in graduate programs are often working professionals who are balancing careers and families, and who see online classes the best option for continuing their education (Cercone, 2008; Perry, Boman, Care, Edwards, & Park, 2008;
Online courses provide a way to pursue an advanced degree that might not be possible in a traditional setting (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Braun, 2008; O'Brien et al., 2011) and graduate students view online courses as a complementary option to onsite courses that can meet their needs (Holmberg-Wright & Wright, 2012; Young & Norgard, 2006). The research indicates that career aspirations distinguish graduate students from traditional undergraduate students and influence their perceptions, success, and satisfaction in taking courses in varied delivery formats. This important aspect can affect a graduate student’s perception of their overall learning experience and contribute to their decisions about courses and programs.

Graduate Students’ Perceptions of the Course Environment and Quality

Research on students taking online courses reveals useful information about successful online learning communities, student perception of learning, and other factors that define their experiences, especially within the online course environment. This can affect learning and student satisfaction, and predict what student characteristics contribute to online success.

Rovai (2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b) has spent the last decade researching different aspects of online learning, and particularly the concept of classroom community in virtual environments. Rovai’s work suggests that course design can foster an online community among learners who are physically separated from each other, how the online classroom community affects cognitive learning, and how the concept of “connectedness” online affects persistence rates (Rovai, 2000; Rovai, 2001; Rovai, 2002a; Rovai, 2002b; Rovai, & Jordan, 2004; Rovai & Whiting, 2005). This connection between students that an online environment can foster is particularly important since data increasingly suggest that the concept of an interactive “virtual classroom” is an important contributing factor to positive online retention and student learning.
Pike, Kuh, and McCormick (2011) defined the most successful online environments as those that encourage active and collaborative student learning, interaction with faculty, strong student participation with diverse experiences, and higher order thinking. These elements support student engagement and result in a higher perceived student value and interest in the course, and a greater sense of classroom community (Yang, Cho, Matthew, & Worth, 2011). Other studies have corroborated the significance of connectedness and its positive effects on student efficacy, retention, and persistence in online courses (Bain, Fedynich, & Knight, 2009; Boling et al., 2012; Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, & Swan, 2009; Braun, 2008; Carroll, Ng, & Birch, 2009; Deggs, Grover, & Kacirek, 2010; Getzraf, Perry, Toffner, Lamarche, & Edwards, 2009; Exter, Korkmaz, Harlin, & Bichelmeyer, 2009; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011).

While a sense of community is important, it does not entirely define the level of learning among students in a course. Ritter et al., (2010) surveyed 126 graduate students taking online, hybrid, and onsite leadership courses to determine their sense of community within their courses. While a sense of community scored lower with students in online courses than in hybrid or onsite courses, somewhat surprisingly, this did not statistically effect their perception of their learning experience. On the other hand, Boling et al. (2012) found that online courses that were mostly text based with limited opportunities for interaction were less helpful to graduate students. Rated highly was a graduate program that was perceived to be dynamic, interactive, and supportive of a learning community. The relative newness of online learning has encouraged continued research into both perceptions of the online class as a learning community and other factors that contribute to students’ satisfaction.
It is important that these types of studies continue because they inform course design and teaching in online and hybrid courses. As noted, the amount of interaction and communication that a student experiences within an online or hybrid course can vary. Students, not surprisingly, report that interaction with faculty and classmates is more difficult to achieve online than in hybrid or onsite environments (Ferguson & Tryjankowski, 2009; Pugh, 2010). Within graduate programs offering onsite, online, and blended/hybrid courses, technology can still present challenges and there can be a significant difference in the perceived classroom connections among students, although Rovai and Jordan (2004) found that there is a greater sense of community evident within hybrid courses than onsite courses. Being anxious or uncomfortable with the technology, however, can also produce a level of anxiety that effects student perceptions and course satisfaction in taking a course online (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Hager, George, LeCheminant, Bailey, & Vincent, 2012).

Other factors that contribute to the student experience online have been examined. Paechter and Maier (2010) and Pugh (2010) reported little difference in graduate students’ general perceptions between those enrolled in online education courses and those enrolled onsite, although some online students expressed a need for more interaction with instructors, closer interpersonal relationships, and more general interaction among students. Other research has uncovered unexpected results when the length of a course is varied. Two studies found that an online course offered in a shorter, intensive format of a few weeks received higher marks for communication with fellow students but lower for faculty-student communication than a standard length online course (Ferguson & DeFelice, 2010; Ferguson & Tryjankowski, 2009). This was attributed to less time available for instructor feedback, and the unintended but positive result of facilitating even more communication among students. What is clear is that variables
within the learning environment need to be examined more closely to determine the effect and resulting experience.

Despite the number of studies comparing course deliveries and student perceptions, still lacking are more qualitative investigations of how students view their own learning outcomes and their level of satisfaction in mixing and matching online, hybrid, and onsite offerings within specific degree programs. Students who are taking different types of courses within a single degree program can encounter wide variations in how they engage in each course and, as a result, in the program as a whole. Braun (2008) studied graduate students taking online and hybrid courses in the same degree program and found that 73% said online courses were more demanding; 44% of the students taking only online courses said they experienced more interaction with their instructors, and 55% of the online students would have preferred a hybrid course to an online one.

Frederickson et al. (2005) found that online students gain knowledge and reduced anxiety in taking courses online and onsite, but they indicated less satisfaction with faculty interaction online and more satisfaction with the peer collaboration. Other differences that have been noted include a student’s changing sense of being part of a learning community (Phelan, 2012); the effect of learning styles (Lightner, Doggett, & Whisler, 2010); levels of engagement with course materials, instructor, and classmates, (Fasse, Humbert, & Rappold, 2009); quality of the discussion and communication (Pittenger & Doering, 2010); differences in the effort required in taking a course in either delivery mode (Ellis, Ginns, & Piggott, 2009); social interactions (Harris, Larrier, & Castano-Bishop, 2011); and the degree of peer support needed and received (Yang, Cho, Matthew, & Worth, 2011). Other research shows that students find aspects of each delivery method (online, hybrid or onsite) satisfactory to their learning experience (Ritter et al.,
However, little is known about the total academic experience in a single graduate degree program when all varied delivery courses are taken into account.

The perception of the quality of the student experience online has also been examined. Robertson et al. (2005) reported that education graduate students at a southern university rated their online courses as high and perceived the quality of their online experience to be as good as or possibly superior to their onsite courses. Students particularly appreciated the efficiency of online course materials, the consistent structure of online content, and the ability to focus on their own self-directed learning. Topper (2007) compared graduate student evaluations between onsite and online courses and saw no difference in instructional quality. This suggests that students may not perceive delivery format as a major contributing factor in the quality of programs.

Other studies link quality in online programs to a number of factors: a high level of interaction between students and faculty and among classmates (Rydzewski et al., 2012; Young & Norgard, 2006); consistent course design and structure across the curriculum (Arbaugh, 2000; Jones, Kupczynski, & Marshall, 2011; Young & Norgard, 2006); a sense of belonging to a learning community (Jones et al., 2011; Phelan, 2012); length of the course and cost; size of the program (Jones et al., 2011); and a realization of how much was learned in the course and program (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Robertson et al., 2005). These measures taken together can provide a blueprint for developing high quality, student-centered graduate programs regardless of delivery method which can positively affect student perceptions of their academic experience.

**Importance of Delivery Method on Overall Learning**

Topper (2007) found that course delivery method may have a very limited effect on the learning outcomes of a course and may not be a differentiator when it comes to course quality.
Dzubian and Moskal (2011) contend that in a random sampling of over 1.1 million course evaluations of students onsite, online and in hybrid/blended learning environments “students pay much more attention to the overall educational experience and less attention to the individual aspects of a course” (p. 239). Dae Shik, Lee, and Skellenger (2012) posited that 101 graduate students enrolled online and onsite found that delivery method was not a predictor of overall satisfaction in a course. It appears that students feel they can be equally successful in online, hybrid and onsite courses, regardless of their learning styles, as long as the course is developed around sound learning theory, proven instructional design principles, and an understanding of what to expect in the online environment (Kock, Verville, & Garza, 2007; Naylor & Wilson, 2009; Schwartz, 2012; Topper, 2007). There is also some discussion in faculty circles that course delivery may no longer be a major distinguishing factor in the learning experience of students. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a faculty member with extensive experience in teaching in multiple delivery methods suggested that faculty should stop thinking in terms of a dichotomous view of teaching as online or face-to-face, and move toward the idea that all courses can include both methods (Benton, 2009). The student perception that delivery method neither significantly affects their learning outcomes and experience nor the quality of their courses or degree programs casts doubt on the thinking of many faculty and administrators who feel that online learning creates barriers to optimal learning.

**Academic Value and Legitimacy of Online Courses and Programs**

A growing body of research, especially in the last ten years, has examined specific facets of the graduate, online course delivery experience and how it compares to onsite traditional courses and programs. Still unresolved is how to establish academic value and legitimacy among skeptical faculty and administrators. Research exists which suggests ways that online
courses might be better integrated into existing curriculum that could persuade skeptics to reconsider. For some students, the online course environment may be a preferred venue. Students who are self-disciplined and highly motivated (as are many graduate students), thrive on in-depth discussions, and prefer to apply their ideas and theories and reflect on their observations are good candidates to succeed online (Ferguson & Tryjankowski, 2009; Meyer, 2003; Terrell, 2002). Faculty and course designers may also be able to construct online courses that allow students with many different learning styles to succeed, focus on their own self-directed approach, and establish relationships and interaction with classmates and faculty (Paechter & Maier, 2010; Pugh, 2010; Simpson & Du, 2004). Research focused on learning styles such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory (Harrington & Loffredo, 2010; Terrell, 2002) could be particularly useful. Terrell (2002) found that online courses can be developed to provide a high level of abstract conceptualization and to encourage the direct application of ideas and theories that may be attractive to some students.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a way to insure that courses, no matter the delivery method, meet the needs of the greatest number of students (North Carolina State, 2008). Courses developed with UDL maximize usability and effectiveness regardless of students’ ages, abilities, or situations. Based on three elements, UDL recommends the creation of courses that offer a) multiple ways for students to acquire information; b) multiple ways for students to show what they have learned; and c) multiple ways for students to engage, stay motivated, and remain challenged (Schelly, Davies, & Spooner, 2011). This is particularly helpful to those with learning disabilities who may find an online environment desirable (Burgstalher, Corrigan, & McCarter, 2004; Grabinger, 2010; Sapp, 2009; Simoncelli & Hinson, 2008). The UDL
establishes a course standard for faculty and administrators to embrace regardless of delivery method.

For those faculty and administrators who remain unconvinced of the value of online instruction, data that show flexible course design which appeals to large numbers of students’ learning styles could help some rethink the legitimacy of online learning. Institutions, in determining the quality of online instruction, should continue to consider the perceptions of students themselves. Studies show that the quality and effectiveness of online learning increase as students enroll in subsequent online courses and become more comfortable with the technology (Arbaugh, 2004). Further, there is little difference in perceptions of learning and levels of satisfaction by students taking courses in online, hybrid, and onsite delivery modes (Bowen et al., 2012; Castle & McGuire, 2010; Dziuban & Moskal, 2011; Kim, Lee, & Skellenger, 2012; Ritter et al., 2010; Robertson et al., 2005). Similar outcomes, despite differences in delivery model, help establish the value of online courses within graduate degrees for faculty, administrators and students.

Conclusion

Extensive research conducted on outcomes between online and onsite courses has shown overwhelmingly that there is no significant difference between technology-delivered courses and traditional on campus courses (Bernard et al., 2004; Russell, 2001) despite some evidence of student dissatisfaction with online courses (Bristow et al., 2011). Perception of the online learning experience can be influenced by many factors including course design (Arbaugh, 2000; Jones et al., 2011; Young & Norgard, 2006); the quality of the communication, interaction, and “connectedness” within the course environment (Rovai, 2000; Rovai, 2001; Rovai, 2002a; Rovai, 2002b; Rovai, & Jordan, 2004; Rovai & Whiting, 2005); students’ learning styles
(Ferguson & Tryjankowski, 2009; Harrington & Loffredo, 2010; Terrell, 2002) and student comfort with technology (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Hager et al., 2012). Also vital to the perception of learning is how a graduate course or program helps a student achieve personal and professional goals, especially in providing knowledge and skills necessary to do their jobs better or advance their careers (Arbaugh, 2004; Broome et al., 2011; Holtslander et al., 2012; Pittenger, & Doering, 2010; Roehrs, 2011).

There remains a scarcity of research that specifically evaluates the perceptions of the learning experience of graduate students who are enrolled in mixed degree programs. Research that does exist with graduate students in the online environment shows that perceptions of their learning experiences may be influenced less by delivery methods than by elements of the course or program itself (Bowen et al., 2012; Castle & McGuire, 2010; Dziuban & Moskal, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Ritter et al., 2010; Robertson et al., 2005; Topper, 2007). Additional research that supports the inherent importance of course design and its effect on learning may influence more positive opinions of quality among skeptics.

The major factors related to students’ perceptions of their learning experiences discussed in this literature -- including whether delivery method substantially affects student learning -- were addressed in this study. The study provided in-depth qualitative data through individual graduate student interviews of the overall perception of their experience in a mixed delivery program. This is useful to administrators and faculty who want to know the extent to which a consistent educational experience is being provided and general program goals are being met. Ideally, the assurance implied by offering and granting a degree places the focus on the learning outcomes of the entire program as well as each course, whether online, hybrid, or onsite (Bristow et al., 2011). Much of the research remains focused on the delivery system, and not necessarily
program outcomes, when it should be the other way around. In response to these gaps in the literature, this study explored the experience of students who are taking online, hybrid, and onsite courses. These students were in a position to evaluate their learning experience and to provide perceptions on whether the courses that use different delivery methods resulted in equivalent learning outcomes.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore *how graduate students describe their learning experience in a graduate program that includes online, hybrid, and onsite courses*. The study also had three related sub-questions: 1) *What do graduate students describe as their learning and communication experiences with faculty and classmates in online, hybrid, and onsite courses?* 2) *What do graduate students describe as their learning experiences with course material using technology in online, hybrid, and onsite courses and?* 3) *What do graduate students describe as their learning experiences and course workload in online, hybrid, and onsite courses?* An interpretive paradigm was employed with the focus on the participants. Burrell and Morgan (1979) explained an interpretive paradigm as one that attempts to understand the world as it is and to comprehend it from “within the frame of reference of the participant, not as an observer of the action,” (p. 28). This study sought to understand how students view their experience in graduate courses delivered by different methods and how they perceive their degree program experience as a whole.

Research Design

The research design used for this study employed a qualitative approach. Creswell (2012) described qualitative studies as those in which the researcher does not yet know the variables of the research problem. While the literature may provide some information about the phenomena under study, more needs to be learned from the participants themselves.

The most common research methodologies and traditions used in examining the student experience in online versus onsite courses to date have been quantitative in nature. Creswell (2012) stated that quantitative research identifies multiple variables and seeks to measure these, along with the extent of those differences among groups. As demonstrated by the literature
review, research that has focused on aspects of different course delivery models has primarily been conducted with a quantitative approach in order to compare and evaluate student course outcomes (Russell, 2001), student views of the delivery method (Dziuban & Moskal, 2011), and satisfaction levels of students in these courses (Holmberg-Wright & Wright, 2012; Kim et al., 2012). While useful in producing a body of knowledge about grade and delivery comparisons between online and onsite courses, these studies have not delved deeply into how students themselves describe their academic degree experience in a multi-delivery graduate degree program.

Fewer, but growing numbers of studies have approached research from a qualitative perspective. These have concentrated on the online experience itself in terms of course satisfaction (Boling et al., 2012); course expectations (Deggs et al., 2010); assumptions about the online experience (Osborne et al., 2009); effective student feedback (Getzlaf, et al., 2009); and student critical thinking skills (Phelan, 2012). The qualitative studies have opened up new ways of viewing the student/faculty/classmate experience, not by comparisons but by looking closely at understanding student views within the online environment. It can be expected that much of the future research done on online, hybrid and onsite coursework will be qualitative as studies continue to move away from comparisons to face-to-face courses. There is a need to understand the online student experience better as well as a growing recognition that online courses should be evaluated on their own and not necessarily as they compare to traditional course delivery. This research study, therefore, utilized a qualitative approach.
Research Tradition

The phenomenological research method that best matches the research question and sub-questions for this study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), IPA consists of three areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to studying an individual’s experience (Smith et al., 2009) introduced by the German philosopher Husserl in the early 20th century. Husserl viewed inquiry as concentrating on descriptions of experience (Valle & Halling, 1989). Husserl did not create phenomenology as it is described today, but laid the foundation by suggesting the study of the consciousness of a person as it is realized (Gorner, 2001). Creswell (2013) detailed the characteristics of a phenomenological study as those that focus on understanding the essence of the meaning of an experience. Moustakas (1994) described a phenomenological approach as one which aims to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and can provide a detailed description of it.

Hermeneutics, the second major influence in IPA according to Smith et al. (2009), is the theory of interpretation. While studying the phenomenon, the researcher is also involved in exploring an insider’s perspective of the subject while the subject is giving their own perspective. This results in a two-stage interpretative process or a “double hermeneutic” (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This means that while participants in a study are trying to make sense of their world, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. Thus, this becomes a double interpretative process.

Idiography, the final concept in IPA, concentrates on the particular and the importance of examining something in detail (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, a detailed focus is conducted of a particular instance. According to Shinebourne (2011) this can be of a particular case or of a few
individuals compared to each other. What results can be a recognition of shared commonality or differences which can contribute to the research. Taken together, the three parts of IPA—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography—guided the exploration of this study of graduate students taking courses in their degree program through different delivery systems and how they perceived their individual learning experiences.

The application of an IPA research method in this study consisted of using the research questions as the basis of the interview in order to explore each participant’s experience. Each of the three influences in IPA came into play. The interview questions were structured to elicit a description of the experience and allowed for follow-up questions which asked the participant to further describe their perception of the experience and to make sense of it. While a phenomenological approach looks for an accurate, clear description of a phenomenon, phenomenology within an IPA methodology seeks to capture and explore the perceptions and views of the participant and what they mean to the participant (Smith et al., 2009). This was achieved through follow-up questions during the interview process that asked the participant to more closely expand on the experience just described. As an example, when a participant was asked to described their learning experience with faculty and classmates in their online courses, the participant was asked to further explain any differences in communication that they perceived, and why and how they viewed those apparent differences. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that the interview questions when using an IPA method may sometimes appear self-evident, but the researcher can explain that it is important to understand how the participant understands the experience. I used this in explaining my own further questioning with some participants.
The hermeneutic aspect of the interviews corresponded with the goal of eliciting further meaning by the participants of their experience. I began the process of interpreting how the participant was making sense of the phenomenon while listening to their interpretations. This double hermeneutic aspect of the research provided a richer description and additional data to analyze. Within this research project, the double hermeneutic presented the participants’ interpretation plus my own interpretation of the participants sense-making interpretation. Smith et al. (2009) state that this produces research that analyses how the researcher interprets the participants’ interpretation. In IPA, this generates description and a process that helps to interpret emergent themes. Idiography focuses on the details of the participants’ responses to the questions and follow-up. In this study, it provided an additional way to uncover how participants make sense of their coursework as it is delivered in a face-to-face and technology driven environment.

**Participants**

The unit of analysis within a phenomenological study is several individuals who have shared the experience (Creswell, 2013). As such, the study’s unit of analysis was students (individuals within a group) enrolled in a specific doctoral degree program who were completing coursework toward their degrees or who have recently completed their degree in this program. Their program consisted of courses taken in some combination of online, hybrid, and onsite delivery. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants, since this enabled the selection of those who are or have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

Participants were recruited from Southwest New England University in the northeast United States. A general recruitment e-mail (Appendix A) was sent to students who had completed coursework within a doctoral degree program in education with online, hybrid, and onsite courses. The specifics of the research study were outlined in the e-mail along with an
attached unsigned consent form (Appendix B). Students interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher for additional information. Five individuals responded that they were interested in the participating in the study. All five were directed to a brief qualifying questionnaire (Appendix C) which they all completed. The participants varied in age from 35-54 to account for those who might considered themselves *digital natives* or *digital immigrants* which might affect their comfort level with technology (Prensky, 2001).

The questionnaire asked about the student’s current and past course enrollments to determine their eligibility for the study based on the number of online, hybrid and onsite courses they have taken, how many courses they have completed in the program, and their willingness to participate in a face-to-face interview that explored their experience in a mixed delivery graduate program. The results of this questionnaire were not used as part of the study design. Of the five who completed the qualifying questionnaires, four agreed to become participants and complete the study interviews.

The central phenomenon in this study is the student experience of learning by different delivery methods. Typical sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, was used to represent a typical online graduate student (Creswell, 2012). The participants fit a representative profile of students who are most likely to be enrolled in a graduate degree program offered in varying delivery modes—working professionals who are balancing family life and would not otherwise be able to continue their education (Bejerano, 2008; Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Braun, 2008; Cercone, 2008; Changchit & Klaus, 2009; O’Brien et al., 2011). Participants who completed the initial qualifying questionnaire had taken at least six online courses, at least one hybrid course, and one onsite course. The participants took part in one face-to-face interview or a web conferencing interview (based on their geographic location) which lasted between 40–60
minutes. A follow-up interview was also conducted with each participant after the initial analysis to clarify any questions and member-check the interview transcript. These follow-up interviews lasted up to 30 minutes. The resulting analysis of student perceptions of their learning experiences in online, hybrid, and onsite courses helped to understand some of the gaps that may exist between faculty beliefs and students’ learning experiences in each course delivery.

The sample size for this qualitative study was four participants. Qualitative research typically allows the study of a few individuals or a few cases. This smaller number enabled the researcher to explore, in-depth, the experience of each individual and adequately analyze the resulting data. Seidman (2006) suggests that the number of participants should be sufficient enough so those outside the study can connect with the experience of those within the study.

**Recruitment and Access**

Participants for this study were recruited from a pool of current or recent students based on the completion of courses in various delivery methods in this doctoral degree program. The pool was determined in consultation with the academic program director. Eligible participants were contacted via e-mail with a recruitment announcement that introduced the researcher and explained the research study and its purpose, and asked for volunteers to participate in a qualifying questionnaire and follow-up face-to-face interview. Those who contacted the researcher were sent an unsigned consent form and additional information, and were asked to complete a qualifying questionnaire. Of the five who completed the questionnaire, the four who choose to participate engaged in one face-to-face in-person or video conference interview which lasted between 40-60 minutes, which was audio taped and conducted at a place and time convenient for the participant. A follow-up phone interview was also scheduled to review the transcripts of the initial interview, make any corrections, and clarify any other information. This
follow-up interview lasted no more than 30 minutes. A token gift, a gift card for coffee valued at $20, was sent to each participant after the follow-up interview.

**Data Collection**

Creswell (2013) stated that data collection is a “series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p.146). The central research question of this study— *how do graduate students describe their learning experience in a graduate program that includes online, hybrid, and onsite courses*— was designed to elicit data that provided a detailed range of each student’s experiences. Data were gathered through live interviews with a series of questions (Appendix D). Interview questions focused on the perceptions and views of the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). The questions were informed by both theoretical frameworks, the literature review, and the research design. The interviews took place at a time and place convenient for the participant, in a private meeting room or by phone and web conference when face-to-face was geographically difficult or impossible. Participants were encouraged to tell their stories in depth and express their views at length (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were transcribed, sent to each participant, and follow-up interviews were scheduled to enable member-checking and to provide the researcher with the opportunity to ask clarifying questions.

Copies of all materials have been stored digitally. The qualifying questionnaires were conducted through the online survey system, Survey Monkey, where they are stored. The transcripts of the interviews were organized and stored by each participant’s pseudonym.

Interview data were coded first via In Vivo coding and then by themes that were viewed through the lens of the two theoretical frameworks, constructivism and connectivism. Taped interviews
were transcribed by an outside service with specific instructions for transcribing the audio sessions. Paper and digital copies will be maintained until the dissertation process is complete.

**Data Storage**

The qualifying questionnaires and follow-up interviews, as well as their results are currently stored electronically as well as via hardcopy (Groenewald, 2004). Participant questionnaires and transcriptions were assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. Digital copies of all collected materials (consent forms, questionnaires/interviews, transcriptions and audio files) remain in a password protected computer and on a flash drive to enable a duplicate set of records (Creswell, 2012). The flash drive, paper copies of consent forms, questionnaire results and paper transcriptions and hand-coded data of audio recordings of interviews have been kept in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher has access to the computer and the locked storage cabinet. Audio files of interviews have been erased. Remaining data will be destroyed after the dissertation is accepted as complete.

**Data Analysis**

Saldaña (2013) posited that the research question of a study will influence the choice of the coding method. For this study, the first cycle analysis of interviews was done via In Vivo coding by hand. In Vivo coding, which maintains the wording of the participants, is the best choice for initial coding because this study sought to understand the realities of the participants (Saldaña, 2013). This enabled the interviewer to capture the “voice” of the participant. In Vivo coding helped identify segments for categories or themes which were critical for next stage analysis (Creswell, 2012). Smith et al. (2009) suggested that organizing and analyzing data in IPA research requires coding line-by-line to identify patterns, understanding what the
participants mean by their responses, and creating a structure for drawing relationships between the themes. By establishing a structure, comments were noted and other themes emerged.

After the initial In Vivo coding process, “Themeing the Data” was used as a way of categorizing data so that in a phenomenological study, the nature and meaning of an experience could be captured and made sense of (Saldaña, 2013). Repetition or emerging themes within and across participant interviews were identified. Themes serve as a way to provide a deeper understanding in a phenomenological study of every day events and significant statements of experiences and beliefs that emerge (Saldaña, 2013). Themeing was completed by using MAXQDA coding software. In cases where an emerging theme compared with what previous studies have predicted, themeing the data helped to look beyond published studies for results that did not exist in the literature (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Developing emergent themes required capturing the essence of statements and reflections made by the participants and interpreting what appeared crucial (Smith et al., 2009).

Themeing the data as a second cycle analysis process revealed evolving themes, relationships, or clarifications (Saldana, 2013). Themeing helped to note any social networks and relationships which is a focus of the theoretical framework of the social constructivist and the connectivism lens of this study. Rovai (2004) pointed out that a constructivist approach brings both faculty and student perspectives and experiences to the class environment, and facilitates teaching and learning. In connectivism, the interactivity which takes place within the class confines and beyond it can explain learning in the new digital age (Hogg & Lomicky, 2012). In coding for themes, identifying references to collaboration, group discussion, and community helped organize and determine patterns in responses to these themes.

After the data were coded by themes and patterns which covered the areas of online
communication, sense of “community,” and online discussion feedback, the data were analyzed, organized and segmented by participant and by their accompanying interviews. Current literature was used to interpret the responses to determine if they reflect the results of previous research studies.

**Trustworthiness**

A number of validation strategies were used in this study to ensure the reliability of the data collected. Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton (2001) define trustworthiness in research as “the ways we work to meet the criteria of validity, credibility, and believability of our research—as assessed by the academy, our communities, and our participants” (p. 324). Van Manen (1990) believed that we gain insight into the essence of a phenomenon through a reflective process which clarifies and makes meaning of the lived experience. In order to insure that the data accurately reflects a theme and are correctly reported, triangulation and member checking was used (Creswell, 2012). Two theoretical frameworks were used in looking at how participant viewed their experiences. Data were gathered through the interviews and follow-up interviews with the participants who shared the same degree program and, in some cases, possibly the same courses in multiple deliveries. Sandelowski (1986) suggested that a qualitative study is credible when it is based on true and accurate descriptions and interpretations of the experience. Member checking was employed so that each participant was able to verify the accuracy of their interviews and provided clarification where needed by reviewing the transcript of their interview.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

As mentioned, the use of two theoretical frameworks also increased the validity of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The study used two linked frameworks—constructivism and connectivism—as the lens through which the study was conducted. Both frameworks shared a
mutual focus on interaction and communication as critical to learning (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Siemans, 2005). The research question and any sub-questions explored the graduate student learning experience from these perspectives.

Constructivism and connectivism were selected as theoretical frameworks to capture a student’s learning experience in taking courses in multiple delivery systems. Constructivism encapsulates the idea that students are building their own knowledge with support of the instructor, materials, and classmates (Rovai, 2004). Connectivism describes unique meaning-making and forming connections that is a part of technology-driven learning (Siemens, 2005). These two frameworks together describe a rich, dynamic learning environment. The data collected from this study were analyzed with these frameworks to determine the extent to which online and hybrid courses fulfill these requirements, and reflect the “no significant difference” findings that are well established in the literature (Bernard et al., 2004; Russell, 2001). If delivery format was not a significant factor in determining outcomes, then other factors contribute to learning in a “classroom” environment, no matter how it is constructed.

Both constructivism/social constructivism and connectivism focus on knowledge as learner-centered, imparted through internal and external activity, with interaction and communication critical to learning. Rovai (2004) saw constructivism as maintaining knowledge through learner centered activities that include communication and negotiation. This corresponds with the features of connectivism as knowledge being dispensed within a group and knowledge as dynamic, complex, and being reevaluated by participants (Boitshwarelo, 2011). The research questions sought to explore how the course learning environment, regardless of the delivery, was experienced by students.
Figure 2. Convergence of the theoretical frameworks and research with the research question.

Coding as a Tool for Validity

Themeing the data supported two processes which reflected the actual words and thoughts of the participant and the researcher’s interpretation of the statements. (Smith et al., 2009). These bring together description and interpretation which best revealed the experience of the participant as told to the researcher, the resulting understanding of that experience, and the sense-making and the meaning of what happened.

Minimizing Internal and External Threats to Validity

Threats to internal validity, defined as the ability to identify a causal relationship between variables, is minimal (Morgan, Gliner, & Harmon, 2000). Since there were no long time lapses between the beginning of the study and its end, there was no negative effect on participants or resulting data. There was no participant attrition. The selection of participants was based on their eligibility and all were enrolled in similar courses in the same program with comparable
enrollment patterns. Because there were no advantages or disadvantages for those who chose to participate in the study, responses did not affect the results of the data.

Past research studies have shown that a key variable that affects student perceptions of learning centers on the amount of interactions between the student and others, especially when fostering a learning community both within and outside of a course (Exter et al., 2009; Perry et al., 2008; Pike et al., 2011). Certain inferences made from the data were checked and categorizing by pattern so that external validity could be established based on how the results compare to prior research and how the study could be used for informational purposes by similar institutions which offer online, hybrid, and onsite graduate courses. A growing number of graduate students are taking courses in a variety of deliver systems, and this is increasingly becoming the norm as more institutions offer this option to their adult professional students (Allen & Seamen, 2013). Some of the learning experiences expressed by participants may be common to other students enrolled in similar graduate programs.

**Rich Description Provides Credibility**

The research, as required by an IPA approach, provided rich, thick description (Smith et al., 2009). The institutional setting, participant’s academic background, and the goals of the research study have been described in detail to enable readers to better understand the account as credible. Rich detail also allows readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other institutions or programs (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

**Reflexivity of the Researcher**

Researchers must reveal their assumptions, beliefs, and biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This lends credibility and allows a reader to consider how the participant’s views and experiences might have been viewed and interpreted by the researcher. I came to this study as
both an administrator of distance education programs, an adjunct faculty member who has taught face-to-face as well as online, and as an online graduate student who has also taken onsite, hybrid and online courses. Having had the full distance learning experience as an administrator, faculty member and student, I have a range of opinions based on my own personal experience. The research, however, shows that every student’s educational experience at a distance is unique as each student brings their own expectations, experience and learning style into a community of at-a-distance learners (Shea & Bidjerano, 2012). I revealed to participants that my own academic program background included taking courses in various deliver methods. My experience does provide direct knowledge of the phenomenon. Examining the learning experiences of students in different delivery modes is a professional as well as personal inquiry for me.

Along with my experience came the possible bias of having already formed many ideas about what works best for students. The data reporting includes quotes from the participants reflecting their views and perceptions. I consciously “bracketed” or set aside my own opinions to focus on those of the participants, especially during the interview process. This enabled me to reflect on the phenomenon of each participant’s view (Smith et al., 2009). I have found in informal discussions with classmates that their opinions reflect their experiences which sometimes differ from my own. All views are valid, however, from the point of view of the individual student. The research question does not reflect any hypothesis and the qualitative, IPA approach underscores the need for focusing on the participant’s experience as they interpret its meaning, not my own.
Protection of Human Subjects

The study involved graduate students enrolled in courses offered in different delivery formats and was designed to gauge their perceptions of their graduate program experience. Protecting human subjects in research requires researchers to think through the design and process of their study to make the purpose and methods clear to all the participants involved (Seidman, 2006). This study did not involve any treatment and did not present any obvious physical risks to participants. No children, pregnant women, or prisoners were involved. The benefit to participants was the opportunity is to be able to discuss their graduate program experience beyond just end-of-course evaluations, and to reflect on their own expectations and learning outcomes in taking courses in different formats. There were no social, legal, or economic risks to participants who were involved in the study. Participants qualified to participate based on their completion of online, onsite, and hybrid courses in their graduate programs were contacted first by email to determine their interest in participating in the study. Those who indicated their willingness to participate were sent additional information and a link to a qualifying questionnaire. Participation was strictly voluntary and participants were informed that they could opt out of the study at any time (Butin, 2010). All information about the study was provided in a written format (via the unsigned Consent Form, Appendix B). This information was distributed again throughout the research process.

The sample Consent Form was given to each participant. Since they were unsigned, no signed copies exist to protect the identities of the participants. Strict confidentiality was maintained about the participants in the study and their identities (Seidman, 2006). All procedures regarding recruitment of participants, surveys, and interviews were done under the guidance of the Principal Investigator. The IRB approval was obtained and guided by
requirements set by Northeastern University’s Human Subject Research Protection guidelines (Northeastern University, 2012).
Chapter 4: Report of the Research Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how graduate students describe their learning experience in a graduate program that includes online, hybrid, and onsite courses. The sub-questions asked participants to describe their learning and communication experience, learning experience with course materials, and their course workloads in online, hybrid, and onsite courses. The four participants in this study were either current students or had recently completed their studies in a doctor of education (EdD) program. One participant had just defended his dissertation and was due to graduate in a few months. Two were working on their dissertations and one had completed more than half of the coursework in the program. The participants were between 35-54 years of age.

As the interviews progressed and the data were coded, the sub-questions provided a way to capture the participant’s descriptions of their experience and to code these by evolving themes that were then organized under superordinate themes. Superordinate themes are emergent themes and patterns that can be grouped together to form a larger theme (Smith et al., 2009). The emergent themes that surfaced described the participants’ decision making process in choosing to pursue this doctoral program, their experiences while in the program, and how they viewed their overall academic experience. The superordinate themes moved beyond initial concerns about online learning to navigating communication within delivery systems, mastering course content, assessing course workloads among delivery systems, and reflecting on overall learning in a mixed delivery program. The themes were often related to one another and at times overlapped as participants compared each course delivery in each superordinate area and described how they experienced them.
Using the IPA research methodology, I sought to understand how participants understood their learning experiences. The participants’ meaning making of their experiences and my interpretation of their meaning making became the double hermeneutic of the study. Each participant described their lived experience in learning through different delivery modes, their expectations before and during their enrollment in the program, and how these later reflected on their overall program experience. Their observations of online learning and their overall perceptions of the program provided a wide-ranging representation of their experience.

**Moving Beyond Initial Concerns about Online Learning**

Students enter a degree program with unique educational backgrounds, specific reasons for wanting to complete the degree, and differing expectations. These influence their experiences after they start a program. The decision to pursue any doctoral degree is not an easy one because it requires years of commitment and is accompanied by nervousness about what will be required to succeed. The tension increases when considering a doctoral degree program with more than one delivery method. This is especially true for students without any previous experience taking online courses. The literature suggests that technology can produce a level of anxiety among some students (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Hager et al., 2012), and that prior online experience can be a predictor of success in online courses (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012). The literature also suggests that despite the growth in online enrollments in the last 10 years, many faculty still consider learning online to be inferior to onsite instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The concerns about delivery methods and negative views of online learning are known to students and surfaced in the participant interviews in this study. Three of the four participants had had no previous experience with online coursework, and as described below, all four felt some unease and apprehension about the course format on a number of levels.
Professionals approaching program with apprehension about online education. Julius has undergraduate and graduate degrees in business, and was working as a full-time college administrator during the program. He had no previous online course experience. He entered the program believing that he would be able to take more courses in his preferred learning style, which was face-to-face. “I wanted to be able to take more onsite courses…that was one of the reasons why I moved to the _____ area and took a job of director of graduate admissions at the institution I was working at,” he said. His reasons for wanting to take courses onsite were related not only to his preferred learning style but also to a perceived notion that an online degree would be viewed as inferior when compared to a degree obtained in the traditional manner, “I was hesitant. There are still a lot of people who work in higher education who don’t think too highly about online programs.” He mentioned that some online universities do not have “a very good reputation for offering quality education.” Concern over quality was also coupled with the hesitancy of enrolling in a doctoral program. “I was also very, very nervous about enrolling in a doctoral program to begin with. So, there was a lot of anxiety choosing an online program.”

Stephen and Ed, both of whom were also working as college/university administrators while enrolled, also had no prior online course experience and voiced similar concerns about the quality of online courses. Stephen, who holds an undergraduate degree in education and a master’s degree in English composition, was excited about entering a doctoral program, but still had reservations: “I was a little nervous. I just wondered if it was really as rigorous and taught with as much of integrity as a regular on-the-ground course would be taught.” Stephen had a negative opinion of a for-profit university offering totally online degrees, “…to me it just doesn’t seem like a very reputable degree, for one reason or another.” Ed also felt a certain
amount of apprehension about the online format, “I didn’t know what to expect.” Ed’s biggest fear was that his undergraduate and graduate degrees in engineering had not prepared him sufficiently for the intense writing required in a doctoral degree program, “I hadn’t done a lot of writing in the past. Not being face-to-face in many of my classes with the instructor was a little concerning to me as well, because I never learned in the online format.”

Luke, who has an undergraduate degree in mathematics and two master’s degrees, had previously taken online courses and, as an online instructor himself at another college, had little doubt about his ability to learn in an online environment. He was, however, like Julius and Stephen, still worried about others’ perceptions about an online degree despite the degree being offered by a traditional, non-profit, campus-based university, “Even as an online professor, I was concerned for my own self, how prestigious the degree would be. So this being from Southwest New England University, which is considered brick and mortar, even though we use all types of instructional methods, it was important to me that I get a degree that’s going to be respected.”

As a group, the participants shared many of the same misgivings about the online format. Some based this on their lack of previous online experience, apprehension about the academic rigors of a doctoral program, and the negative reputation of some online programs and universities. Julius summed up his early feelings which mirrored those of the other participants, “There was a lot of anxiety about choosing an online program…not just because it was an online program, but because it was a doctoral program. So there was a lot of anxiety and trepidation of choosing the program.” All four participants weighed their options carefully before committing to a degree with courses taken in various delivery methods.
Professional degree needed to advance career aspirations. Graduate students are typically pursuing a degree for career or professional advancement and the perceived value and great importance of the immediate application of what is learned (Broome et al., 2011; Holtslander et al., 2012; Pittenger, & Doering, 2010). For the participants, the decision to pursue a doctoral degree was directly related to their career aspirations. The strong desire for a terminal degree helped reduce some of the fear and negative perceptions about trying a program offered in a mixed delivery format. The expected outcome in terms of career progression was seen as worth the effort and this became a primary motivator.

Julius had had a great deal of practical experience but felt he needed the educational foundation to advance in his career, “I’ve told a lot of my friends that because I’d been working in higher education for close to twenty years now… I really wanted to learn the theory behind the practice I’ve been practicing for the last twenty years.” Julius felt that the degree was the one thing he was lacking to advance in his career, “All of my educational training had been in business, and I had been working all of my professional career in higher education. So I felt that it was something that’s going to help me with my career goals.”

Stephen had similar career reasons for enrolling as well as a financial incentive since he worked at the university offering the program, “I just wanted to continue my studies and I thought it might lead to future job opportunities and …I can take classes at the institution that I work at and obviously do it with tuition waivers which is a big bonus.” Like Stephen, Luke also had both career advancement goals and financial motivations for enrolling in a doctoral program. As an online instructor at another college, his rank and pay were dependent on educational attainment, “You had to have at least five doctoral courses to become assistant professor. To
become associate you have to have your doctorate.” As a military veteran, Luke was using his Post-911 GI Bill to pay his tuition which was also spurred his pursuit of the degree.

Ed, a former instructor turned administrator at a college, felt he needed the extra training and lacked the specific academic background in education for career advancement:

I got involved in higher ed back in the mid-90s …I decided that I was going to make a career of it back in ’08. I never had any formal training in education. So I decided that it would be a good idea to explore doctoral level programs in education.

Ed also saw the convenience factor of online courses as an advantage, “A lot of my classes were in the online format…it was a very convenient program to complete all of my coursework.”

The participants each grappled with a number of issues before enrolling in the program. Beyond just the length of time and effort required to complete a doctoral degree, there was the added concern about the quality of online learning. All the participants held negative views of other online programs and feared that any online degree would be viewed as substandard. They worried about the general acceptance of online courses as academically equivalent to traditional ones, and their own ability to learn in an online environment since three of the four participants had had no previous online course experience.

The participants moved beyond their doubts by focusing on what they saw as the tangible advantages of the degree and the institution. Attending a traditional brick and mortar university with a “brand” that also offered a mixed delivery program reduced the concern about pursuing an inferior academic degree. Two of the participants were receiving tuition support which lessened the financial burden of paying for an advanced degree. All the participants felt that a terminal degree would help advance their career goals. While the convenience of taking courses online
was not mentioned often, it did offer needed flexibility for all four participants who were concurrently working full-time jobs and had family commitments.

On a deeper level, as the participants recounted their assessment of the program, there was a sense from their attitudes that some intangibles also influenced their decision. While the uncertainty of the online learning environment was an issue for three of the four participants, it was not enough to dissuade them from enrolling. This came from a feeling of self-confidence based on having completed graduate degrees at the master’s level and their positions as full-time working professionals. They had already proven themselves at the graduate level and felt capable of upper-level graduate work. Each participant considered the issues and believed in their own ability to move forward in pursuing this degree even if they did not have first hand familiarity with online courses. They were certain they could develop whatever new skills might be necessary to learn in an online academic setting. This pushed them forward into starting the program.

**Navigating Communication within Delivery Systems**

Students understand how learning and communication take place in a traditional classroom setting. Even when an onsite course instructor provides supplemental online materials for students, the traditional classroom experience is based on a faculty member and students meeting at a given place and time, and exchanging information, knowledge, and learning through instant, in-person communication. An online environment creates a different setting that is not necessarily familiar to all students. Learning how best to communicate online became a process.

Many faculty feel that what is most lacking in online courses is the rich discussion and communication that takes place in a face-to-face classroom (Graham & Jones, 2011; Ulmer et al, 2007). The participants in this study, with extensive traditional learning experiences, had to make
meaning of a new learning environment and manage how communication takes place asynchronously as well as face-to-face in their program. It was necessary for them to discover how to communicate effectively. How this was negotiated and experienced was different for each of the participants.

Julius, with no previous online experience, slowly came to feel that his initial anxiety about online course communication was unwarranted, “Once I got into the program and I started doing the coursework and providing the papers and everything else that was required, I really felt like this is something that I actually can do.” He also found that although he preferred face-to-face instruction, there were advantages to the online learning environment. He appreciated that online course discussions allowed participants adequate time to prepare responses to discussion questions in a step-by-step fashion:

You could really give it some real thought to what you wanted to say. I felt that the communication was that much better because they’ve allowed you to prepare for what you were going to say and how you were going to say it. As opposed to being in an onsite course where you’re speaking freely and not giving a whole lot of thought and so you don’t have time to prepare what you’re going to say or what your statements are going to be.

Julius also described other advantages of the online environment for communication with classmates, “Everybody was able to contribute to the discussion which doesn’t always happen when you’re in the onsite courses.” He pointed out that while the online environment encourages and even requires inclusiveness, everyone has a “voice” online. Discussions also easily identify who does not participate or communicate a possible downside for some, “This could be good, it
could be bad, in that everybody must. If you’re not participating, it’s very apparent in an online course.”

Stephen had similar positive impressions of his learning in online courses, despite also having a preference for face-to-face instruction, “I think it's been a really great experience. It's forced me to articulate my own thinking a lot more, since everything you do is in writing, as opposed to sort of an off-the-cuff, face-to-face in-class discussion.” As a composition teacher, Stephen noted the effect the program had had on his own writing skills, “My own writing has really improved because you have to do so much of it.” He described the communication process in online courses in a similar manner to Julius, viewing it as an environment where thoughtful thinking, planning, and writing are required:

When you chime in on the discussion board, you really have to be careful about the way that you word your ideas and I think that's been the biggest benefit. I teach writing and I feel my writing has really improved as a result of doing online courses.

In addition, Stephen felt that the courses provided an environment where writing and research skills are built upon early and can be used when developing a topic later that becomes a thesis, “In every course, there's some kind of major project where you have to do a lot of writing and a lot of research, …you really get the freedom in every class…where you could sort of research your thing.” In addition, Stephen’s fears were lessened by the asynchronous format of the online courses:

You're doing it on your own time. You do have deadlines but as far as tuning into a lecture goes or completing readings or whatnot, you're on your own schedule, except for those weekly deadlines or more long term deadlines. So I thought, okay, I think I can do that.
Stephen had specific observations about the role of the faculty in his courses and how communication in online courses was conducted. While different from an onsite course, it was no less responsive, “Whenever I've sent an email to a professor, I've always heard back and I've always been helped by them. They've always clarified things whenever I wasn't sure of something, so that's really great.” Stephen found that students also responded to questions rapidly and that the occasional Wimba session, those done via a conferencing system and in real time, were also useful.

Stephen found the sessions that involved group work with classmates at a distance problematic, and required a greater effort to work through problems caused by communicating at a distance, “The discussions where I was working with classmates online in a web session were actually difficult. Those were times when I wished that I was face-to-face.” Each student in the group had their own ideas about how to approach the project, so decisions by phone and online became tricky to manage, “Though we did, I think, designate a leader a few times, I still found that to be difficult. I think that those meetings are much easier to do in person.” Stephen went on to say:

You know, again, that might just be my personal preference, but, I'm not very good at talking on the phone, even with my own wife. So it's a talk in a big group or a group of like four or five people on the phone, and I just found it really hard. I know I would have been able to communicate my ideas better and I would have been able to be more assertive if I was with them in person. On the phone, I was really reticent to speak up.

Luke’s extensive online experience influenced his perceptions and experiences in a much more analytical way and he was very forceful in explaining his own learning style and preferences, “Now, I’ll just say right from the top if I never did an all in-person class again in the
rest of my life, that would be absolutely fine with me. So that’s my proclivity, that’s where I’m coming from.” Indeed, Luke’s confidence about what has worked best for him academically can be traced back throughout his high school years, “I was never mister, you know, jump up and talk and want to be heard... If I could have taken online since high school, I would have taken online courses since then.” Luke had high expectations for the online program and expected it to meet the standards that he was used to in his own online teaching. Much like the experience described by Julius and Stephen, Luke reported that the discussion board communications online provided a good learning environment, “I enjoy that manner of communication. The one thing I appreciate about it the most is it gives me opportunity to think, to research, to edit when I’m going to write and how I’m going to communicate it.”

Ed, like the others, was also generally encouraged by his online experience in terms of his communication with classmates and faculty after he overcame his initial fear of the unknown, “I found it a very good way to learn. I learned a lot from my fellow students through discussion boards …I had apprehensions, I found out as I got into it, that this stuff isn’t so bad at all.” Ed noted that the discussion boards provided good interaction between the students and faculty, “If I did have a question about an assignment, it was always emailed to the professor. There have been one or two times in my entire degree program where I actually got on the phone with the instructor.” Ed found that occasionally there was also the use of Wimba, which he found to be very helpful. As far as ease of use and comfort, “For the most part, it was easy.” When asked about the effectiveness of learning, Ed felt that the small group projects through Wimba and discussions boards contributed greatly to his learning, “My cohort was about 20 students. I was the only one from higher ed, everyone else was K-12. It was eye-opening. “Ed learned about the teachers’ union environment in K-12 education, something he had never been exposed to before.
This expanded his knowledge beyond higher education. As he progressed, his specialization courses allowed him to connect with higher education colleagues which he felt was very effective in bringing knowledge back to his own institution.

Ed did have a negative experience involving the absence of a faculty member during an online course, “In this particular course, the faculty member was really nonexistent, and as a result most everybody in the course was extremely frustrated with the fact that this professor wasn’t participating and we weren’t getting the feedback.” Ed felt that the instructor’s negligence in not responding to the discussion board or getting assignments back in a timely manner affected his ability to learn. It also had an unintended learning outcome, “You know, it was a learning experience from that perspective. You know, I know if I ever teach online what not to do at this point in terms of being a faculty member in teaching online.” Ed felt that while interaction with classmates was essential, feedback from faculty was critical:

I understand a faculty member may have 30 students in an online class, and they can’t possibly respond to each and every post. However, it’s nice to see that the faculty member is participating in the discussion, and that faculty member maybe brings yet another perspective on whatever the topic is and it was just lacking in that particular class.

With no previous hybrid course experience, what to expect in that learning environment was also an unknown. Each participant found hybrid courses to be a more positive experience than expected, with some caveats. Julius’ hybrid course met 4-6 times on campus during the semester and he felt he built some relationships with his classmates based on the group projects they shared. His hybrid course experience was acceptable, but still lacked the time for communication that would have taken place in a face-to-face course, “Once you got there, there
wasn’t really a whole lot of time to speak to your classmates or anything else. It was, you get to class, you did the coursework, and everybody was ready to leave.” From his perspective, however, he felt that the hybrid and online courses really shared the same essential components for learning, “It was very similar to the online course where the bulk of your writing and posting and communicating with the other fellow students was done online.” Julius did appreciate the ability to put a name with a face and the communication that took place while together in the hybrid courses but time still seemed too limited to built real relationships.

When asked about his communication experience with hybrid courses, Stephen felt it had real advantages over online in terms of pre-planning how to best use classmates’ time on campus together:

I know we worked a lot on our assignments together that week and I had started some work on them beforehand… before actually meeting them and trying to sort of plan out our work a little bit. It was great to actually meet them to talk together, to go to the library together, to come up with a plan together. I just thought it was so much more effective and just more fulfilling for me personally to see those people face-to-face.

Stephen’s positive student experience of the hybrid course face-to-face meeting also extended into interactions with the faculty,” Seeing that faculty member, how that person conducts classroom discussions, and add his two cents about the different text we were reading. It was great.”

Luke had a different reaction to the communication that takes place in hybrid courses and found it similar to face-to-face and difficult at times:

I find when I’m not in the online environment; you’re almost in a competition with the rest of your classmates because only a few people are going to be able to speak and one
of them at a time. Most of us in this program are established professionals. We’re successful. A little on the alpha dog sort of side of things. So I find that it is almost competitive or more competitive when you’re in person.

Luke was particularly critical of the amount of time he perceived to be wasted when students got together for their on-campus meetings in the hybrid courses, with faculty taking time to explain assignments and other “house-keeping” items that could have more easily been dealt with online. Luke felt that many of the faculty who had taught the hybrid courses early in his program may have been doing it for the first time and were therefore not familiar with how best to maximize the on-campus sessions of the course, “I believe clearly you can communicate online what the project is and the assignment is and not have to spend half an hour debating it and discussing it in class.” Luke did feel that there were positive aspects to the hybrid format, “I would say it is probably the networking. Just getting to meet your other students, you know.”

Ed described the experience in his one hybrid course as a positive one. He found meeting classmates and the faculty member face-to-face very beneficial:

We had a whole day together ... there would be a certain part of that day that would be a lecture, and we’d have open discussion about a particular topic. Then in many cases we’d be broken up into small groups, and we’d work to answer a particular question, and then we would present our results to the class, towards the end of the class…I found it a very nice format to learn.

Ed explained that the onsite environment of the hybrid course as particularly conducive to learning, “One student will ask a question that will spur questions from other students, and you know how that goes, it may diverge into something else that’s equally important to the discussion.” Ed pointed out that the spontaneity is not something that occurs online, “You don’t
get that kind of interaction online… the communications are delayed, and there is not that dynamic interaction between a bunch of people in a classroom. So I found that to be beneficial in the learning process.”

**Communication in the onsite course.** The delivery method that elicited the most comments and reflection about learning and communication was the onsite course in the program. Julius expected communication would be best accomplished in the onsite environment. His description of his onsite course experience stands in stark contrast to his online courses:

> A throwback to the old times of the faculty member goes up and lectures, there was a lot of conversations and input from the students, from the readings. But it was, totally like an onsite course, like an old fashioned onsite course, as opposed to the online and the blended courses, which, the bulk of those took place online with submission of the assignments, the discussion with your classmates, the discussions on the discussion board and the postings.

Having experienced just one onsite course in the program, Julius found the contrast to the online and hybrid courses quite noticeable. There was no use of technology, written work (all paper copies) were submitted in class, and there was one class presentation. Julius was quick to suggest that not all face-to-face courses in a program would necessarily be completely void of any use of technology, but this particular course and instructor was a return to how courses were taught before the introduction of technology into the classroom. Julius emphasized that the structure of this course was decided by the faculty member. He suggested that a different faculty member might have introduced some technology into the face-to-face environment. Despite onsite courses being his preference, Julius felt that the communication in this one online course
might have been improved. It was not a matter of delivery system, but faculty preference for how the course was offered and designed:

I think I had a better learning experience in the online courses and the blended courses than I had on the onsite course. I think it really had a lot to do with the teaching style of the instructor, and not necessarily that it relates to all onsite courses. But I didn’t really feel, with the onsite course, that there was a whole lot of learning going on other than, we would read the assignments and then we would just give our opinions and they were very brief. Many times I felt, when we were in the classes, the discussion was cut short. I also felt that sometimes there was so much more that we, that I, wanted to know or learn or hear about.

Julius’ view of the lack of communication and learning within the onsite courses was influenced by his preference for onsite learning although it did still meet many of his expectations. The positive aspects included meeting classmates on campus, within both the hybrid and onsite courses, which was important to him, “One of the things that I wanted about it was the camaraderie that you would have with your classmates and your peers, you know, to be able to have some open conversations and dialogues on the spot.” Julius benefited from the socialization and networking that he felt could only be experienced in a face-to-face classroom. This was in contrast to both online and hybrid experience where he felt he never got to know other students. In comparing learning and communication in the online courses to a face-to-face course, Julius appreciated being able to put a name to a face and have some one-on-one communication, “I felt that, in contrast to the online course, … I was able to build stronger bonds with my classmates in the onsite course.”
Stephen’s experience in the online course was similar to Julius. Stephen also preferred the onsite learning experience, “The face-to-face course was really interesting…on the one hand, I loved being in a face-to-face course, just for the change of pace… there's something that's a little more fulfilling about being in a classroom with people.” But Stephen also found the onsite course lacked interactivity and communication with classmates:

The interesting thing about that course is that I really didn't interact very much with my classmates. Informally, before and after class, but rarely in class did the professor ever have us do… small group activities or pairing up with a partner … or having just a very dynamic discussion. It was primarily conducted via lecture by the professor. There weren't many opportunities that the professor built in for students to interact with each other.

Stephen also attributed this to the style of the instructor. It was expected that notes would be taken during the lecture and questions that were posed by the instructor to students were expected to be answered. While Stephen felt that the faculty member was an expert in his field, he was not necessarily “a very good teacher.” Stephen was quick to add that students could ask questions at any time and the faculty member was quite receptive to that and students were not “stifled” in any way. It was more that the class environment lacked an “organic give and take” and the instructor dictated the flow:

I think the tone was more ‘I'm going to talk about the readings and you're going to listen and I'll ask some questions,’ but it just didn't have the dynamic of people feeling free to speak aloud, to talk with one another, and there were some really great people in that classroom but … we were all a little reticent to speak up.
Luke had stronger objections to the face-to-face course based more on his preference for online and the practical aspects of time and place. Luke’s typical day, when enrolled in the on-campus course, consisted of getting up at 5:00 am, working at his job from 7:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m. and then driving his car to campus to make it for the evening class. He found himself too exhausted to fully participate in class:

I didn’t have the mental energy at 6:00 at night to be effective in that sort of learning environment. Perhaps if the class had been 9:00 in the morning or 2:00 in the afternoon, it would have been a different outcome for me. It was tough to focus and have the energy to learn at that time…with adult learners like myself.

You really can’t do too much about that.

Luke did appreciate the seminar-like atmosphere of the face-to-face course. He, like Julius and Stephen, attributed the organization of the course to the particular style of the faculty member, “No other professor out of the 13 or so ran a class in such a way. Not only was it a traditional class but it was a professor running a traditional class, traditionally.” Luke had an ironic way of looking at the courses, “I also appreciated the experience for what it was because I knew that every class I had taken could have been that way, you know.”

Ed, like Luke, mentioned the inconvenience of having to be on campus for the onsite course one night a week but found the discussions that took place when students were face-to-face very useful, "You have a group of people in a room, I find sometimes, more effective in the learning process than trying to learn online. However, I love the flexibility of the online.” Ed signed up for the face-to-face course based on the topic of the course and the experience of the instructor, “I had a professor for that particular class who was a very accomplished higher ed administrator, who had lots of experience…. it was only offered in an on-ground format because
this is the way that he preferred to teach.” Ed enjoyed the onsite course because it allowed him to put a name to a face and read the body language of his classmates. While he was clear to state the type of communication that went on onsite did not diminish the level of communication which takes place online, he felt that the onsite course facilitated a more passionate discussion of a topic.

**Communication, expectations, and outcomes.** All four participants had taken their one onsite course with the same professor and they held strong views about the experience, with some of them at odds with their own learning style and how they expected this course to be taught and organized. The strong reaction to the onsite course can be partially explained by how starkly different it was from all other courses that participants had taken in their program. Once in the rhythm of communicating and learning online, many aspects of a faculty-centered, face-to-face classroom environment felt, for even those who prefer onsite instruction, somewhat jarring. Participants missed the time they had online to think and prepare their responses for better communication.

The participants considered carefully how they communicated in each of the delivery formats and how it affected their learning. The electronic interaction of online communication was a major part of their learning experience and they relied on it and appreciated the positive aspects of planning, organizing, and thinking before “speaking” online. Online and hybrid communication worked well for all of them. Learning style preferences, previous educational experiences, and understanding what they thought worked best contributed to how they navigated communicating online and adapted to it. Julius and Stephen continued to believe that important parts of communication and learning occur best in a face-to-face format, yet their one experience in an on-the-ground class was a negative one. The participants’ learning experience
became less about the delivery method and more about how the faculty member conducted and organized the course and how interactions took place with classmates regardless of format. Even Luke, with his strong preference for online learning came to the same conclusion that how a course is taught determines successful communication, not necessary the delivery method. He was able to appreciate some of how the onsite course was taught. Ed was the most enthusiastic about the onsite course, but was inconvenienced by having to be in class one night a week. Participants found the most important aspect was how successfully they learned, not necessarily when and where it took place, though sometimes time and distance were a factor. For most, online and hybrid courses provided a better environment for learning and communication because it met each students’ expectations for being able to connect with peers, exchange ideas, and collaborate on assignments regardless of their individual learning style and preferences.

Mastering Course Content

Course materials play a large role in how and what students learn online and onsite. For purposes of this study, course materials are defined as online lectures, textbook, articles, research studies, videos, websites, power point presentations, images—anything that is considered part of the content of a course which is not offered as face-to-face instruction and adds to the instructional quality of a course. The literature suggests that students in online courses value the efficiency of course materials online (Robertson et al., 2005) and that it is important to consider the level of student engagement students with these resources (Fasse et al., 2009).

Participants in this study were asked to describe their learning experiences with course materials in all three delivery methods. In all courses, there was a heavy dependence on reading materials, especially textbooks and online research articles, since they were the basis for most class discussions and eventual research topics. In addition, some courses also used videos (some
of faculty and other experts) within their online courses. Students were generally left to manage and absorb the reading as they saw fit.

**Materials offer variable options for learning.** Jules saw learning via the materials as a self-directed process:

I felt like a lot of it, for the whole program, was self-initiated learning. I do feel like there were some students who were able to get away with, doing the bare minimum. I feel like there was other students, who like myself, really wanted to learn. I read all the materials, I did all the readings, and I did all the assignments. I do feel that the materials that were provided was a very good source for learning, if you actually did the readings and did the assignments that were required. I felt like a lot of it for the whole program was self-initiated learning.

Julius approached the course materials overall as an opportunity to learn as much as possible and did not see much difference between those provided among the different delivery methods, “I took the initiative to really do the readings, do the assignments, and learn from the materials… I really didn’t see a difference regarding, whether it was the online, the onsite or the blended course.” Julius felt that if someone did want to “slack-off” it was perhaps easiest to do so in the online and hybrid courses. Without the face-to-face component, no one was going to question whether the material had been read or not, “So I do feel that the onsite did require you to be a little more prepared for the coursework.”

Stephen had a similar view of how learning with course materials took place, “You really had the freedom to do as much work as you want. You could really do as much as you want so, I don't want to sound like a slacker, but I know I am.” In order to better explain, he added:
You can do all the reading, you can do some of it, you can do a little bit of every assignment. I'm just trying to contextualize how this is different compared to the on-the-ground course, or at least the one that I took. In the on-the-ground course, and even in the hybrid course, I feel like there's little bit more of a pressure to make sure that you did those readings.

Stephen pointed out that completing the required readings for the onsite course became imperative, “You knew that they’d be discussed in class, and you knew that you might get called on or you might be asked to volunteer an answer. I never wanted to be sitting in that classroom feeling sort of clueless.” He added that readings for the online courses could be postponed for later when there was less immediacy at stake. Stephen felt that as he has progressed in the courses, there appeared to be overlap in the materials covered between and among courses, however, overall the materials were helpful in his learning.

Luke, as opposed to Julius, felt that the materials for the courses over all three deliveries were extremely varied. It seemed obvious to him that some courses had been thoughtfully constructed while others seems to be lacking.” You could see that a lot of work was put in to some courses and there were a lot of materials. You can see that almost no work was put into some.” Luke’s focus was on how materials functioned in meeting the learning outcomes of the courses and the program. Luke’s preference was for more peer reviewed journals to be included as well as more of the instructors own materials. What he did not feel contributed to his learning were instructor videos:

I am not a fan whatsoever of instructor videos. I’d prefer to view a screen cast where what they want you to see is on the computer screen and they’re talking. But there’s nothing I find more distasteful than an instructor who thinks that their mug has to be on
the camera. Talking to me and reading off the slide. That doesn’t do it for me and they shouldn’t do it for anybody.

Luke felt that short three minute videos or videos done by experts in the field or on a particular topic would have been more effective. He was also disappointed with the materials used in the onsite course, “We had a traditional professor teaching a traditional class in a traditional manner and… the course material being so outdated. I don’t know if a single journal article came past the time this professor was a student at college.” Luke suggested that the reason the materials might have been so outdated was because they were all print-bound and it is impossible to update materials that are not online. Luke felt, though, that any difficulties with course materials were related to the faculty’s choices not the delivery system, “Sometimes there are a lot of good resources and sometimes there is little there.”

Ed was very positive about the role that course materials played in his learning, “I think I found the most benefit in the assignments that had three or four readings from recent literature, and then followed by discussion boards with classmates.” For Ed, having the readings or topics that were discussed directly relate to his work as a college administrator was particularly useful:

There was a course or two in my curriculum where we looked at current issues in higher ed in particular. I found it beneficial because of my current position, to be more relevant to my work and to the institution that I work at. So I could then bring that learning right into the workplace as a part of the learning process.

Like Stephen, Ed found that he gained greatly from the focus on writing, “I did find a lot of benefit in the written assignments throughout the program, and in particular in the hybrid class format.” Writing in response to postings or to course assignments or readings provided
numerous opportunities to write. He added how his writing and own habits improved over the course of the program:

I think, again, I go back to the writing assignments. While I was apprehensive at the beginning, you know, I really started to enjoy the writing assignment, it gave me time. If you write properly and you go through multiple drafts, it gives you time to write a draft and reflect and come back to it, reflect and come back to it, something I’d had never done as a young person. I’d have waited till the last minute and whipped up the five-page paper together and just submitted it.

Like Luke, Ed also preferred more recent articles and text materials as it again allowed him to bring current knowledge into his job:

In my current position and with the motivations I have now, I planned accordingly, and I was able to go through multiple drafts and reflection cycles, and that provided a lot of benefit to me, really investigating whatever the topic was in providing or writing a good paper as a result.

**Use of materials demonstrate student-centered experience.** The participants reflected on their mastery of course materials and viewed their learning as a highly individualized experience. Each participant approached working with course materials in a different way. Some absorbed as much of the material as much as possible, while others managed their work based on their learning style and time constraints. Materials were seen as the basis for much of the communication, research and communication feedback and therefore was essential, although the courses also provided them the freedom to pick and choose how much time could be spent mastering the material.
Within the online environment, knowledge became the basis for collaboration on group projects, discussion questions, research topics, and eventually the dissertation topic and proposal development. Exposure to readings became sources for trying out research topics and also provided valuable practical information that could be applied on the job. Participants wanted up-to-date materials which reflected the latest research. They considered mastery of the course materials critical to their learning, building blocks for their research topics and providing information that could then be applied to their work environment. In essence, the participants became independent researchers picking and choosing what areas of study most interested them.

Assessing Course Workloads Among Delivery Systems

Course workload in online programs has been discussed in the literature with what appears to be no consensus on how this may or may not affect the quality of a course or if workload is comparable between online and onsite courses. Workload has been examined from the perspective of students, who in some studies believe online courses are more demanding (Braun, 2008; Fey, Emery, & Flora, 2008). A study completed in 2010 with over 2,800 online students in a southwestern university in the United States found that they wanted high quality and rigorous online courses that offer alternative learning experiences (Jones, 2012). This suggests that students want and expect that the workload will reflect the academic level of the course. At the same time, research shows that faculty found designing online courses to be more work that face-to-face courses (Graham & Jones, 2011; Shea, 2007). Despite the suggestion that online courses may be more work to take or more work to design, faculty still have doubts about their quality. There may not be any relationship between the workload requirements in a course and its quality but asking the participants in this study to compare their workloads across
delivery methods resulted in students making sense of what the course work was like, how it differed, and how it contributed to their learning and met their expectations.

**Workload shifts by delivery, course level, and faculty.** Inherent in an online environment is the need for students to write more. As the prime way of communicating among classmates and with faculty, writing takes up a large piece of the required work in any online course. This aspect was mentioned many times by the participants. Julius reiterated that he found much more writing in his online courses than in the face-to-face one. He also found that successfully organizing his time was particularly critical in his online courses:

I do feel that the online courses did require you to do a lot more time management. I remember having my calendar out and saying, okay, for this class this is due at this time and this at this time and this is when I’m going to read this and this is when I’ll read this, whatever the assignments were. So I did feel that the online course required you to be a much better time manager.

The online courses also contained strict timeframes by which postings had to appear as well as corresponding responses to other students’ remarks. This required a specific day each week which kept Julius to very strict timetables, “Most of them were your first response has to be by Wednesday, your second one has to be by Thursday, so you’re much more held to a timeline with the online courses than you are with the onsite courses.” He felt that with the onsite course, there was a marked difference in class preparation time,” Even though I had to plan ahead, you were a little more relaxed, that it would be okay… as long as I have everything done and read by the time the class meets, I’ll be okay.” Julius also saw the presence of the faculty member in the onsite classroom as changing the dynamic for him and made him consider carefully his preparation for class,” The respect that you have for the faculty member who is
standing in front of the classroom … you want to make sure that you’ve covered all the material that’s being covered in the class.”

Stephen felt the workload for his online, hybrid, and onsite courses were fairly equal, “They're pretty similar in terms of the workload. I took a very difficult class in the fall. There was … more work than I thought was necessary. So now, the current class I'm in, doesn't seem as bad.” There were some workload disparities between courses based on delivery system, but Stephen found them to be fair:

For the most part, I think the workload has been good. It's been challenging, not overwhelming, and very beneficial to my own thinking and writing and research but again, the nature of them has changed because of the on-the-ground, just the pressure to read and not as much pressure to write. Whereas in the online courses, more pressure to write, less pressure to read. I don't know if the current class seems easier just simply due to the class I took in the fall, you know?

Luke drew a distinction in terms of workload based on the faculty member, not on the delivery method. He described how assignments and content within courses were choices made by the faculty member and that determined the workload:

I don’t think I would put it in terms of which type of class it was. I put it in terms of the professor, how they were. For example, one professor was online, all online. He liked to use case studies. Case studies could be quite time consuming because at the other end of that case study was also a formal five page paper. I recall there are like four cases. So we had a project and we had a midterm project then we had four case studies, and then we had discussion board postings. That class was a lot of work.
Expanding on his belief that workload seemed more driven by the instructor, Luke added, “There were times that some of the classes—there wasn’t that much work. It just varied on what the professor’s perception of what the workload needed to be.” As an online instructor himself, Luke was acutely aware of how a course was structured and what he felt would have worked best for student learning. Occasionally the technology or design of the course increased the time and work involved. Luke described some courses as not having all the weeks of content available online right away, which created a problem for students wanting to plan ahead:

Sometimes … you want to get ahead of the game and you might have a particularly busy week ahead of you. Then you’re hoping to work on a weekend to get ready but when absolutely none of that material is available until Monday morning, and oh, by the way, sometimes on that Monday morning it’s messed up, it doesn’t come out until Tuesday morning or if all the materials aren’t there, that just puts us way behind. Just give us a whole course and let us, you know, as adults, if we work ahead, we’ll work ahead. Maybe you don’t want to submit it early, that’s fine.

Luke did not think that the workload for the onsite course was more than an online or hybrid one. As he thought further about whether the delivery method would ever affect the workload of a course, Luke conceded that it was possible that a hybrid course might have less of a workload and spread out over a longer period of time:

My perception is that blended might have been the easiest. The meeting is like an assignment in itself. So maybe they don’t need to give us many assignments to fill the time. Everything seemed … to build up to your next meeting… there were three or four, you know, in a 12 week period. That gave three or four weeks to work on each next step.
Instead of, okay, next week you got this five page paper and then after you got three postings and then start on this project.

Luke also felt that the research courses in the program were by their nature, more intense in terms of workload than other courses. He described a particularly difficult eight week term in the program:

It was terribly intensive. I took an eight week blended, my final research course. We had group projects. We had multiple assignments. We had to meet in person, I think it was four times in eight weeks. I think I said something to the instructor about it being cruel and unusual. The instructor knew because it had a double whammy. It went from a 12 to an 8 week course plus it was blended.

Ed approached the doctoral program, as he described it, “Very aggressively.” As a result, he found the workload to be significant, “I started by taking two courses per term. The first couple of terms there was a hybrid course, with an online course, and I found the workload pretty heavy.” Ed, like Luke, also found the research courses could be particularly intense:

It took me some time to adjust to that workload. And as we progressed through the curriculum, uh, I felt as if the courses got more and more rigorous. So I did four terms where I was able to handle a workload of two courses per term, and then I had to kind of slowdown. When you get into the research design courses there is just a lot of material there. Somebody who was a cohort ahead of me and a coworker of mine highly recommended that when I got to a particular course, that I only take that course in that term. And I’m thankful that I listened to that person because, it was extremely rigorous. There were lots of readings and lots of paper writing and many, many different types of assignments in preparing for the DTP (Doctoral Thesis Proposal) process.
Other than the research courses, Ed like Stephen felt that there weren’t big differences among the courses. He noted that the meetings on campus in the hybrid or face-to-face allowed in-person interaction, but otherwise, the workload seemed the same, “In terms of the workload, you know, discussion board requirements and paper requirements, I don’t think there was any discernible difference.” Looking back, he added:

I feel the same way, you know, when I think back to all of the courses that I took, there is not any one particular course or one particular format that, you know, pops out at me as being less rigorous in terms of workload or more rigorous. I think they were pretty evenly distributed in terms of the workload requirements.

All the participants had different ways of assessing workload. Some looked at how the workload evened out, as some courses had a heavy load, others did not. Some looked at it not from the aspect of the delivery method of the course, but by the choices individual faculty made about the amount of materials and assignments to include in each course. The onsite course did not appear to require more or less work as it was seen as being designed in a different manner. Research courses struck some as more intense than others. The emphasis on writing in the online and hybrid courses naturally contributed to a heavier number of writing assignments. The participants felt, with the occasional “tough” course in terms of workload, that the delivery system had little to do with course work load. The workload did not appear to affect learning adversely. The participants saw their work load experience as mostly similar across the program, challenging at times, but what one would expect in a doctoral program.

**Reflecting on Overall Learning in a Mixed Delivery Program**

As participants looked at their doctoral program as a whole and reflected on their experiences, a number of observations emerged about their learning, some of which contradicted
their own styles and expectations. Some reflections overlapped across themes. Many of their observations were shared; others were unique to each participant.

**Hybrid format as “best” option.** All four participants felt that the hybrid format probably provided the optimum delivery for learning as it combined the best parts of both online and onsite. This was their belief regardless of their own learning style or preferences.

For Julius, being able to communicate with his classmates was an important aspect of the program and was influenced by his preference for onsite learning. For him, meetings on campus, within both the hybrid and onsite courses, met his expectations best, “One of the things that I wanted about it was the camaraderie that you would have with your classmates and your peers…to be able to have some open conversations and dialogues on the spot.” Julius benefited from the socialization and networking that he felt could only be experienced in a face-to-face classroom. He felt this would be the case in both the online and hybrid courses. This turned out to be true in only the face-to-face course, “I felt that, in contrast to the online course … I was able to build stronger bonds with my classmates in the onsite course.” He attributed his preference for face-to-face instruction to his being an “old school” social person. He was, however, disappointed by the onsite course. He believed his online and blended courses offered a better “learning experience” than onsite, “The blended course, you know, I could compare very well to either the online and the onsite.” The onsite course lacked a level of communication that Julius was expecting, “I really was hoping that the instructor was going to share much more of his own personal experiences, working at an institution of higher education.” Julius remarked that his somewhat disappointing learning experience in the onsite course was directly related to the instructor rather than the delivery methodology. He remained, however, grateful for the opportunity to take courses in different delivery methods, “When I started the course, the
program, I was living …in New Jersey, I didn’t have that opportunity for the online. I don’t think I would have had the opportunity to have completed my program by now.” Julius was aware that most doctoral students would not be able to attend a traditional face-to-face program due to their work and personal commitments so an online/hybrid/onsite program reaches the most students and provides the best educational experience when time and place are considerations.

Stephen also found the hybrid format most successful in terms of learning. He considered his hybrid course as being a dynamic classroom experience and predominantly group work, which he found energizing. He summed up the experience as, “The hybrid was perfect, really. Like face-to-face but being forced to articulate in writing, a real strength.” Stephen had heard a rumor that the program administrators might reduce the number of courses offered as hybrids and he felt strongly this would not be a good decision, “I just feel like the hybrid courses are very valuable and I'm willing to bet there are other people like me who really value seeing other people every now and then.” Stephen felt that while online courses offered the flexibility to complete work at night and asynchronously and also allow students to meet their family and personal obligations, hybrid courses offered the best of both online and onsite.

Even Luke, with his strong inclination toward online courses, had what he believed was his best faculty experiences with instructors who taught hybrid courses, though he could not say for sure if it was the faculty member or the delivery that made it an exceptional learning experience, “Two out of my four blended classes, I had perhaps the two best professors in the program. I think one would be recognized as the best professor in the program for one of the years.” He went on to say that despite his own preference for online, he could appreciate what hybrid courses offer:
You know, my personal circumstances say go online, all online, and have the professors course material, the designers make that possible. To optimize it, to do what they need to do to make those classes as good as in person or blended. But my thoughts are that, there are advantages to blended courses. You know, it’s kind of a best of both worlds and you know, we can’t always have it the way you want to have it asynchronous… it’s good to have to interact with people, collaborate, work with groups.

Luke added, however, that even if hybrid courses offer the best learning experience, the convenience of online was still of primary importance to him.

Ed also preferred the hybrid format despite the inconvenience of having to travel to campus on a specific day and time, “It’s nice to be able to have the faculty member in front of you… I found that to be beneficial in the learning process.” The hybrid experience is one that he would recommend to others:

I found the hybrid format to be the most effective for my learning style. My institution is looking to increase its online presence and to provide more flexible delivery formats for our students. As a result of this experience, I’ve been really pushing the hybrid format, because I think it’s important to get everybody together periodically.

Need for faculty communication. Participants were also aware of the significant role that they and the faculty play in making learning occur. Despite the perceived lack of communication in his onsite course, Julius felt that his learning across all the courses was more dependent on his own motivation as a student, than on the delivery system. He saw learning as highly individualized and the personal responsibility of the student to utilize the knowledge in a way that best fit their style of learning. “Whether I was in an onsite course or an online course, I needed to do the research, I needed to basically teach myself, learn the things,” he said. He felt
that the faculty member was more of a facilitator guiding the learning and the student was responsible for internalizing and using. “The faculty members, whether it was online or onsite, would just give you the tools for you to be able to go and do your own research and learn in your own kind of way.”

For Julius, the role of the faculty cannot be underestimated in assignments and discussions, “It depends on the faculty member so much. Faculty members could be nonexistent or participatory; faculty might not even read it or care about it. Faculty make a big difference in the quality of the communications.” The chief factors in learning in this program for Julius were dependent on the faculty member and his own personal commitment and style in mastering the learning, neither of which was necessarily related to the delivery methodology of the course.

Stephen also viewed the role of the faculty as a critical link to learning. While he liked the onsite course instructor, he did not feel that the instructor’s strengths was in teaching, “I liked the professor, I really did. I learned a lot. However…his expertise was not in teaching. It was really in the subject matter.” Stephen felt his hybrid instructor was experienced in the classroom and a better teacher. He suggested that it might have been generational as the younger faculty member in the hybrid course had a different style of teaching. He also agreed that differences in the courses were more associated with how the faculty member conducted the class than the delivery system, “The irony of this is that there was less give and take between students in this on-the-ground course than there were in an online or the hybrid course.” Stephen saw the face-to-face meetings helped to put a face to a name as well as enabled him to read the body language of students during discussions, “Having that human touch was great.”

Luke felt that overall the way courses were organized was a direct result of the instructional design process and, again, decisions made by faculty. This occasionally resulted in
a poorly organized course, which ultimately was the responsibility of the instructor. In the online environment, directions in the navigation that are unclear resulted in confusion about how to find assignments and content. Following the usual process to navigate a course online sometimes did not work, “In one of the courses, I worked down all the steps, it took me to figure out what I needed to do that week,… 22 different pages and places I had to go to.” Luke felt that faculty needed a better understanding of the online learning environment to make it more effective.

Like Stephen, Ed also noted that the faculty played a key role in the learning process no matter what the course delivery format. In the one online course, the traditional teaching method used seemed to reduced the amount of discussion that occurred among students:

In the on-ground class…it was a traditional on-ground class, he would lecture to us, we would have some discussion in the class but not nearly as much as we would have in an online format. However, because of this faculty member’s background and experience, at least from my perspective, I learned a lot.

Ed pointed out again that the absence of the faculty member in discussions adversely affected the learning process, “It’s great to have interaction with your classmates and you do learn a lot, you hear different perspectives on the readings, which I found extremely helpful. But at the same time, getting that faculty feedback was important.” For Ed, the role of the faculty in a hybrid course was to bring activities to the face-to-face portion of the course. This was lacking in the one onsite course he took which was “traditional lecturing at us.” Ed’s overview of what works best joins the faculty’s expertise as both online and face-to-face facilitator, particularly in a hybrid environment:
It’s important for a faculty member to be present in the online portion, equally as important are the topics that are discussed in the on-ground portion. When you have a faculty member who can bring the online discussions together in the on-ground portion of the course, and then design an active learning assignment that kind of helps the students to really solidify their understanding of whatever the topic is, that becomes very important, and I was lucky enough to have somebody that was able to do that very effectively.

Ed also emphasized the importance of how students learn from each other, “I really learned in this program was that students in any of these formats, particularly online and the hybrid, can learn with each other, and the faculty member becomes a facilitator of the learning. I think that’s really important.”

Looking back on the program, in general terms, participants were very satisfied, even those who would have preferred a totally face-to-face experience. Julius was grateful for the opportunity to participate in a mixed delivery program though he would still have preferred a totally onsite program:

You know, I really enjoyed that experience. One of the things that really stands out to me is just the rapport that you have with the faculty members. I really felt like I knew my instructor for the onsite course. I knew my instructor for the blended course. But when I think about the instructors for the online, you know, most of them I can’t even put a face to who the instructor was.
**Few obstructions to learning; technology not a barrier.** When asked about any concerns about how technology was used, Julius had none. Early concerns were more about whether he had the ability to complete a doctoral program than the technology or delivery system.

Stephen was equally pleased with the program so far, “It’s really exceeded my expectations. Like I said, I was skeptical at first. I'm more than halfway through it now.” What has begun to set in was a certain weariness with the online course process, particularly with the discussion boards:

I don't know if it's just the feeling of being a little burned out and being halfway through the coursework. I'm getting a little bit tired of discussion boards …it feels more like just a sort of a rote exercise really than what was initially this great forum for thinking through ideas and looking at what other people have said.

Stephen, as a composition instructor, remains impressed with the rubrics used in the courses which outline exactly what is required to successfully complete a course and at what grade level. One of the strengths is the sample projects given to students to enable them to succeed. For Stephen, the teaching pedagogy was clear, which was a big strength.

Technology was also not an issue with Stephen, even though he is a self–admitted “digital immigrant,” having just recently taken up text messaging. Navigating the online environment was no problem, “I don't feel like I’m a very technologically savvy person. But Blackboard, I feel, is very easy and I use it sometimes when I teach, too.” Of the participants, Stephen was the youngest, with the least amount of personal technology experience.

Luke was a “digital native” who had been using online technology since he was in the military in the 1990s. The technology in the program was never an issue but he saw other
problems related to technology, “I was frustrated with how poorly organized the classes were... I had to spent finding out what I needed to do for the week... sometimes it was a technical reason, sometimes it was a professor reason ...just poor design.” His hope is that in the future the program can be better organized and implemented to optimize learning:

I guess I wonder what can be done in this—instructional designers, professors, universities —understanding how advantageous online learning can be. Are they going to put the direction and the energy and effort into optimizing that or are they going to continue to think we’ve got to have traditional classes...

The participants in this study moved from concern about the delivery aspects of the program and perceived quality issues, to successfully navigating the different elements of the delivery systems within their doctoral program which was, for most of them, a new way of learning. Smith et al. (2009) note that in IPA studies, “The end result is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking.”(p. 80). While the participants held a lot of the same views about their experiences, I understood each as having a distinctive view of their own learning objections and outcomes based on their previous academic experience, how they approached the program, their academic and personal goals, and how they steered their own learning within delivery systems. Each made choices about what worked best for their learning style and stepped out of their comfort zones when necessary. For those who had finished their coursework, successfully completing this part of the program was an accomplishment filled with new insights about learning and communication. It became clear to the participants that the delivery system of a course was not as important as how students plotted their learning through the course content and their relationships with their classmates and faculty. Each mastered the knowledge contained within the different learning environments in a way best suited to them.
Participants entered the program with a common, traditional academic experience at their undergraduate and graduate degree level. Through this mixed delivery doctoral program, they were able to learn in new ways and described their lived experience in ways distinctive to each of them. Overall, in each theme, the importance of communication and connection between students, faculty, and course content, regardless of delivery method, was apparent.
Chapter 5: Discussion of the Research Findings

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis was to examine the experience of graduate students taking courses in different delivery formats within their academic program. This study utilized constructivism and connectivism as frameworks to understand how students viewed their learning within these formats and how communication, course materials, and course workload shaped that experience. The study was guided by a central research question: How do graduate students describe their learning experience in a graduate program that includes online, hybrid, and onsite courses. The study also had three related sub-questions: 1) What do graduate students describe as their learning and communication experiences with faculty and classmates in online, hybrid, and onsite courses; 2) What do graduate students describe as their learning experiences with course material using technology in online, hybrid, and onsite courses and; 3) What do graduate students describe as their learning experiences and course workload in online, hybrid, and onsite courses? The goal of the study was to enable participants who were or had been enrolled in a doctoral program which offered courses in three delivery methods to reflect and make meaning of their learning experiences.

Discussion of the Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Frameworks

Constructivism. One of the lenses used to explore the graduate student experience in multiple course delivery formats was constructivism (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). Constructing knowledge is a process of adding more information to what is already known through learner-centered, collaborative activities with class partners, and testing and evaluating knowledge (Driscoll, 1994; Rovai, 2004). It also recognizes the social nature of learning (Phillips, 1995). The distinguishing features of constructivism are active learning, student-centeredness, internal
knowledge construction, collaboration, community building, and group work. All of these enable students to assemble a distinctive knowledge base.

The first research question asked participants to describe their learning and communication experiences with faculty and classmates in online, hybrid, and onsite courses. A constructivist lens helped to explore how the participants explained their learning process by building their knowledge base through communication within their courses. The findings in this study showed that participants believed that they were able to successfully learn through reading, researching, and connecting online and synchronously with conferencing tools. In describing how they navigated their communications within delivery systems, participants created individual ways to learn within all three course formats. Julius felt he gained knowledge through his personal face-to-face discussions and bonded with students in and out of the onsite class, but he also believed that online communications were better for certain learning activities because they offered time to plan and better articulate what he thought, read, and wrote. This was despite his stated preference for a traditional instructor-lead class. He and Stephen, who also preferred onsite instruction, were both surprised at how well they took to the online and hybrid course environment. Both came to appreciate the benefits of having the time to interpret and sort information, compile it in a coherent way both internally and externally, and fit it into their own desired framework.

Ed felt he benefited greatly from the discussion boards and sharing information with fellow students, was appreciative of the collaborative benefits of the conferencing tool, Wimba, and the opportunities for live discussions in the hybrid, onsite meeting sessions. Ed’s own personal goal, to improve his writing and to attain some formal foundation in educational theory and practice, was reached through the shared sessions on the discussion boards. This allowed
him to cumulatively build upon what he learned in each course and throughout the program. Luke, an experienced online instructor himself, admitted that the greatest benefit of the hybrid format was working in small groups, communicating ideas, and reporting on the team’s findings.

Overall, participants were able to establish constructivist learning environments through their online course work. Constructivism recognizes that knowledge comes from many formats—written, spoken, and even through static or moving pictures, and sound (Schnotz & Bannert, 2003). These elements were present in all the course delivery environments, particularly with the emphasis on writing and discussions in the online and hybrid courses. Technology was used to bridge the distance between students and with faculty so they could collaborate on projects and hold class discussion sessions through Wimba web conferences. The online and hybrid courses emphasized various individual and group activities to add to their knowledge. These fit with a key part of a constructivist environment in that learning is an active process that can be either physical or mental, and is transmitted through groups and communities (Phillips, 1995).

Despite this ability to collaborate, discuss, and share ideas online, one of the main criticisms that faculty have of the online environment is that learning is inadequate because it cannot replicate the rich communication that takes place onsite (Graham & Jones, 2011; Ulmer et al., 2007). Proponents of traditional education believe it to be the best way to learn based on an instructor-lead model and rich in-person discussion. Participants in this study found that within their onsite course that they were unable to communicate fully and build connections and shape their knowledge with others. Julius and Stephen felt that communication and interaction was very limited onsite. Luke found that while he had to prepare more for the face-to-face class because of its immediacy, his own attention often waned due to the class’ evening meetings. He
believed it was hard to “actualize” in the class or to make full meaning of the lecture or discussion. Ed, while comfortable with the onsite format, did not like the inflexibility of having to be on campus one night a week.

Participants mentioned the limitations of open, in-depth discussions in the face-to-face course. There were no opportunities for supplemental online discussions or shared research activities or much in-class time given to wide-ranging conversations or debates. Classroom instruction was faculty-centered and led. Knowledge building was limited to what was done in the reading assignments, individual papers and one class presentation. From a constructivist view of learning, knowledge building is a joint exercise among participants. The onsite classroom environment did not provide the communication and learning opportunities expected by the participants. In describing how they learned in their online, hybrid, and onsite courses, participants thought the online and hybrid environments provided more occasions for group learning and collaboration, and therefore were more effective than the faculty-led, traditional onsite course.

The constructivist approach was one used frequently by all the participants in the online and hybrid courses. They collected and built upon their existing knowledge, assessed new information, and collaborated and shared their learning with classmates and faculty (Singleton et al., 2013). These actions were described by participants as highly valued in learning across these two delivery systems. This approach was significant to participants because the class environment became highly learner-centered and met their needs. This corresponds with how Rovai (2004) viewed constructivism as where “course design and pedagogy is on learning, not teaching, and that from time to time, all members of the learning community are teachers as they bring diverse expertise,” (p.90). Similarly, in this study, the participants, as practitioners and
working professionals, responded best to a learning environment that recognized their ability to take in knowledge, use and share it, and then learn from others in their courses.

**Connectivism.** Pairing connectivism as the second theoretical lens with constructivism was a way of bridging any gaps between the constructivist internal knowledge building that occurs through face-to-face and online contact and the external knowledge that is accessed, received, and altered by students and faculty through communicating with technology. Connectivism recognizes the role of technology in changing how students think and learn (Siemens, 2005). A networked community, like the one that occurs online or in a hybrid environment, enables students to internalize knowledge received, change it, and then send it out again electronically into the community in a new form. It is no longer a linear learning environment but one open to a diversity of opinions and continuous action. The distinguishing features of connectivism are autonomy, interactivity/connectedness, diversity, and openness (Tschofen & Mackness, 2012; Downes, 2009).

Two of the research sub-questions asked participants to describe their learning experiences with course material using technology and workload demands in their online, hybrid, and onsite courses. Mastering content online is related directly to communicating that knowledge interactively and opening it up to further additions of more information. The study’s findings showed that participants described and reflected on their learning as significantly enhanced by the use of technology to master content and communicate it. Technology also influenced course workload to some degree. Julius saw the online course environment as a place where he was under no pressure to immediately respond to discussion posts. He was able to carefully prepare his online communications and schedule when and how he managed his time...
and course workload. Workload was heaviest in online and hybrid courses as the main way to communicate was online but less so in the onsite course.

Stephen handled his online discussions in the same manner, stating that he completed the readings and then considered thoroughly his comments in discussion boards. There was always a quick response from classmates and faculty so that the free flow of information was never interrupted. Since the online environment was asynchronous, workload could be somewhat better regulated from the student perspective and more self-directed. Stephen felt that the workload among the various courses was equal.

Luke’s preference for online was marked by what he considered its true learning advantage — equalizing the student experience. All communications carried equal weight for classmates as well as equal opportunities to contribute. It also offered each individual the chance to distribute their ideas directly to a wider audience and without any barriers. Workload for him was more dependent on the type of course, not the delivery system, with research courses requiring more time and effort. Ed spoke of how students learned from each other as they mastered the content and shared ideas online, with the faculty member becoming a facilitator, not the center or source of learning. Like Luke, Ed also felt the research courses required more preparation time.

The descriptions of mastering course material in an individualized manner and balancing the workload, in many ways, is the essence of connectivist theory—autonomous individual actions, openly communicating, and building new information that is being constantly disseminated (Downes, 2009). In the online environment, these were adjusted according to the individual’s own learning preferences and time frame.
Within their courses, while mastering the content and balancing course workloads, the participants consistently demonstrated their preferences for the online environment. It allowed them to have equal access to online materials, to have a voice, to create new individualized information based on their understanding of the course content and what they learned from others, and to change their opinions and share it again with others.

The participants’ observations illustrated that the face-to-face course lacked the open communication, collaboration, and a feeling of connectedness that are the essentials of both constructivism and connectivism. Having to become accustomed to a faculty-centered lecture environment was an adjustment for each of the participants. Mastery of content suffered as most of the participants expected that the onsite course would be more dynamic, interactive, and collaborative. Workload was determined by the readings required for each weekly class meeting with no communication between class sessions. Julius did feel he made the social connections and built strong bonds with some classmates onsite that he had hoped to do, but the discussions were not at the level he expected. There was no option to continue any discussions online that may have started face-to-face. With no use of technology, communication was limited to the once a week class meetings. Stephen felt the onsite class lacked an openness to speak up and was more of a top-down, faculty-lead environment that constrained discussion. Luke found it jolting to be in a class that lacked any use of technology and he was hampered by just the practical issues of working a full-time job and a long commute to campus which affected his ability to concentrate and participate in class. Accounting for work and commuting time compressed the amount of time available for learning. He said he did appreciate the experience because it showed him what the entire program might have been like if it was all face-to-face.
Ed was most positive about the onsite course but even he noted that there was not as much discussion in the course as compared to his online and hybrid courses.

Using the lens of constructivism and connectivism allowed the identification and categorization of those activities which directly influenced participant learning. This helped in answering the research question of how students describe their learning experience in courses offered in different formats. It framed how students learn online and how that learning is constructed. If community building is part of learning, how does that happen in any course environment? The findings showed that participants believed that the activities offered them in the online and hybrid environment contributed to a better learning experience than those in the onsite class.

The participants described in detail with specific examples of what worked and did not in their courses. They also articulated how knowledge was constructed online and face-to-face. These findings are corroborated by Guerrero and Crites (2013) who suggest that “new perspectives, like connectivism, are emerging while existing perspectives, like social constructivism are being revisited to take into account the impact of Web 2.0 knowledge and skills on theories of learning online” (p. 199). Overall, constructivism and connectivism help us understand that constructing knowledge is an individual and also social activity and supported within an active and collaborative environment. Online and hybrid courses demonstrate how using technology can achieve this dynamism and promote student learning and participation (Guerrero & Crites, 2013).
Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature Review

In conducting the literature review for this study, I looked at two questions which supported the central question of how graduate students describe their learning experience in a program that includes online, hybrid and onsite courses:

1. How graduate students perform in online, hybrid, and onsite courses as well as how they view their learning experience with varying course delivery methods.

2. What other factors shape graduate students’ views of their online learning experiences.

According to the literature, the student online experience can be broken down by comparisons with onsite courses, how graduate students differ from undergraduate students in their views of online courses, graduate student perceptions about quality, the effect of delivery method on learning, and the academic legitimacy and value of online learning overall.

Comparisons of Student Performance and Views of the Learning Experience

Earlier research has examined the online learning experience in order to determine if the quality of coursework and student performance was comparable to face-to-face courses. This was assumed to be the baseline standard and was designed to help demonstrate to skeptical faculty and administrators that the quality of learning taking place online was comparable to traditional face-to-face learning. As the literature review points out, the amount of research in this area is extensive and continues to show that students learn equally as well through technology as their on-campus counterparts (Hoch & Doughe, 2011; Kummerow et al., 2012; McLaren, 2004; Neuhauser, 2002; Pribesh et al., 2006; Russell, 2001; Russell, Carey, Kleiman, & Venable, 2009; Sussman & Dutter, 2010; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006; Tucker, 2001). Studies that compared outcomes and perceptions of learning across the same three delivery modes of
online, hybrid, and onsite (Larson & Sung, 2009; Ritter et al, 2010) also established that there was no significant difference.

The findings in this study support previous research in this area. When participants described their learning experiences in online, hybrid, and onsite courses, they believed their online and hybrid learning was comparable, with the onsite course deficient in some areas. They were satisfied with their overall experience, and were successful in completing their coursework. One participant had already defended his dissertation and was awaitsing graduation, two were in the dissertation phase and one was more than half-way through the required coursework. All the participants expected to complete their degrees.

For those research studies that compared more specific aspects of online and onsite courses like class discussions (Arbaugh, 2000), learning styles (Schwartz, 2012), and perceptions of quality (Topper, 2012), there were significant differences found. The participants spoke directly to this topic and viewed the discussion boards, group projects, and discussions within the face-to-face meetings in hybrid courses as excellent ways to learn and further hone their understanding of class material. The findings of this study show that the participants viewed the online and hybrid formats as superior even by those who preferred face-to-face instruction. As such, the perceptions of the quality of class discussions and how they contributed to learning were viewed more highly in the online and hybrid courses than in the onsite course.

There is previous research that closely parallels specific findings in this study about how students perceive their learning experiences. One such study found graduate students in an education program reporting that their online course experience was better than that of onsite students (Robertson et al., 2005). This was attributed to online students’ ability to access their courses when they were most prepared mentally to do coursework and that online courses
allowed for the most efficient use of a student’s time. Also mentioned was the amount of class
time wasted onsite on nonessential matters. Luke commented directly on these same issues, and
his inability to concentrate in the online class because of his heavy work schedule and commute.
He also criticized the amount of time spent on “house-keeping” concerns in the onsite classes
and hybrid courses. Ed also mentioned the inflexibility of having to meet on-campus. All
participants worked full-time and while not all brought up the convenience of online, it clearly
enabled them to pursue their studies more conveniently. Another study described students in a
graduate education online psychology course as more satisfied with the level of collaboration
with classmates (Frederickson et al., 2005). The same positive theme of online collaboration
with classmates emerged repeatedly within this study. Participants found that navigating how to
learn and how to communicate was a major part of their individual process and each found ways
to be highly successful.

There are studies that show that online learning does not compare favorably or compares
differently to onsite learning. Some students find it to be a poor choice (Bristow et al., 2011),
find that online courses do not provide the ability to effectively communicate (Kock et al., 2007)
and that students perceive faculty to have higher expectations of online students than those onsite
(Mortagy & Boghikian-Whitby, 2010). There were no similar observations in this study. While
some of the participants felt that they would have preferred onsite courses, at the doctoral level,
they already had extensive academic experience. Even without previous online experience, they
felt confident in their ability to persist and succeed. Whether they expressed it or not, the
participants expected faculty to maintain high standards in a doctoral program. Most of the
participants entered the program wondering about online learning. They found it to be an
experience that worked well for them despite some apprehension before starting the program.
Participants in this study concluded that not only were their online and hybrid courses comparable in terms of learning, but that online and hybrid courses offered the better learning experience, with hybrid courses the best of both. Overall research has shown that on many levels of comparison, the online course experience is perceived to be as good as a traditional campus-based one. This held true in this study. At least one previous study found that students preferred the hybrid course learning experience (Martínez-Caro & Campuzano-Bolarín, 2011). This was also the preference of the participants in this study.

**Other Factors Shaping Student Views: Graduate Students, Program Quality, Delivery Method and Value**

While there are far greater numbers of undergraduates taking online courses than graduate students, graduate students have more defined reasons for enrolling in degree programs. Previous studies show the convenience factor and needing additional credentials for career advancement are incentives for enrolling and persisting in a graduate program (Holtslander et al., 2012; Cercone, 2008; Perry et al., 2008; Rydzewski et al., 2010). One of the findings in this study is that all participants felt that they needed a doctoral degree to advance their career aspirations. While having practical experience on the job, Julius and Ed both indicated that having the additional academic foundation was important to them. Stephen knew that a doctoral degree would help his career path, and Luke, as an online instructor, needed a doctoral degree to achieve full professor status at his college. Expediency of access to graduate courseware was mentioned by two of the participants.

While the literature points to the skepticism held by faculty and some administrators (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Graham & Jones, 2011; Ulmer et al., 2007), none showed how potential students viewed online courses before they entered a program. The findings in this study
indicated that the participants were acutely aware of how “brand” affects the perception of one’s academic credentials. Three of them carefully considered whether online courses would work for them, would be considered comparable to onsite courses and whether the legitimacy of the degree would be questioned because of the delivery method. Julius, Stephen, and Luke all worried that recent negative press reports about for-profit schools, many of whom are associated solely with online degree programs, would taint the reputation of their degree. The brick and mortar reputation of this institution appeared to have played a deciding factor in their enrollment.

Once enrolled, other factors entered into how students described their experience and how they viewed the quality of the instruction and degree. Rovai’s extensive research into the “virtual classroom” shows that it is course design that establishes student “connectedness” within online courses and fosters a sense of community among learners through interactivity and creates a positive learning experience is essential to a quality learning experience (Rovai, 2000; Rovai, 2001; Rovai, 2002a; Rovai, 2002b; Rovai, & Jordan, 2004; Rovai & Whiting, 2005). Participants in this study frequently described their online and hybrid experiences as collaborative, dynamic, and interactive. Despite having a preference for face-to-face instruction, Julius and Stephen found their online courses allowed them to better plan their responses, prepare assignments, and communicate effectively. Luke liked the efficiency of the online classroom for communication and collaborative work. Julius, Stephen and Ed felt their writing improved greatly in the online environment. All saw their online communication with faculty, in almost every case, valuable and essential.

Some studies have noted that a sense of community can be lacking online. Boling et al. (2012) found, similar to Rovai’s research, that online courses that were text-based offered little interaction and were therefore less helpful to graduate students. Graduate programs perceived by
students to be dynamic, interactive, and supportive were more highly rated. Participants in this study described their online communication to be critical and directly related to the role that the faculty played, though some online courses in the program clearly struggled to achieve enough faculty interaction to meet student needs.

In looking at how participants described their overall experience in all three delivery formats, each articulated that the most effective role the faculty member could play in the success of the course was that of facilitator of learning rather than teacher. This expectation negatively affected the onsite course which was viewed as highly instructor-centered. Participants were dissatisfied with the lack of interaction and communication in the face-to-face course.

Some of the previous research findings conflict with some of the findings in this study. Studies have found that being anxious or uncomfortable with the technology produced some anxiety that affected student perceptions and course satisfaction in taking a course online (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012; Hager et al., 2012). As noted, one of the research sub-questions asked participants to describe their learning with course materials using technology. Three of the four participants had had no previous experience with online courses and while they wondered what an online course would be like, they expressed no concern about their ability to master the technology. Even Stephen, who considered himself a neophyte in terms of technology usage, found the navigation of online courses easy. Luke, an expert online teacher, viewed the online course navigation more with an eye towards improving what he felt was wrong with the design. Castle and McGuire (2010) found that graduate students in their study preferred online courses to hybrid courses. In contrast, this study showed that students may have had a preference for a particular delivery method, but all agreed that a hybrid course offered the best of all three
deliveries. Some studies showed that achieving interaction online between faculty and classmates is more difficult in hybrid or onsite environments (Ferguson & Tryjankowski, 2009; Pugh, 2010) but participants in this study found that the least communication took place in the onsite course. This was attributed to total lack of any online discussion or communication and the way the faculty member chose to teach the class.

Perhaps the most interesting finding supports the notion that delivery method is becoming less important to students’ perception of how best they learn or their satisfaction level (Bowen et al., 2012; Castle & McGuire, 2010; Dziuban & Moskal, 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Ritter et al., 2010; Robertson et al., 2005). These studies indicate that students are more interested in their overall learning experience than the method by which it was delivered. This was found to be true in this study by how the participants, regardless of their learning style, learned to appreciate other forms of delivery. They also found the entire degree experience a good one and that course satisfaction was more dependent on the faculty member and how they designed or chose to run the course, than the way in which it was delivered.

In summary, the findings of this study go deeper in describing what is already in the literature. Various factors influence a student’s learning experience (Arbaugh, 2000; Rydzewski et al., 2010; Phelan, 2012; Young & Norgard, 2006). This study goes beyond what is in the literature by providing an intimate view of student perspectives of online instruction. It has been widely documented that many faculty members are skeptical of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Jascik & Lederman, 2013; Graham & Jones, 2011; Ulmer et al., 2007). Similarly, the participants in this study were aware of the negative perceptions about the quality of online learning held by some faculty and this raised similar concerns for them. Also, the ability to learn online was an unknown for those who lacked previous online experience. Instead
of remaining fearful, the participants, over the course of the program, became supporters of online learning. The fact that the institution was an established traditional university helped to allay some fears. Participants found that course design and the capability to interact and collaborate with classmates mattered more than the delivery of a course. Navigating the online environment was no problem, even for those not technically savvy. Perhaps most importantly from the perspective of faculty, all the participants noted that the importance of the role of the faculty as facilitator of learning was a major contributing factor to how successfully they learned in each delivery environment.

Other factors contributed to their success. Much research has been done on undergraduates taking online courses but graduate students are unique since they are typically pursuing a degree for professional advancement and the perceived value and immediate application of what is learned is of major importance (Broome et al., 2011; Holtslander et al., 2012; Pittenger & Doering, 2010). With extensive higher education experience, the participants as doctoral students were highly focused on why they were in school and their preference for online courses that were student-centered. This allowed them time for individual projects that helped focus on topics and data for their thesis or immediate application to their jobs. The participants chose elements from each course that worked particularly well for them.

As noted by this study and supported by the literature (Arbaugh, 2000; Jones et al., 2011; Young & Norgard, 2006), course design plays a major role in learning in any delivery method. The design of the online and hybrid courses was considered successful by the participants because the courses provided the constructivist aspects of active learning, community building, and internal knowledge construction, while also recognizing the “connectedness” of a connectivist learning environment in which focuses on encouraging diverse ideas and dynamic
discussion. Taken together, the program provided participants the open interaction and shared knowledge, student-centered activities and community building through its course design and facilitator-led environment.

**Discussion of Findings in Relationship to Research Design**

The central research question was *How do graduate students describe their learning experience in a graduate program that includes online, hybrid, and onsite courses?* This was designed to be an interpretive phenomenological analysis study with the data from four interviews with four participants. The questions posed to the participants were aligned with the central research question and sub-questions. The data were transcribed and first cycle In Vivo coding took place after which each participant was sent their individual interviews for member checking. A follow-up interview was conducted by phone with each participant to make corrections and clarify any ambiguous answers. Further coding was then performed to identify themes and superordinate themes. What emerged were themes which sometimes overlapped but were also distinctive by participant experience and by delivery method.

The first aspect of making sense of the graduate learning experience by the participants and by this researcher was understanding their need to move beyond their initial concerns about online learning. Each had a certain amount of unease about starting an online doctoral program. This was mostly influenced by the negative views of online programs held by many in higher education, the damaging press coverage of some for-profit institutions associated with online programs, and the lack of experience that three of the four participants had with learning online. Participants were aware of the importance of “brand” in higher education and how that might affect the perceptions that others might have about their degree. Coupled with the years of commitment required to complete a doctoral degree, and the nervousness of starting a program,
getting past these apprehensions required a great deal of consideration. Their willingness to do so was based on their past academic experience and their career aspirations. All of the participants worked in higher education, had graduate degrees, and each had college teaching or training experience. They possessed the confidence to assess the obstacles and decide if they could be successful in overcoming them. What also helped was the brand reputation of the institution as primarily an on-ground university with a good reputation, which lessened the fears about perceptions that the degree might be substandard. On a more practical level, the participants were driven by their career aspirations that required a terminal degree. Two of the participants mentioned that they were receiving tuition assistance. All of these together aided in moving them forward.

A second theme that emerged in discussing their learning experiences covered activities online after entry into the program. The biggest difference between a traditional onsite course and courses online or in a hybrid format is the inability to communicate face-to-face. The participants articulated how they navigated communications within each the three delivery systems. For the three participants who did not have any previous online experience, this became a process of trial and error. They quickly learned that communicating, completing assignments, and learning from others online was not only easier than expected but also highly effective. Their general confidence in their ability to do doctoral level work translated into a belief in their ability to navigate the online learning environment successfully.

Advantages to the online system emerged—improved writing skills, more thoughtful online responses, and a realization that the learning community offered a dynamic environment for discussions where all had an equal opportunity to participate. The chance to take the discussion online into a face-to-face meeting in the hybrid courses was appreciated by the
participants. To the surprise of most participants, communication within the onsite course was less than optimal, based on the traditional teaching style of the instructor as well as the time of the day (evening) that the course was offered. Both contributed to a lack of interactivity and limited the free flow of ideas. The onsite experience, viewed in context of all of the courses, had the interesting result of altering the views of those who preferred face-to-face to consider that the success of a course as more dependent on the design and faculty member than on the delivery system. Missing for them in the onsite course was the online discussion forum, the ability to think through responses before making them, and the asynchronous environment which allowed participants to learn at a time and place that was best for them.

A third theme was how participants viewed the mastery of the course content in each delivery system. The participants found that the emphasis on writing and reading and the asynchronous nature of online and hybrid courses allowed them to be self-directed in their learning. As doctoral students, they could choose what texts and articles to spend more time on and which ones to possibly disregard. Some saw this as a chance to master as much material as possible for future use in their career, while others viewed this as a way to build up their research resources for the thesis. Participants found the materials useful, particularly those that were more current. These were seen as valuable for research or practical application on the job. Course materials were viewed as the foundation for learning and allowed flexibility to build up a knowledge base that was individualized to their own needs. This fit into the student-centered approach reflected in the program.

The fourth theme was the participants’ assessment of the workloads among the delivery systems. Participants found that the nature of the online and hybrid environment required more writing and therefore created a need to better manage their time. While some felt that the
workload was evenly distributed among the delivery systems, others felt that workload was related to the nature of the course and not to delivery. The research courses with more assignments required more intense efforts. The faculty member also played a role in the workload assigned. Courses with case studies were considered by one participant to be more arduous with papers due every two weeks, discussion questions and a longer paper due at the end of the course. Another participant felt the workload was fairly even with some courses having more work than others. How a course was designed also affected the amount of time spent to navigate assignments and content. Poorly designed courses caused time to be spent simply finding the materials, and this was seen as a poor use of time and entirely avoidable.

The final theme was how participants reflected and described their mixed delivery doctoral program. This included all of the other themes which contributed to the general perception of the participant experience of the program. Participants were pleased with the program and some were surprised to find that taking a course in their preferred learning style (in this case face-to-face) did not always produce the best learning results. Having in-person meetings and the chance to bond with others was as important as the online communications all of them came to appreciate. As a result, the hybrid format was viewed as the optimum, as it included the best aspects of both online and onsite with the flexibility of online and the personal contact of onsite. This was the conclusion made by even those who would have preferred a totally face-to-face program. All of the participants felt that the faculty member played an important role in the learning experience—much more than course delivery. No matter the delivery method, faculty were considered facilitators and relied upon for guidance and feedback in all courses.
Technology was not a hindrance to learning in any way. Even those less technically savvy found navigating the courses easy. Participants felt that although the program gave them the tools with which to learn, in the end it was up to them as individuals to make it work. While the participants shared many of the same views, each of them entered the program with different academic backgrounds and expectations. Their meaning-making was dependent on how they saw it and what worked for them.

Taken together, the themes provide a summary of the participants’ experience from the beginning of their academic journey through looking back and assessing where they had been. All were able to put their misgivings about taking courses online aside, and to decide that it was worth the risks. They found that they could not only learn online but found communication online to be a critical factor in that learning. The self-directed aspect of program—that you could choose what, how, and where to study and learn—was appealing to the different learning styles and personalities of the participants. Course workloads were related more to the type of course, its design and the instructor than the delivery method. Overall, satisfaction levels with the program were high with participants reporting that a hybrid delivery method offered the best of both online and onsite courses. A phenomenological design was central in the emergence of these themes because it provided participants with the chance to delve deeply into describing their experiences and the researcher with the opportunity to explore how those experiences affected their learning in these delivery methods.

**Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. Many of the studies cited in the literature review had large samples, including one which examined 1.1 million end-of-course evaluations. This study involves a small sample of four participants who engaged in in-depth, face-to-face interviews.
The study is not intended to be generalizable to all graduate programs that offer mixed delivery courses. While the data examined the experiences of these four participants, it does not reflect the full range of possible student experiences in a doctoral program with courses offered in different delivery systems. This study looked at the experience of students in a large university in the northeast. A smaller university or one with a doctoral program that offers more onsite courses might elicit a different set of responses. This program offered just one onsite course taught by the same faculty member. A different faculty member or one with a different teaching style may have evoked a different reaction from participants. What the study does offer is insight into how these graduate students reflected on their experience in the important areas of communication, learning through technology, and course workload. Their articulation of how they navigated their learning within all these courses provides important information about the learning environment and how it is viewed by some students.

The participants in this study self-selected their participation. A recruitment e-mail was sent to all eligible doctoral students who had taken the one onsite course and a combination of online and hybrid courses. A total of six responses were received indicating willingness to participate. Five took the next step and completed a brief qualifying questionnaire. Of the five, four participants were available for interviews. These participants were willing to give an hour of their time in a face-to-face interview (two were done by web conferencing system since these two lived out-of-state) plus a follow-up call. This was the first time any of the participants had been asked to reflect on their experiences and they gave a great deal of time and attention to articulating their perceptions. A set of four other participants may have provided a different set of data and may have been able to provide additional insights, depending on where they were in the program, their previous experiences and their expectations and perceptions.
Implications for Educational Practice

**Scholarly significance.** One of the goals for this research study was to understand the real lived experience of students who were enrolled in a graduate program in which the courses were offered through different delivery methods. As noted in the literature review, very few studies have been conducted with students who have had this specific mix of courses. Most early studies have been qualitative and involved end-of-course evaluations or grade comparisons. Often, previous studies compared one course delivered in one method to the same course delivered in another, typically an online course compared to its on-campus equivalent. These have now been done frequently and have repeatedly shown no significant difference when conducting grade comparisons, that continuing to do these provides no significant new information (Arbaugh et al., 2009; Deggs et al., 2010). As such, the goal in this study was to go beyond end-of-course evaluations and ask students about their experiences and perceptions in detail about online courses and to invite them to reflect deeply on how they communicated and navigated in their mixed course delivery program. Their insights revealed much that confirms recent research: that online courses were better than onsite ones (Robertson et al., 2005); students were more satisfied with the level of collaboration online than onsite (Frederickson et al., 2005); and students preferred hybrid courses to onsite or online ones (Martínez-Caro & Campuzano-Bolarín, 2011. It also shows the participants’ adaptive abilities to perform outside of their learning styles in these various courses as well as what eventually worked best for each of them. Taken as a whole, their overall experience adds to the body of knowledge about learning within a technologically connected student environment by demonstrating that despite what some faculty believe, students found that they are able to learn through communication and collaboration in the online and hybrid environments in ways that exceed the traditional classroom experience. As someone who has also had this experience as a student, I understood how participants described
how they felt and best learned. This aided me in interpreting that experience for a scholarly audience. I described these in ways that those unfamiliar with the student experience could best benefit from this study. At the same time, I was careful to not let my own experience influence my questions or how I interpreted their responses.

**Practitioner significance.** Though this study involved a very small number of students, it illustrates how each participant made meaning of their learning within each course learning environment. As an online graduate student, I wondered whether the literature reflected my own experiences and if other students held the same views and perceptions. As an online instructor, I have developed and taught online as well as face-to-face. My full-time professional position is in helping institutions implement online programs. Learning how participants viewed the role of the faculty, especially in an online course, was very useful. I was interested in what the participants found to be most valuable and what was ineffective about the delivery formats. What was also beneficial to me as a practitioner was having participants with a range of experiences. I found some of my own experiences and perceptions were shared by the participants, while some were not.

Faculty skepticism remains an issue for many institutions. I believe the online environment provides a different learning experience that can be equally effective as face-to-face. This study gives skeptics the actual words of doctoral students who have lived the experience and who themselves have been uncertain about how one can successfully learn and communicate online. This study helps to show that the participants had a unique and positive learning experience—even those who were initially apprehensive about online course delivery. I do not expect this study to change the minds of dubious faculty members, nor do I think it is necessary to do so.
This study illustrates, in the words of the participants, their views of the role of the faculty, the importance of good course design, the advantages of a student-centered environment, the ways in which effective communication takes place in every delivery system, and the participants’ perception of the value of online courses, without regard to first considering the delivery method of the course. The participants in this study had initial concerns about online learning, much like some faculty, but they overcame them. It is possible that doubtful faculty might also become more accepting after they try developing and teaching online programs and are supported in their online endeavors.

Faculty concerns raised about online learning also relate to areas outside course delivery. Faculty are uncertain about learning the technology and the lack of technical support (Graham & Jones, 2011); the fear that teaching online requires more work that may not be adequately compensated (Graham & Jones, 2011; Shea, 2007); and online teaching may not be recognized in promotion and tenure decisions (Graham & Jones, 2011; Shea, 2007). These are issues that administrators can address to reinforce their own commitment to online programs as an important part of the institution’s mission. Further research into the area of faculty support and outcomes, especially with those who previously expressed doubts as to the quality of online courses, would be most useful.

Finally, this study demonstrates that apprehension held by students and perhaps even faculty about the online environment can be overcome when the online and hybrid courses offer meaningful collaborative opportunities, the opportunity to build a learning community with classmates, and a learner-centered approach in which each individual builds onto their knowledge in a way that is most successful for them.
Conclusion

When I started working on this research topic several years ago, I knew that I was interested in learning more about how students experience their learning if they decide to mix and match courses in different delivery systems. I believed that this would become the norm in higher education in the future. I focused my research on students who take these varied delivery courses in one graduate degree program where there are fewer courses than in an undergraduate curriculum and therefore easier for students who have lived the experience to more accurately reflect on each course and each delivery over a shorter time frame. A phenomenological approach provided me with the opportunity to “hear” students describe that experience and interpret how they interpreted it. The research questions resulted in data that covered the following themes:

- Moving beyond initial concerns about online learning
- Navigating communication within delivery systems
- Mastering course content
- Assessing course workloads among delivery systems
- Reflecting on overall learning in a mixed delivery program

Within these, each of the participants’ views is reflected. Each experience was unique and based on their own expectations and how they adapted to what was, for most of them, a new learning environment. There were many similarities between the results of previous studies as found in the literature review and those in this study. At the same time, this study allowed the participants to speak at length for the first time about how their own learning within these different course delivery formats. While administrators and faculty often base programmatic decisions on end-of-course evaluations and their own teaching experience, having students who
articulate extensively what worked best for them in a program and by delivery method provides an insider’s view. Most online courses are taught by faculty who themselves have never been online students in a degree program. This study offers some deeper perspectives that may not otherwise be known or considered.

There are additional related areas for further research that could be done. The most obvious would be to assess whether taking more onsite courses with different faculty in a mixed delivery program would result in different results than the onsite experience reported here. This study included only males. It would be worth studying gender differences and if women view their learning experience in these formats differently. Studying only those who had previous online experiences in credit courses might provide a different level of expectations and perhaps more focus on course design, tools, and assessments since this group would have some basis for comparison. This study was included doctorate of education students. It would be interesting to know if other academic areas might produce different results, particularly in the health care professions or business areas where practical application on the job is also a primary motivator for pursuing the degree.

Another question to answer would be why some graduate students choose not to take courses online or in hybrid format when available to them. Is this decision the result of a previous bad experience, an expectation that their learning style could not effectively be accommodated or a fear that learning in this method would not be comparable? More qualitative studies of faculty who teach both online and face-to-face would be helpful to determine faculty perspectives of effectiveness and knowledge generation. The nature of online learning continues to open up new paths for research.
This study specifically looked at the learning experiences of one group of doctoral students in online, hybrid, and onsite courses. While each was unique, they had common experiences from which to draw conclusions that can help administrators and faculty better understand their learning and examine the delivery methods offered students in higher education in the future.
References


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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear EdD Student:

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a research project as part of my doctoral thesis in Northeastern University’s EdD program. You are being contacted by email because you are enrolled in the Southwest New England University’s EdD program and have taken at least one face-to-face course in this program as well as a number of hybrid and online courses.

The purpose of this research is to explore the graduate student learning experience in taking online, hybrid and online courses in a specific degree program. This research is important as there are many studies that have been done comparing student outcomes in online/hybrid courses vs. onsite courses, but very few have explored the actual graduate student learning experience in a specific graduate degree program that is made up of courses in a variety of delivery formats. Your participation may help researchers, faculty and higher education administrators better understand how students view their learning experiences when taking courses in varying delivery methods and how they perceive their total graduate program learning experience.

The research project will involve one 45-60 minute face-to-face or web conference audio-taped interview where you will be asked to describe your learning experiences in your courses and a 30 minute follow-up web conference call which will enable you to respond to any questions that I have based on your responses and enable you to expand on any of your previous responses. Both will be scheduled at a time and place convenient for you. Participation in the study and student identities will be kept completely confidential and follow Northeastern University IRB guidelines.

If you would be interested in participating, please let me know by email me no later than __________. I will then send you a brief, qualifying questionnaire (it will take 5 minutes to complete). I am looking for 4-6 participants and if I receive more than that number, I will let you know whether or not you have been selected to participate as soon as possible.

If you decide to join the study, you will be asked to sign a consent form at the first interview. The consent form that I have attached to this email provides additional information about the study. If you have questions before you decide to participate, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you decide to participate, I will also answer any other questions you may have about the study.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary and confidential. You may refuse to join or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study at any time and for any reason, without penalty. You can choose to skip over any question in the interviews that you do not want to answer, and can respond as much or as little as you choose to any particular question. Your involvement in the EdD program will not be impacted by your decision to participate or not participate in the research.

Again, please email me at Kryczka.s@husky.neu.edu if you would like to participate. If you have additional questions, you can email me or call me at 617-571-2176. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this study.

Susan M. Kryczka
Appendix B: Unsigned consent document

**45 CFR 46 117(c)** In certain instances, an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects. In cases in which the documentation requirement is waived, the IRB may require the investigator to provide subjects with a written statement regarding the research.

**Only the IRB can waive or modify the consent process. Researchers are not authorized to make this decision. When a signed informed consent is not required, this consent form may be given to participants to keep. Please modify the following information as necessary.**

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Graduate Programs in Education

**Name of Investigator(s):** Corliss Brown Thompson, PI; Susan M. Kryczka, Student Researcher

**Title of Project:** The Graduate Student Learning Experience in Online, Hybrid, and Online Courses

**Request to Participate in Research**

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to explore the graduate student learning experience in taking online, hybrid and online courses in a specific degree program.

**You must be at least 18 years old** to be in this research project.

The study interview will take place at a time and location convenient for you and will take about 45-60 minutes. A follow-up interview of not more than 30 minutes will also take place after the initial interview, at a time and location convenient to you by web conference call, to review the transcript and clarify any of the responses, if necessary. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to reflect, on your learning experiences as a graduate student taking courses in online, hybrid, and onsite formats.

**There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.**

**There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study.** However, your answers may help us to learn more about how students view their learning experiences when taking courses in varying delivery methods and how they perceive their total graduate program learning experience.

**Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner.** Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being of this project.

**The decision to participate in this research project is up to you.** You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

**You will receive a $20 gift certificate to Starbucks at the end of the follow-up interview.**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call or contact Susan M. Kryczka, 617-571-2176 or at Kryczka.s@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Corliss Brown Thompson, the Principal Investigator, at co.brown@neu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Susan M. Kryczka
Appendix C: Email and Qualifying Questionnaire

Dear Student/Former Student,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this brief qualifying questionnaire regarding your learning experience as a graduate student in a program which offers courses in varying delivery formats.

I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University and conducting research which explores the graduate student experience in taking online, hybrid blended, or onsite (face-to-face) courses within their graduate degree program.

I am interested in exploring student views regarding 1) learning and communication experiences with faculty and classmates in online, hybrid/blended, and onsite courses; 2) learning experiences with course materials using technology in online, hybrid/blended, and onsite courses; and 3) learning experiences and course workload in online, hybrid/blended, and onsite courses.

For purposes of this study, an online course is defined as one which has more than 80% of its content delivered online and has no required face-to-face meetings; a hybrid or blended course is defined as one which has 30-79% of its content delivered online with a reduced number of face-to-face meetings; and an onsite course is one which 0-29% of the materials may be delivered online (syllabus/class assignments) but class meetings are all conducted face-to-face.

This qualifying questionnaire has been developed as the first step in identifying individual students or recent graduates of the program who qualify for the study and wish to participate in a longer, in-person interview and follow-up call. If you would like to participate in the qualifying questionnaire, please go to the following link and fill out the questionnaire by _________. The questionnaire will take no more than 5 minutes to complete. Questionnaire responses and participation in the study are confidential and voluntary.

For your information, a consent form is also attached to this email which provides more information on the study and interview process. It is not necessary to sign it at this time but it is provided for informational purposes.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Susan M. Kryczka
Doctoral Student
School of Education, College of Professional Studies
Kryczka.s@husky.neu.ed
Appendix C: Email and Qualifying Questionnaire

Qualifying Questionnaire

1. Are you currently enrolled in or are you a recent graduate (since January 2013) of Southwest New England University’s EdD program? ___Yes ___No

2. How many courses have you completed in your degree program? _______

3. How many courses have you taken online? (An online course is defined as a course that has 80% of its content delivered online and has no required face-to-face meetings). ___

4. How many courses have you taken as a hybrid/blended? (A blended or hybrid course is defined as one that has 30-79% of its content delivered online with a reduced number of face-to-face meetings). _______

5. How many course have you taken onsite? (An onsite course is defined as one that has 0-29% of its materials may be delivered online syllabus/class assignments but class meetings are all conducted face-to-face). _______

6. Your age:  ___21-29  
   ___30-39  
   ___40-49  
   ___50-59  
   ___60-69  
   ___other

Based on your responses, if you qualify for the rest of this study, please indicate if you are willing to participate in a 45-60 minute face-to-face audio-taped interview with the researcher to discuss your learning experiences in taking courses in a mixed delivery graduate program. There will also be a follow-up interview to be conducted later by a web conference call not to last more than 30 minutes to clarify your answers and ask follow up questions. The interview and follow up web conference call will take place at a time and place convenient to you and your identity will remain confidential. All interview protocols are conducted under the auspices of the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board
http://www.northeastern.edu/research/hsrp/irb/

7. _____ Yes, I would be interested in participating in a face-to-face interview and follow-up web call.  
   Name: ___________________________  
   Email address: ___________________  
   Re-enter your email address: ___________________

8. _____ I am not interested in participating in the study at this time.  
If you qualify and indicate that you would be interested in the face-to-face interview and follow-up, I will send you a follow-up email in the next few weeks.

Thank you for your consideration.
Susan M. Kryczka  
Kryczka.s@husky.neu.edu  
College of Professional Studies
Appendix D: Interview Questions

Warm-up Question
Tell me a little about yourself. For instance, do you have a particular hobby or how do you like to spend your free time?

Background
1. What undergraduate degree do you hold and what academic area is it in?
2. Why are you pursuing a graduate degree?
3. How did you come to choose to take courses in different delivery methods?

Central Interview Questions
4. Before you enrolled in this program had you ever taken an online or hybrid/blended course before?
   a) If you have taken a previous online course, how would you describe that experience?
   b) If you have taken a previous hybrid/blended course, how would you describe that experience?
   c) If this program is your first experience taking online and hybrid/blended courses, how would you describe any expectations or concerns you may have had about learning online or via a hybrid/blended method? Were any of your expectations or concerns realized?
5. Describe your learning and communication experience with faculty and with classmates in your courses online. This would include written communications within and outside of the course in the form of discussions and emails, phone conversations, or web conferencing using Skype, Adobe Connect, or similar system.
6. Describe your learning communication experience with faculty and with classmates in your hybrid/blended courses? This would include face-to-face class time and written communications within and outside of the course, discussions and emails, phone conversations, or web conferencing using Skype, Adobe Connect, Google Hangout, or any other web conferencing system.
Appendix D: Interview Questions

7. Describe your learning and communication experience with faculty and with classmates in your onsite courses? This would include face-to-face class time and written communications within and outside of the course, discussions and emails, phone conversations, or web conferencing using Skype, Adobe Connect, Google Hangout, or any other web conferencing system.

   a) Additional follow-up question: Did you experience or perceive a difference in communication with faculty or classmates in courses offered in the different delivery methods? If so, how? If not, how do you feel about communication overall as part your learning experience in the course(s)?

8. Describe your learning experience with course material (lectures, content, texts, assignments, exams) in your online course(s)?

9. Describe your learning experience with course material (lectures, content, texts, assignments, exams) in your hybrid/blended courses?

10. Describe your learning experience with course material (lectures, texts, assignments, exams) in your onsite courses?

   a) Possible prompt question: Did you experience or perceive differences in your learning experience based on course materials? How do you feel about how course materials are presented in online, hybrid/blended, and onsite courses? How do you feel about course materials overall in the courses?

11. Describe your learning experience and course workload in your online course(s).

12. Describe your learning experience and course workload in your online hybrid/blended courses?

13. Describe your learning experience and course workload in your online course(s) onsite courses?
Appendix D: Interview Questions

a) Additional prompt question: Did you experience or perceive a difference in your learning based on workload? Do you feel these differences affected your learning overall in your degree program?

14. Tell me about your learning experience overall in taking courses in different delivery methods in your degree program?

   a) Additional prompt question: Can you tell me more about your overall learning experience as it relates to course delivery, communication with faculty and classmates, using technology, and workload?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences in the degree program?

Thank you for your participation in this interview. I will be in touch within the next two months regarding a follow-up telephone interview and a copy of the transcript of this interview for you to check for any errors.