

**An Examination of the Online Student Experience and Students' Online Course  
Performance**

**by**

**Simrit Parmar**

**Submitted to the Faculty of Extension**

**University of Alberta**

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communications and Technology**

**October 27, 2010**

## **An Examination of the Online Student Experience and Students' Online Course Performance**

### **Abstract**

As interest in online course delivery continues to expand, questions remain about its effectiveness as a medium of instruction. Numerous research studies conducted to find an answer to this question have failed to achieve consensus due to their conflicting results. The conflicting results of these studies, most of which are a comparison of student performance based on the mode of delivery, suggest that to better understand online delivery, we need to understand how other factors in the online student experience influence student performance. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of two groups of online students and understand how those experiences may have affected performance in their online courses. One group was composed of students who had done better in online than traditional courses and were part-time students taking online courses only. The second group was composed of students who had done better in in-class courses and were full-time students taking both online and in-class courses concurrently. Using a phenomenological approach, through participant interviews, this study explored the experiences of six online students to create a picture of the online student experience and how it might influence their learning in online courses. The findings of this study appear to indicate that student performance in an online environment may be influenced by factors such as instructor expectations; timely feedback; effective time-management; student course load; and whether the student is taking both online and traditional courses at the same time.

## Introduction

With the advent of the internet age, online course delivery has become increasingly popular due to its convenience, flexibility, and the opportunity it provides working professionals to upgrade their academic qualifications without giving up their jobs (Karber, 2003). However, because online delivery is thought to have several disadvantages like isolation, disconnectedness, limited interaction and a lack of media naturalness, questions remain about the effectiveness of this “lean” medium in providing quality instruction (Abrami & Bures, 1996; Willging & Johnson, 2004). In an attempt to answer questions about the effectiveness of online learning, to ensure quality instruction, and to optimize student learning and success, numerous research studies comparing student performance in online and traditionally delivered courses have been undertaken. However, these studies, which have been primarily quantitative in nature (cf., Maki, Maki, Patterson & Whittaker, 2000; Kashy, Albertelli, Kashy, & Thoennessen, 2001; Shachar & Neuman, 2003; Nesler, Hanner, Melburg, & McGowan, 2000; Brown & Leiholm, 2002; Ury, 2004; Ury, McDonald, McDonald, & Dorn, 2005; Kidd & Stamatakis, 2006) and which have compared results of students' performance primarily using a pretest - posttest model or students' grade point average (GPA), have yielded conflicting results (Dellana, Collins & West, 2000). Thomas Russell's “No Significant Difference Website” (<http://www.nosignificantdifference.org/>), is a readily accessible collection of studies that points to the mixed nature of the results in the domain of alternative delivery. Due to the mixed results of these studies a clear picture of the effectiveness of the different delivery methods has yet to emerge.

Some researchers have questioned the effectiveness of using GPA or pretests and posttests in measuring performance in online courses and suggest that a different approach in studying the problem is necessary (Kidd & Stamatakis, 2006; Johnson, 1997; Picciano, 2002, Holman, 2000). Other researchers suggest that there may be other factors that may be more important than the medium of delivery in explaining student performance.

The aim of this study is to examine other factors that may help us better understand differences in performance in online and face-to-face courses, rather than just performance measures themselves.

In order to get at some of the factors in the online student experience a qualitative phenomenological approach was selected for this exploratory study because “phenomenological methods are particularly effective in bringing to the fore experiences and perceptions from their own perspectives and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions” (Lester, 1999. p.1). This study hopes to create a comprehensive picture of the students' experience in an online setting.

#### Research Question:

What are some of the factors in the online student experience that affect his/her performance in online courses?

## **Literature Review**

In studying the online student experience, an understanding of the media richness theory, developed by Richard Daft and Robert Lengel in 1986, provides insight into the impact different communication media potentially have on the message being communicated. The media richness theory or information richness theory proposes that communication media have varying capacities for resolving ambiguity, negotiating various interpretations, and facilitating understanding. The more closely that a medium can reproduce the original message, the richer the medium, and the less closely it is able to replicate the original message, the leaner it is. So a face-to-face lecture is richer than a textbook which is a lean medium because it cannot reproduce intonation and visual social cues such as gestures. Daft, Lengel, and Trevino (1987) present a media richness hierarchy where a face-to-face conversation is the richest medium in the hierarchy followed by telephone, electronic mail, letter, memo, and bulletin. The implication of the media richness theory is that when using a lean medium like email or a text message to communicate, a sender needs be aware of the limitations of the medium in four areas: immediate feedback, multiple cues, language variety, and personal focus (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). Because the leaner the medium, the greater the equivocality and uncertainty present in the message being communicated. So according to Daft, Lengel and Trevino's media richness hierarchy, a traditional classroom with face-to-face communication is likely to be more conducive to a student's clear understanding of the message being communicated and consequently have a positive effect on student performance than online learning, a comparatively leaner medium. However, Ned Kock's (2005) media naturalness theory or compensatory adaptation theory has been proposed as

an alternative to Daft and Lengel's (1986) media richness theory. The media naturalness or compensatory adaptation theory posits that though people consistently perceive that face-to-face communication poses fewer obstacles to effective communication, yet when people conduct tasks using e-collaboration technologies, they often present the same level of performance or even better performance than groups accomplishing the same task face-to-face. These findings indicate that despite their perceptions, people likely make compensatory adaptation for the leanness of the media. The e-collaboration paradox would then suggest that in spite of the inherent drawbacks of a comparatively leaner medium like online learning, these differences between media may not differentially affect performance. However, research studies comparing student performance in online and traditional courses have yielded results that appear to conflict. Some studies (Russell, 1999; Miller, Cohen, & Beffa-Negrini, 2001; Thirunarayan & Peres-Pardo, 2002; Daymont & Blau, 2008; Maring et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2002; Stivason et al., 2008), concurring with Kock's media naturalness theory, suggest that an online learning environment does not negatively affect student performance. Yet other studies (Brown & Leiholm, 2002; Ury, 2004; Ury et al., 2005; Kidd et al. 2006; Gibson, 2008) indicate that the traditional classroom setting with its "direct teacher-student interaction" (Brown & Liedholm, 2002. p. 446) gives students a definite advantage in performance.

As numbers of cyber-learners continue to increase, so do questions about the efficacy of online education. Questions abound about learner outcomes, student satisfaction, competing platforms, appropriate pedagogy and faculty preparation (Gibson, 2008). In an attempt to answer some of these questions, there is a growing body of research examining various aspects of online education; however, the major focus of

these studies has been on comparing students' performance in online and traditionally delivered courses using pretest-posttest models and GPA (Ury, 2004). And of the studies that have been published, there is conflicting evidence as to whether there are significant differences in student performance when comparing online and face-to-face instruction (Nichols, Shaffer & Shockey, 2003). As a result, there is no consensus around the answer to the question, "Are there differences in the amount of content learning between online and traditional courses?"

### **Studies indicating better onsite results**

Several studies conducted across universities using comparisons to measure performance in examining relative differences between delivery methods mostly indicate the superiority of face-to-face instruction. A study conducted at Michigan State University comparing student performance in classroom and online courses in Principles of Macroeconomics showed that online students, though they had characteristics more conducive to academic success, did significantly worse than classroom students (Brown & Leidholm, 2002). This difference was more pronounced for exam questions that tested students' ability to apply basic concepts in ways that are more sophisticated and least pronounced for basic learning tasks such as knowing definitions or recognizing important concepts. Further, a study conducted by Dr. Ury (2004) at Northwest Missouri State University showed that management information system students enrolled in online courses "showed a considerably lower mean score than students enrolled in traditional sections of the course" (p. 99). Significant differences were also found by Bearden et al. in a 2002 study which stated that "trend analysis indicated that students with lower GPA who enrolled in online courses performed lower, as measured by the final course grade,

than on-campus students” (p. 213). Another study by Ury et al. (2005) consisted of 1300 observations spread over seven courses that are a part of the university’s computer science and information systems curriculum. Student performance was compared by GPA, American College Testing (ACT) composite scores, credit hours completed, instructor, and delivery method. Significant differences in performance were found in three of the seven courses where the online students received a significantly lower grade than in-class students. A 2009 study by Ferguson and Tryjankowski examining the performance of Master’s-level students enrolled in an online cognition, learning and assessment course and comparing it with the performance of students in a face-to-face classroom setting found that the classroom students scored significantly higher on the final exam.

Further, a comparative study of pharmacy students in a pharmacokinetics course at West Virginia University delivered live and through asynchronous videoconferencing showed that students who completed the course in the traditional classroom setting had a higher score than that of the videoconferencing group. However, for student satisfaction, the videoconference group rated the course higher than the traditional classroom group (Kidd & Stamatakis, 2006). Another study at Arkansas State University using the pretest – posttest format and comparing the achievement of undergraduate students enrolled in two sections (online and classroom) of a telecommunications course revealed that the classroom students generated a much higher performance (Jones, Moeeni, & Ruby, 2005). Yet another comparative study of student outcomes and student satisfaction in three MBA human resource management classes showed that the traditional classroom students performed slightly better than the online students where the final course grade



was concerned. The traditional classroom students also rated the course higher in terms of student satisfaction (Gibson 2008). Referring to the results of the study, Gibson comments that these findings are “in opposition to much of the current literature showing that online achievement of learner outcomes is at least as good if not better than in-class students” (p. 8).

### **Studies indicating better online results**

There are also ample research studies showing that online students out-perform students in a traditional classroom. A study at Montana State University assessing student performance in a Principles of Accounting course indicated that the online students performed significantly better on the final exam than their classroom counterparts. This study, which also measured attitudes of the two groups of students, reported that both the in-class and online students were equally satisfied with the course (Campbell et al., 2002). Results of a study (Nesler et al., 2001) of undergraduate nursing students indicated that students in the distance programs had higher scores than campus-based nursing students. Research by Shachar and Neumann (2003), using a meta-analytic approach of eighty-six experimental and quasi-experimental studies revealed that in two-thirds of the cases, students taking courses by distance education clearly out-performed students enrolled in traditionally instructed courses as demonstrated by their final course grades. Another study by Maki et al. (2000) comparing students in web-based and classroom sections of an introductory psychology course indicated that students in the web-based sections out-performed the classroom students. A study at the George Washington University on student outcomes in two successive pathophysiology courses where ninety-six students received half the instruction in traditional classroom mode and

the other half in a distance mode revealed that students performed significantly better on the material presented in the distance format; however, students expressed a strong preference for the classroom format (Maring et. al., 2008).

### **Studies unable to show significant difference**

Yet, other studies using comparisons in performance based on delivery methods were unable to show significant differences. For example, a study by Miller et al. (2001), using final course grades as the measure in their comparative study of 35 online students and 434 traditional students enrolled in a nutrition course found no significant difference when comparing the performance of online and in-class students. Research conducted by Daymont and Blau (2008) at Templeton University showed that when factors like GPA, major, and class were controlled for, both male and female students in online courses did as well as traditional students. A study by Stivason, Saunders, and Price (2008) comparing student performance in an accounting course offered by a single professor in both an online and traditional setting revealed that though certain testing methods did provide significant advantages to one group over the other, when a variety of testing methods were used, the overall difference in performance between the online and in-class groups was insignificant. Further, a quasi-experimental study by Vroeginday (2005) which compared final exam and overall scores of online and in-class students indicated that while online students tended to perform better in the final exam; however, there were no significant differences observed with respect to over all scores. Vroeginday concluded that the results of this study favour Russell's (1999) no significant difference hypothesis. Other research studies that have compared traditional learners to online learners also report that there appears to be, 'no significant difference' in the learner performance

based on pretest-posttest (Johnson, 2002) and overall scores (Smith & Palm, 2007) where mode of delivery is concerned.

The confusing results of the numerous studies examining the effectiveness of online delivery has caused traditional academics to view online teaching in higher education with suspicion (Buck, 2001). Buck contends that “many of the data used to support claims for the efficacy of online learning are suspect from a statistician’s viewpoint” (p. 600). She is especially critical of studies that claim “no statistically significant difference was found.” To say “no statistically significant difference was found between online and in-class” does not mean that the two methods are in fact equal. According to Buck, the “failure to find a difference is a weak position that can be explained in multiple ways and does not permit a confident statement about the results” (p. 600). However, the reasons for these results may be less with the “lack of significance” finding and more with the reporting of the findings of these studies. Furthermore, the lack of significant difference may perhaps be due to the fact that the measures used to look at differences may not be sensitive enough.

As the debate continues, it remains worthwhile to examine the role of online education and look at ways of improving the effectiveness of this new teaching instrument (Singh & Pan, 2004).

### **Performance independent of mode of delivery**

Much of current research conducted in the area of online learning has focused on measuring performance based on mode of delivery. However, an examination of the conflicting results yielded by the numerous performance-based media comparison studies suggests that to better understand the differences in performance more refined research is

needed. In an article reviewing meta-analyses and other studies of media influence on learning, Richard E. Clark contends that there are no benefits to be gained by employing any specific medium of instruction for “media do not influence learning under any condition” rather it is pedagogy that makes the difference (1983, p. 445). Supporting Clark’s contention, a study by Larson and Sung (2009) which was a three way comparison of delivery modes (online vs. blended vs. in-class) for an introductory management systems course taught by the same instructor indicated that based on exam and final grade, there was no significant difference in delivery modes where student performance was concerned. Another four year (2000-2004) comparative study based on the final exam results and grade point averages of two thousand students enrolled in the masters program in the department of computing sciences at a Hong Kong university concluded that the mode of study is not a determinant of success (Quiping, Chung, Challis & Cheung, 2006). Research conducted by Mcfarland and Hamilton (2005-2006) indicates that the delivery method has no effect on student performance. Rather the factors identified that appeared to affect student performance are: (a) instructor effectiveness, (b) presentation of information/content by instructor, and (c) overall course satisfaction. Instructor effectiveness, according to the researchers, includes several things such as (1) the quality and speed of communication in replying to discussion board questions, email etc.; (2) decisions about course design and technology; and (3) comprehensive and clear expectations. Presentation of information involves the ease or difficulty of learning the course content as it is presented online by the instructor. The third factor, students overall satisfaction, is influenced by their workload and the level of their prior experience with online instruction. Similarly another study by McLaren (2004)

conducted on business students reveals that performance as measured by grades is independent of the mode of instruction (classroom or online).

Though comparative research studies have served a useful purpose in confirming the legitimacy of online learning, rather than continuing to perform media comparison studies, we should move towards developing teaching pedagogies that make the best use of current technology (Sener, 2004). For whether or not technology makes a difference seems to depend on how it is used (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006)

*Use of grades in comparison studies problematic.* In the comparison studies conducted to date, grades have often been used to measure performance and to compare between the two delivery modes: online and in-class. However, the normative nature of grades, where a person's test performance is compared to the performance of his peers, only reflects the differences amongst the individuals within the group (Browning, 1997). One's grade usually depends on who else is in the class and does not necessarily directly reflect the course content. The grades are typically affected by the distribution of the class and not direct mastery of the material. So comparisons between groups are difficult, as norm referencing of grades will yield proportionately similar grades.

Furthermore, factors that can affect students' overall educational experience in an online/distance education environment may not be easily captured by grade performance (Kidd & Stamatakis, 2006). Factors other than just students' performance may be reflected in grades. For example, grades do not directly measure study habits, time available for study, teacher effectiveness etc. Johnson (1997) contends that GPA alone is a poor measurement of a person's learning because it is dependent on many variables such as course-design, marks inflation, rigor of curricula, and instructor grading patterns.

This view about the error of relying solely on grades to adequately measure performance either online or in-class is supported by Picciano who asserts that “while grades and their derivatives like GPA are common student performance measures, they can be problematic particularly in light of concerns about grade inflation and other issues” (Picciano, 2002. p. 24). While GPA is a good measure to make performance comparisons within a group where one test-taker is compared to his/her peers, it is inappropriate for group comparisons. Due to the normative nature of GPA, the distribution of grades within two groups is almost similar, and this makes comparisons between groups difficult (Browning, 1997).

### **Other ways of measuring performance**

Rather than focusing on a single measure of performance, multiple measures need to be employed so that the problems inherent in a single measure do not cloud the results, and a clearer picture of the effectiveness of online delivery emerges. Other ways of measuring performance include: successful completion of a course, course withdrawals, graduation rates, and attendance. A study by Picciano, (2002) made a deliberate “attempt to go beyond typical institutional performance measures such as grades and examine measures specifically related to course objectives” (p. 21). The purpose of the study was to explore what factors might affect performance in an online course in relationship to student interaction and sense of presence in the course. The results of the study showed a strong relationship between students' perceptions of the quality and quantity of their interaction and their perceived performance in an online course compared to their actual interaction (measured by actual postings) and performance (measured by assignment and exam scores). Another study by Hyllegard,

Deng and Hunter (2008) investigating the determinants of attrition from online courses at a community college in New York used statistical profiling of students which was based on demographic and academic factors.. The study found that students who officially withdrew had the same statistical profile as the student who completed the course. Their reason for withdrawing, as suggested by the findings, was that they were over-extended where course workload was concerned. On the other hand, the students who unofficially withdrew had a different statistical profile than the rest of the class. The majority were Hispanic students who began the term with weaker academic accomplishment such as fewer credits, lower GPA, and lower reading and writing skills. The study also suggested that the high attrition rates in online delivery were an “obvious consequence of the expansion of access to motivated individuals who have unusually busy lives” (n.p.), rather than an inherent shortcoming of the medium.

Additional research that focuses on other factors in the online student experience is an ethnographic study by Hara and Kling (2000) which revealed that students in e-learning environments are more likely to experience feelings of isolation, frustration, and confusion. Another study by Taylor (2003) reveals that while students may enjoy the flexibility and convenience of online courses, those who have trouble with motivation and self-discipline may sign up for classes but disappear halfway through the course. According to Tyler-Smith (2006), a student's first set of experiences can either be a barrier to retention or contribute to the likelihood of persistence. Other research that looks at aspects of the online student experience is a report by Singh and Pan (2004) based on their experiences with online teaching. The researcher's examination of the online student experience suggests that isolation of an online learning environment may

negatively impact student performance. All these studies serve to provide some insight into the online student experience.

Of the studies examining the efficacy of online learning that have been done to date, a number have been quantitative in nature, which mainly consist of media comparison studies based on performance. Other studies, mostly qualitative in nature, examine one or two aspects of the online student experience or student perceptions of online learning. However, there is a need for additional research that better understands performance in an online environment.

An understanding of students' experiences with online learning and their effect on students' performance in online courses could provide valuable information which could not only help in course design but may also guide institutions in putting appropriate measures in place to provide a rich learning experience using a relatively lean medium.

In the words of Sharpe, Benfeld, Roberts and Francis (2006) there is a need within higher education to evaluate student experiences in e-learning environments, an issue which has been ignored owing to the relatively low status of pedagogic research and the pressure to maintain and deliver rather than evaluate.

### **Student experience**

In exploring student experience with online courses, this study looked at aspects of student engagement relating to online courses. Total student experience in a traditional setting encompasses the different aspects of the engagement of students with higher education (Harvey, Burrows, & Green, 1992). It includes teaching and learning, curriculum, student life, advising and mentoring. However, online courses present a different set of challenges to both instructors and students. For example, students taking



courses online may never come face-to-face with either their instructor or their fellow course mates (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004). They may never step inside an advisor's office or physically visit the institution. So keeping these differences in mind, this study explores the following factors that characterize the online student experience:

*Student-related:* working in isolation (Abrami and Bures, 1996; Chong, Digangi, Hill & Rivera, 2001; Singh & Pan, 2004; Jannasch-Pennell & Kaprolet, 2008); self-directed learner; time-management (Burak, 1993; Dunlap & Garbinger, 2003); stronger writing skills necessary for communication (Berenson, 2008; Deal III, 2002)

*Instructor and instruction-related:* zero or minimum face-to-face contact with instructor (Kaber, 2003); immediate feedback not always possible (Bennett, Priest, & Mcpherson, 1999; Hagie & Hughes, 2005); instruction primarily in text rather than verbal lecture

*Technology:* technology a bigger factor initially with online learning; familiarity with technology necessary; ability to negotiate the technology; access to internet (Singh & Pan, 2004; Summers, Waigandt, & Whittaker, 2005; Berenson, 2008); lack of access to updated technology for minority and low income students (Singh & Pan, 2004); student concerns about time needed to become competent with technology (Buckley et al., 2010).

*Communication:* limited face-to-face communication; written word is the primary communication tool (Berenson, 2008); discussions are more likely to be written, mainly through posting of student work on Web pages; asynchronous discussions and sometimes through live internet-based conferencing (Li & Irby, 2008; Kaber, 2003)

*Website:* website design; ability to navigate website easily

*Flexibility:* Convenience; people unable to access regular classroom due to geography, work constraints, family, financial considerations can pursue their education from home (Davison, 2005; Taylor, 2003; Kaber, 2003)

*Approach to Studying and Preparation:* extra effort and higher level of personal responsibility required of online students (Schrum & Hong, 2002; Blocher, De Montes, Willis & Tucker, 2002; McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000 cited in Berenson, 2008); “balance complex aspects of life with study programs” (Schrum & Hong, 2002, p. 64)

### **Performance measure**

To compare the performance of students in online courses with that of students in traditionally delivered courses, most researchers have either used pre- and posttests (c.f. Thirunarayan & Peres-Pardo, 2002; Holman, 2000) or Grade Point Average (GPA) (c.f. Bearden, Robinson & Deis, 2002; Ury, 2004).

For the purposes of this study, in selecting groups, performance will be measured by the student's GPA in his/her online courses in comparison to his/her GPA in traditional courses.

This study aims to examine some of the factors that are more a part of the online student experience than traditional instruction and see how these factors might affect performance in online courses.

### **Methodology**

“While there is a long and well established history of studying the efficacy of teaching and learning at a distance, the research outcomes are varied” (Campbell, Floyd, & Sheridan, 2002). To better understand the factors that influence performance,

additional methods of investigation are likely necessary. In addition to employing additional methods of investigation, research needs to move away from just using students' scores as the measures used to resolve the question of 'better online or in-class.' Single measures cannot tell the complete story. For example, as mentioned, GPA alone may not be the best way to measure a person's learning. There are additional aspects of learning such as course-workload (Macfarland & Hamilton, 2005-06), study habits (Kleijn, Ploeg, & Topman, 1994), time-management skills (Walker & Siebert, 1989), employment (Paul, 1982; Macfarland & Hamilton, 2005-06), and familial responsibilities (Applegate & Daly, 2005) that could be useful other factors to explore when examining learning in online and in-class courses and that might not be adequately captured by a single performance variable alone. Thus, the issue of factors that might affect student performance needs to be studied in addition to GPA or pretests-posttests alone. And the narrow focus on performance-based media comparison studies needs to be broadened to an examination of other factors in the online student experience.

The intention of this research, therefore, was to look to the experiences of the participants. Since this study sought to gather data regarding the experiences of research participants who had taken both online and traditionally delivered courses and examine how the online student experience affected their performance in online courses, a phenomenological approach using one-on-one interviews was chosen as the project's methodology. Phenomenology is "concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved" (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p.189). Therefore, a researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the people (Greene, 1997; Maypole & Davies, 2001;

Robinson & Reed, 1998) involved, or who were involved, with the issue that is being researched. The researcher felt that a qualitative approach using participant or student interviews may provide rich data and a different perspective.

This exploratory qualitative approach allowed an in depth examination of students' experiences. Further, this approach provided another useful perspective to help better understand the area of online student performance. This phenomenological approach attempts to understand how a student's online experiences impact performance in online courses.

### **The setting**

The study was conducted on the campus of a local college recently given the status of a university situated in one of western Canada's largest cities. The university has a full-time student population of 10,000 students and offers degree, diploma and certificate programs. Since the university serves communities in the in the rural areas surrounding the metropolis, it is especially interested in distance delivery and the issues that go along with it.

### **The researcher's role**

This study can be classified as "backyard" research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992. cited in Cresswell, 2009). Though the researcher is an insider (an administrator who is currently not involved in teaching) and conducted the student interviews herself, the research was conducted in a faculty different from the researcher's, and that gave the researcher some distance and objectivity. To ensure qualitative validity, the researcher diligently checked for the accuracy of findings by going back to the participants to clarify and confirm when certain aspects of their answers were not clear. The researcher ensured

that there was consistency in her approach and used semi-structured interviews to gather her data.

### **The study participants**

Using purposive sampling, the study identified its sample population which were students who self-reported a difference in performance (using course GPA as a measure) between their online course and their traditionally delivered classroom course. GPA was used not to measure how well they had done, but rather to indicate the change in their relative standing between the courses offered in the two different formats – online and in-class. Purposive or selective sampling allowed the recruitment of informants who could provide data about the experiences or phenomena of interest to the inquirer/researcher (Tavakol et al., 2006). Purposive sampling requires that “researchers think critically about the parameters of the population we are studying and choose our sample participants carefully on that basis.” (Silverman, 2005, p.129).

Participants were undergraduate students who had taken both, online and traditionally delivered courses. Based on a comparison of the grades of participants in their online and classroom courses, three of the participants (Group A) had scored higher on their classroom courses while the other three (Group B) had scored higher on their online courses. The relative performance of participants in online and in-class was based on a self-report of their GPA in the two delivery modes. It was based on their definition of how well they did in one category relative to the other.

In choosing a sample size of six, the researcher followed Morse's (1994) recommendation that phenomenologies directed towards the essence of experience include about six participants. The researcher felt that a sample size of six participants

(three in each group) would help keep numbers manageable yet allow for some variation in participant experience.

### **Data collection, storing, and analysis**

**Data collection.** Through individual interviews, eight participants were asked to share their experiences with online learning and express how they thought their experiences with online learning impacted their final score on the online course. Even though the researcher's intent was to use only six participants, eight participants were actually interviewed to make allowances for participants who might change their mind and ask to withdraw from the study, however, only six participants were included in the analysis. These interviewees with their 'informed consent' (Bailey, 1996, p. 11) were the primary unit of analysis in the study (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000).

The interviews lasted anywhere between 30 to 40 minutes. Interview questions regarding student experience were based on the earlier identified factors viz. student-related, instructor and instruction-related, technology, communication, website, convenience and learning style. Interview questions were open ended. The questions were "directed to the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the theme in question" (Welman and Kruger, 1999, p196). In formulating and asking the questions, the researcher was mindful of Bentz and Shapiro's (1998) caution that the researcher allow the data to emerge: "Doing phenomenology" means capturing "rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings" (p.104). Further, the researcher was cognizant that she must bracket her own preconceptions and "enter into the individual's life world and use the self as an experiencing interpreter" (Miller & Crabtree, 1992, p. 24). When capturing data, the researcher recognized that the qualitative interview is

literally an interview, “an exchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest,” where the researcher attempts to understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfolds meaning of peoples’ experiences” (Kvale, 1996, p.1-2).

### **Interview questions**

In choosing the questions for the participant interviews, the researcher first identified factors in the traditional student experience based on Harvey, Burrows and Green’s definition of the “total student experience,” which refers to all aspects of student engagement with higher education (1992). The total student experience encompasses teaching, learning, curriculum, student life, and advising. It is based on the premise that there is an important relationship between the student’s environment and learning, and that the evaluation of the entire learning environment is necessary in trying to understand student performance. The researcher next went on to identify aspects of the student experience which are unique to an online environment. In identifying these aspects, the researcher was guided by current research (c.f. Bolliger & Martindale, 2002; Schrum & Hong, 2002; Deal III, 2002; Kaber 2003; Li & Irby, 2008; Singh & Pan, 2004; Berenson, 2008). The characteristics of the online student experience were categorized under the following headings: student-related; instructor-related; technology and website; communication; convenience; and approaches to learning and preparation. The unique aspects of the online experience in each of these categories were identified, and questions were formulated to get an understanding of how each of these characteristics such as isolation, lack of face-to-face contact, convenience of online learning, higher level of personal responsibility, technology etc., which are factors in the online student

experience, affects students' performance. Through these questions the researcher was interested in creating a comprehensive picture of each student's experience with online learning. According to Bolliger and Martindale (2002), the ability to negotiate these unique characteristics of the online learning environment is important to student success in online courses.

**Please see Appendix I for questions asked of participants during the interviews.**

*Student related questions:* The first set of questions was designed to examine how the students' perceptions and experience of the demands of an online environment, such as the ability to work in a relative isolation; the ability to study independently with very little direction; the ability to manage time effectively; and the ability to coherently express one's thoughts and ideas in the writing, may have influenced their performance in online courses.

*Instructor related questions:* The second set of questions examined how the changed role of the instructor especially the lack of or limited face-to-face interaction, and lack of real-time feedback affected the online student experience.

*Technology and Website questions:* The third and fourth sets of questions were designed to provide information on how familiarity and comfort with and convenient access to technology as well as good website design may be factors in a students' online experience.

*Communication questions:* The fifth set of questions examined how the altered mode of communication in an online environment was perceived by students. Were they



comfortable with this altered way of communicating? In their perception, did this have any impact on their experience and their performance?

*Convenience questions:* The sixth category explored to what extent the convenience and flexibility, which online courses are known for, were truly benefits.

*Approaches to studying and preparation questions:* The intent of the final category was to provide information on whether the students' study approach to online courses was different than their approach to traditionally delivered courses. And how, in their minds, their approach influenced how well they did.

Through these questions the researcher was interested in creating a comprehensive picture of each student's experience with online learning. According to Bolliger and Martindale (2002), the ability to negotiate these unique characteristics of the online learning environment is important to student success in online courses.

**Data storing.** With the consent of the participants, each interview was audio recorded. The interviews were transcribed. Each participant was given a two-week window from the day of the interview to withdraw from participation if he or she decided to change her mind.

**Data analysis.** Once the data was collected, it was analyzed; common themes in the experiences of the participants were identified and the results were interpreted. In analyzing the data, a simplified version of Hycner's explication process cited in Groenwald (2004) was used. The five phases of this explication process or analysis that were employed by the researcher are:

1) *Bracketing and phenomenological reduction*

The researcher should attempt to check her personal views or preconceptions and deliberately and purposefully be open herself to the phenomenon “in its own right with its own meaning” (Hycner, 1999 cited in Groenwald, 2004).

2) *Delineating units of meaning*

Here those statements that seem to illuminate the researched phenomena should be extracted or isolated.

3) *Clustering of units of meaning to form themes*

The researcher will look for commonalities amongst units of meaning, which, in this case, is each interviewee and then group them into themes.

4) *Summarizing each interview, validating and where necessary modifying it*

At this point the researcher will conduct a ‘validity check’ by returning to the informant to determine if the essence of the interview has been correctly ‘captured’ (Hycner, 1999, p.154. cited in Groenwald, 2004)

5) *General and unique themes from all the interviews and composite summary*

The researcher will look for “themes common to most or all of the interviews as well as the individual variations” (Hycner, 1999, p. 154 cited in Groenwald, 2004). In addition, it is important to bring out unique and minority voices as counterpoints to the phenomenon researched (Groenwald, 2004).

The researcher consciously hoped to limit researcher-bias, one of the biggest criticisms of the qualitative approach, through bracketing. In addition, by listening intently, by recording accurately and candidly, by including all data in the final report,

and by attempting to achieve balance, the researcher aimed to maintain the validity of this qualitative study.

## **Findings**

### **Interviews**

In all, the researcher interviewed eight participants. Of the eight, five had done better in traditional courses and three had done better in online courses. To keep the groups balanced, only three participants in the traditional-better group were needed, so, only three participants were randomly chosen for inclusion in the analysis. Each interview was about 30 to 40 minutes in duration. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

**Please see Appendix II for transcripts of interviews.**

The findings of this study are reported below. In addition to a rich description of the participants' experiences, themes from participants are presented.

Finding participants who had done better in online courses was a challenge. Of the fourteen students the author spoke to in the selection process, most had either done poorly in online courses or had done about the same. The research study findings describe the online student experience of six students, three, in Group A who had performed better in traditionally delivered courses and three in Group B who had performed better in online courses. Each group comprised of one male and two female students. The age range of the students was between 23 and 30 years.

In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants in outlining the study findings, the feminine gender has been used to refer to both male and female participants.

### **GROUP A – Higher traditional class grade**

Group A students were enrolled in both online and in-class courses when the research was conducted, but their grades were higher in the traditional class. All the students in this group were full-time students with a course load of four to five courses. Two of the three Group A students worked part-time was not currently employed. All the students in this group were taking one online course, with the other three or four courses they were taking being traditional.

### **Student Related**

*Working independently.* All three participants in Group A expressed that they enjoyed working independently. One of the participants who had taken three online courses remarked that she had taken her first online course to accommodate her schedule, but she liked working independently so much that she decided to take additional online courses. All of the participants also viewed themselves as being self-directed. They did not need the professor telling them what to do at every step. They were comfortable navigating the internet if they needed to look up additional information to understand a concept or idea not fully explained by the text or professor notes. One student felt she could teach herself without the need of a formal/traditional class or lecture. Two of the participants indicated that they took the initiative of looking up supplemental information if the information presented by the instructor notes or the textbook did not make the information clear. One participant indicated that she tended to be more self-directed and

actively involved when she was taking an online course than when she was in a traditional classroom where she tended to be more passive.

*Time management.* The self-reported time management skills of the three participants ranged from good to problematic. On further probing time management was found to be an issue for all of these participants. One participant who described her time management skills as good said that she always started out well organized with a schedule that she tried to follow diligently, but somehow time management always became an issue around midterm and final exams. Another participant who described herself as having difficulty with time management had a problem understanding the breadth and scope of online assignments and the amount of time that should be allocated to them. "When only a paragraph would be needed (because I was used to writing papers), I would write a full paper," and that wasted a lot of precious time. The third participant in the group who saw her time management skills as average felt she wasted a lot of time and had difficulty sticking to a schedule as the familial and social demands of day-to-day life interfered with her schedule.

*Writing skills.* Two of the participants viewed their writing skills as average while one viewed them as above average. The participants who viewed their skills as average were comfortable writing in certain situations and not others. However, they did not think their writing skills influenced their performance in online courses because according to both participants, though all communication in online courses takes place through the written word, the writing required is short paragraphs, and not long essays or papers, and they were both very comfortable writing short paragraphs and emails. The third participant in the group who considered her writing skills as above average felt that

writing skills definitely affected performance because, “Well thought out ideas combined with word choice and grammar get your ideas across a lot easier.”

### **Instructor Related**

*Instructor contact and feedback.* Two of the three participants recognized that limited instructor contact could be a problem; however, it had not been so for them. The third participant in the group strongly felt that the lack of face-to-face interaction in an online environment made it difficult to understand the instructor's expectations clearly and it also made it difficult for the student to convey his/her ideas clearly. However, the participant acknowledged that she had had both a very good and a very bad online experience where instructor contact was concerned. Her good experience had to do with an instructor whose involvement and ready feedback that made her online experience very positive. Her bad experience had to do with a professor who was barely involved, in fact was absent most of the time and did not get back to students immediately.

All three participants agreed that immediate feedback was important. While the lack of immediate feedback could be an issue in online courses, one participant felt that working ahead could solve that problem because then she was not leaving everything to the last minute hoping that the instructor would respond to her in time. She could see it being a real problem in online courses if things were left to the last minute and felt it would be nice to see something implemented to help the student should such a situation occur. Another participant felt that though immediate feedback was important, it was not that much of an issue because one could post a question on the discussion board. In fact, in her mind, the online format had a distinct advantage because in instances where the professor was actively involved, it made the professor more readily available than “if you

[the student] were to go visit them during office hours.” The third participant in the group found the way instructors gave feedback on papers in class was more beneficial than the feedback received in an online environment; in class, “the profs. will talk about your papers, what you need to do and what not to do and things like that. Whereas in online, you can send questions to your prof., but a lot of those questions you have to decide for yourself.” According to her, one did not receive the benefit of hearing the instructor’s general feedback students.

*Presentation of information.* All three participants felt that in online courses information was presented in a very basic manner that was not very conducive to learning. It consisted of the professor laying out what chapters and what pages needed to be read. This presentation style, they felt, was not enough for understanding difficult concepts. One participant in the group felt it makes a huge difference when professors add slides and when they add links as well as professional insights that are associated with the concept. “That helps a lot, but just having the pages that you read, I dislike that way of doing it.”

Similarly, another participant expressed that instructors should pay more attention and put more thought into the presentation of information. The software used to present information should be the one most conducive to the learning of the information being presented. For example, anatomy notes would be better presented in PowerPoint format than PDF format because “it is easier for students to manipulate the course material to their way of learning using PowerPoint than PDF. By manipulate, I mean, a student can colour code or add notes or other information to the information provided by the professor. While PDF files can be manipulated also; PDF manipulation requires

professional software which is not as easily or cheaply accessible as PowerPoint, a staple feature of most computers.” The third participant said it would have helped if she had got a paper package that outlined the course contents, readings and text. In the absence of such a package in her psychology course (one of the two online courses she took), she started out using the wrong textbook and had to go back and “re-do that [readings] again.”

### **Communication**

While two of the three participants felt communication in an online environment was completely different than communication in a classroom, the third participant in the group did not feel that there was much difference in communication between an online and a traditional environment. Of the two participants who felt that communication was completely different online, one felt that misunderstandings, both between instructor-student and student-student, were very common in online communication, which led to arguments and tension. In her words: “And doing a group paper is the most disastrous thing I have done academically. It’s extremely difficult.” She felt the distance and the lack of face-to-face interaction made group work difficult. The second participant felt that in an online classroom, there was a distinct lack of closeness; however she did not think this affected performance. In addition, she felt that the online environment tended to stifle questions. She expressed that in the tradition classroom environment she was “always bugging her teachers, but with online, I am asking very few questions.” Another participant said that not having the professor present in front of her made her miss important cues and that she was unable to understand instructor expectations, and that she thought was one of the reasons she did not do as well on online courses.



All three participants liked online discussion as a way of learning the assigned material and sharing and understanding each other's point of view. What one participant really like about the online discussion was that everyone gets to express his/her opinion. In a traditional classroom she felt she did not voice her opinions that much. "Whereas in online discussions, it is kind of nice; it is getting me out there to say rather than to sit back and listen. I enjoy that aspect of online discussions." In fact, the online discussions seemed to help mitigate to some extent the drawback of online communication. Another participant found that the online discussion format gave students a chance to discuss common problems online and after thoughtful discussion come up with solutions rather than just being handed the solution by the professor. However, she felt, the success of the online discussion was contingent upon the amount of student involvement and interaction.

### **Technology and Website**

All three participants were familiar with and comfortable using a computer and the internet. Two of the participants had some initial difficulties with the website. One participant shared that the first time she took an online course, she had a really difficult time, "...going okay, how do I do that? How do I know what I am supposed to do?" Another participant felt that had she not attended an orientation session earlier on and had her instructors not used Blackboard as a part of their instruction in the traditional format, she would have had a difficult time with the technology. Further, the participant who had had a difficult experience with first online course expressed that although all professors use Blackboard, they format their courses differently, and the first couple of weeks are spent just understanding how things are formatted. While this time spent figuring out the

format was frustrating, it did not necessarily affect her performance, she felt that a more or less standard template would be an “absolute time saver.” Similarly, another participant in the group felt that it took time to figure out all the different objects or icons on Blackboard.

### **Convenience**

One of the three participants in the group felt the convenience of studying whenever and wherever that the online format provided was a definite help. Whereas the other two participants felt the convenience was both a help and a hindrance. It was a help as one participant expressed because, first the lecture notes are all posted online, so if you do miss some key information, you can go back and look at the notes. In a classroom situation, if you miss something the professor has said during the lecture, you cannot easily go back to the professor and ask him/her to re-teach the concept. In an online setting one can access the information any time one wants. However, two participants felt that this convenience was also the biggest hindrance because there are no set times for class; there are no verbal reminders of deadlines; and there is no professor telling students on a weekly basis what his/her expectations are for the course and the students. As a result, it is easy to forget about the online course or put off studying till another time. All three expressed that when time was limited whether for exams or assignments, the online course was less of a priority than the traditional one. In allocating limited resources the traditionally delivered course seemed more important. When I inquired why that was so, the response was that the professor's expectations of them became their expectations of themselves. And those expectations of the professor in the traditional class seemed to take precedence over their own expectations where their performance in the online

courses was concerned. The participants said that in a traditional class environment they felt a greater sense of connectedness with their instructor and classmates and that sense of connection made them give more importance to the in-class courses. Further, one of the participants expressed that with online courses, “because you can access it anytime, because you can read the material whenever you feel like reading it, basically, it gets pushed over because you say, ‘Oh. I can read it at any point in time I want.’ Because the lectures are there, I can go to them a hundred times. Whereas in a traditional classroom setting, it is that one 50 minute or 80 minute slot that you have to prepare for and understand what is going on and if you don’t you can’t ask the professor to go back and lecture on that again. So you need to be prepared and know what is happening and so basically that is how [my] online course fell into the hierarchy I gave it.”

### **Approach to Studying and Preparation**

All three expressed that the learning approach required for online courses was definitely different from the approach required for traditional courses. They felt that one had to be more prepared for online learning because the student was doing the learning on his/her own. One participant said, “There is nobody there to remind you that an assignment is due this day and that day.” All agreed that online courses required a greater degree of self-discipline on the student’s part. In addition, the student had to be better organized and better able to balance the time devoted to online courses and traditionally delivered courses.

Two of the three participants in the group felt that online courses also required a greater degree of commitment from the students while the third participant felt the amount of commitment required depended on the course and the subject matter being

covered rather than the medium of instruction. One of the participants who felt that online courses required a greater degree of commitment said in a traditional classroom her commitment was to show up every day and fulfill the professor's expectations. "Whereas my commitment to the online is more for myself... So, I find I am committed to my online courses. But if I had to choose what I had to miss, I would probably miss the online courses. Because of the in-person [contact in class], for some reason makes it feel like a different importance level." So because of this tendency to relegate online courses to the back burner, she felt she had to be more committed to do well. The second participant in the 'greater commitment' group stated that the commitment for online courses is at least twice as much as in class, because one has to not only read the reading assignments but then also look up the definitions of unfamiliar concepts since the professor wasn't there explaining things, "...and above and beyond that you have to make the notes for studying for your mid-term... and when you are doing your papers in class, the profs will talk about your papers, what you need to do and what not to do and things like that. Whereas in online, you can send questions to your prof, but a lot of those questions you have to decide for yourself." However, this participant felt that the process of doing individual research to understand concepts in an online environment gave her a very good idea of the subject matter.

### **Group B – Higher online grade**

Group B students were enrolled in online courses only when the interviews were conducted. Most recently they had received higher online grades than had previously in traditional courses. They were part-time students, taking only one or two online courses and no traditional courses. As a result, they had a lighter course-load than Group A

students, who were full time. Specifically, two students were taking one online course each and one student was taking two online courses. They all had full-time jobs.

### **Student Related**

*Working independently.* Two of the three participants in Group B expressed that they enjoyed working independently and were self-directed learners. One of the two said she always took extra initiative, “I always end up doing the whole thing [assignment] and letting other people just sign their name.” However, the third participant said she did not enjoy working on her own at all. She tended to procrastinate more when she worked by herself. She elaborated that she tended to “procrastinate more with online courses.” She would look at the assignment due dates and start working on the assignment a couple of days before the due date and stress herself out completely. But, she always did manage to get a very good grade on the assignment. This participant did not see herself as a self-directed learner either. She said that in an online environment, she will only learn the material because she needs to know it, but in a traditional class environment, “I will learn it even though I do not need to learn it necessarily. I am the kind of person who with online will learn what I need to know for the exam or learn what I need to know for the assignment. I don’t have time to read the huge pile of papers they want me to read.” She said that she was not a self-directed learner because she did the learning and the assignments because it cost money to take the course and not because she was particularly motivated.

Of the two participants who enjoyed working independently, one said that because she had a very busy life, online courses made it possible for her to study on her

own time, at her own will, and “without the distractions that I have to go through throughout my day.”

*Time management.* The two participants who liked working independently also said they had good time management skills and were able to organize their schedule and keep to it. One participant said that because she was always so busy, her life would be chaos if she did not stick to her schedule. The participant who did not like working on her own, on the other hand, viewed her time-management skills as not being very good when it came to online courses. She expressed that even though she knew better, she would look at the assignment only the day before it was due and left the reading to the very last minute. But, because she said she was “a bit of a keener,” she always tried to do it to the best of her abilities in the time she had allotted herself. Time management for her was an issue because she could not make the course work a priority in her daily life as she had a fulltime job and the care of a household. However, when the pressure of a looming assignment deadline was on, she was able to make course work her focus.

*Writing skills.* All three participants were very comfortable writing and viewed their writing skills as being above average. They were also unanimous in their belief that their good writing skills more positively influenced their performance in online courses, as in online courses they had taken, one had to communicate via the written word only. One participant stated, “I would just say my wording helps to make things clearer for other people. There are a lot of beginners in my class and I find I am able communicate with them easily.” Another participant said her writing skills helped convey her ideas well. The third participant expressed that poor writing skills made group work a real

challenge for her because she was always correcting other people's work. This got her into numerous "fights" with the people in her group.

### **Instructor Related**

*Instructor contact and feedback.* For the most part, all three participants were happy with the amount of contact they had with their instructors. One participant expressed that coming into her first online course, she was very skeptical about the amount of instructor contact possible in an online environment, but she was pleasantly surprised. "It's been really good; she gets back to me within 24 hours. She is marking assignments way quicker than I had at ... before." Another participant also said her professor always got back to her in a timely manner, "I've never been sitting here wondering or waiting on a question." The third participant felt that while contact was generally not an issue, the amount of contact was dependent on the instructor. Most instructors were very quick to respond, keeping students informed if they were going to be away for a few days while a minority were not.

All three participants expressed that immediate feedback was important to them and that, in fact, in an online environment the feedback was much quicker than a traditional environment. As one participant expressed, "I actually find I get feedback quicker online than I did when I was in school. A lot of the time with my professors, they would have phone numbers and certain office hours which would be hard to get into because they are teaching a bazillion classes. I find my teacher, given I've only had one class online, but she's been very quick with responses."

Another participant observed that most of her instructors responded to her within 24 hours, which was very important to her given her tendency to leave things to the last

minute; however, she did feel that the lack of instructor feedback on assignments was an issue, especially, for example, when she got a 100% on an assignment with absolutely no feedback at all. She had no idea what she had done well, why she had got the 100%. A little feedback, according to her, would have helped.

*Presentation of information.* While one of the participants in Group B had an issue with instructors who did not update their information such as page numbers when an edition was updated or assignment dates to reflect the current term. Failure to be current in the information presented created a lot of unnecessary confusion for the students. She also felt that presenting information using visual aids like pictures, PowerPoint etc. would make learning in an online environment easier because it can get very boring and concentration becomes difficult. Another participant expressed that though she was quite capable of making notes for her own understanding from the instructor notes or the textbook, it would help if instructors paid more attention to the way they presented information in an online environment.

### **Communication**

While all three participants in Group B agreed that communication in an online environment was different, one participant felt the difference was a positive one. Another participant believed the difference was neither positive nor negative, and the third felt the difference was a negative one. The participant who felt there was a positive difference said that both the professor and the students got their points across much more quickly: “In class you can kind of walk around in circles and professors tend to ramble on. In an online environment, they have to get their point across the first time for their students to understand.” The participant who said the difference was neither positive nor negative



did acknowledge though that response in an online environment was not immediate and required a bit of patience on everyone's part. However, she expressed, "There is good and bad to both in class and online courses. I know there is a difference and I'm more partial to online. To me the difference isn't positive or negative; it's just there." The third participant felt the difference in online communication was a negative one because of the heavy reliance on the written word, it was not always possible to bring one's point across.

All three participants liked online discussion forums as a way of learning assigned material. While one participant liked the fact that everyone had a chance to voice his/her opinion, she did not like having to rate fellow students on their responses. Another participant liked that the online discussions forced everyone to get involved. "And in doing so," expressed the participant, "I think a lot of people found that you take the time to understand everyone else's point of view and I feel people can see everyone else's work and they're actually learning a lot more than you would in class." She went on to say that this way, even the painfully shy people can get involved. The third participant felt the written format of online discussion gave her a chance to make a well thought out response, "instead of spitting out whatever comes out of my mouth." In the traditional class, she hates being called on to answer questions because she is not prepared. The online discussion format saves her the embarrassment she would suffer in a traditional classroom. She is more comfortable answering questions from the safety of her own home with the luxury of having all the previous responses to scroll through and think about before giving her own well-thought out response.

### **Technology and Website**

All three participants were familiar with and comfortable using a computer. Even though one of the participants did not have much experience with a computer as she grew up in a home without a computer, she said she was “decent with it,” as she had taken a couple of courses in college. In addition, the participant shared that she currently does not have ready access to the internet as she lives in the country and connections are not the best. So whenever she needs to do an assignment, she drives into town to the library. Despite these difficulties, she did not feel her performance had been hindered in anyway, “The internet is everywhere and anyone can get it, so I don’t think anyone can use that as an excuse not to complete anything.” All three participants were intuitively able to use the WebCT/Blackboard. Only one participant had formal coaching (one hour in length) in using Blackboard. While there was some initial nervousness for this participant, “I just took an hour or so to play around with the different tabs and links, and I felt pretty comfortable. I picked it up on my own.” Another participant expressed concern over the confusion and stress caused when course website dates and assignment due dates were not updated from one semester or one year to the next.

### **Convenience**

The participants in Group B all felt that the ability to work on one’s own time at one’s own convenience was a help. One participant viewed as a huge bonus the ability to volunteer part-time, raise her three children and study as well. However, the other two participants felt it was a hindrance in some ways too. For example, one of the two felt that it was easier to procrastinate in an online environment because there were no real world reminders such as going to class. Yet she appreciated the fact that she was able to

work and study also. The other participant expressed that while online courses allowed her to study while working and paying her mortgage, she felt that she was not learning as much as in a traditional classroom. In her online courses, she was learning everything for the assignment and probably losing it the next day. “So for long term retention of knowledge,” said the participant, “I would prefer an actual class to the convenience of being able to do it whenever, wherever.”

### **Approach to Studying and Preparation**

In Group B, all three participants expressed that the learning approach required for online courses was different than that required for traditionally delivered courses. One participant said that online courses required the student to be able to work independently and be able to think for him/herself. She continued that in online courses, a student cannot ride on the coattails of others especially where participation is involved: “Online it becomes pretty evident if you are involved or not.” Another participant felt that online learning required good time management skills and the ability to create and adhere to a strict schedule. One cannot put things off till the last day. The participant further expressed, “You have to be self-sufficient and be able to make time each day, in my opinion, to work a little bit on it. You have to be disciplined and dedicated...” The third participant felt that online learning required the ability to study on one's own and to be able to do research needed for the completion of assignments.

One participant felt that online courses required more of a commitment while another participant felt that online and traditional learning required the same amount but rather a different kind of commitment. The participant who said an online environment required a greater degree of commitment felt that in online courses, the student had to be

committed to a higher quality of work because one doesn't have the person to person connection: "You're selling what you have to say clearly and concisely, so that others understand, as compared to in a class where you can just throw in some thoughts here and there and get participation marks that way."

The experience of the third participant who had taken at least five courses was that, in online courses, her professors let her get away with a lot more late assignments and, so in her mind they required less of a commitment than traditionally delivered courses.

## **Discussion**

The researcher examined the experiences of six participants divided into two groups: Group A and Group B. There were three things noted that distinguished the two groups. First, the groups were distinguished by performance based on delivery method with one group having done better with traditional instruction (Group A) and one having done better with online instruction (Group B). Second, one group (Group A) was taking both traditional and online courses, and one group (Group B) was taking only online courses. Finally, in terms of their student status, Group A was made up of full-time students, who were taking either 4 or 5 courses concurrently (3 or 4 face-to-face), and Group B was made up of part-time student taking 1 or 2 online courses concurrently. These differences do not allow the researcher to know which of these factors or combination of factors may have influenced the differences noted between the two groups.

An examination of the experiences of the two groups and of the individuals within each group indicated that there were not many notable differences in the experiences of the participants; rather, in some instances there was a range of experiences. Current research (Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000) suggests that a student's satisfaction with online learning is positively correlated with performance and that student satisfaction is also positively correlated with the instructor, the course, and the technology. In this study, how students who had a positive online experience did when comparing performance in online courses and traditionally delivered courses varied. There were positive and negative aspects to the online experience of students in both groups.

One interesting difference between the two groups was that the three participants (Group B) who had done better in online courses, when taking those courses, had interests different from those of Group A competing for their time. Both Group A and B had to juggle course-work with other aspects of their lives. The Better-Online Group (B) mentioned having to juggle full-time work, family and mortgage/rent and course-work. The Better-In-Class Group (A) mentioned juggling part-time work, family responsibilities and a full course load of both one online and three for four in-class courses. Group A who were full-time students seemed to mention the pressure of juggling online and in-class courses and other competing interests more than Group B, who had a maximum of two courses, both online.

A close analysis of the experiences of the participants in the Better-In-Class Group (A) revealed that whenever a choice had to be made between the demands of an online course and the traditionally delivered courses, the demands of the traditionally

delivered courses won out. Participants noted that this greater focus on the in-class courses was due to instructor expectations and instructor immediacy.

A detailed analysis of the experiences of the two groups is presented below.

### **Student Related**

***Independent learner.*** All but one of the six participants described themselves as independent and self-directed learners. This participant who had performed better in online courses described herself as not being an independent learner. She preferred the traditional classroom environment and “hated” online. Yet this dislike of online learning did not hamper her performance as she did better on her online courses than the traditionally delivered courses. This preference for the traditional classroom even amongst students who do well in an online environment is supported by current research (Maring et. al., 2008; Allen et al., 2002; Hayward, 2004). According to research by Maring et al. (2008) on pathophysiology students, a strong preference for the traditional classroom mode of delivery was shown even by students who performed better on exam questions drawn from content delivered in a distance format.

Despite her self-reported dislike of online format, this student in Better-Online Group (B) chose to take online courses because of its convenience, which allowed her to study and “pay her mortgage” at the same time. Current research (Burak, 1993, Dunlap and Garbinger, 2003, Piskurich, 2002 as cited in Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003) suggests that being an independent learner is a necessary characteristic for success in online courses. In the case of one of this study’s students, who self-reported, not being an independent learner, did not appear to not have a negative effect on performance in an online setting.

***Time management.*** Time management certainly was more of an issue with participants in the Better –In-Class Group (A) than Better-Online Group (B). In Group A, while one of the participants clearly recognized she had an issue with time management, time management was also found to be a significant issue with the other two participants, who initially described their time management skills as being good and average respectively. Though participants in Group A recognized the importance of making a schedule, sticking to that schedule became difficult because the demands of the classroom courses always seemed to take precedence over their online course. In Group B, one participant indicated she had an issue with time management, but her desire to do well usually forced her to put other things aside in her life temporarily and she always managed to do well. Group A participants' expressed difficulty juggling both their single online and multiple traditional courses may explain Group A's greater difficulty equitably managing the limited time they had available. It may also explain their lower score(s) in the online courses for difficulty with time-management as there are no real-world reminders and the ability to complete a plan for completing work is a major reason why the performance of online students suffers (Burak, 1993; Piskurich, 2002 as cited in Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

***Writing skills.*** All three Better Online Group (B) participants viewed their writing skills as being above average. Whereas in Group A, one participant viewed her writing skills as above average and the other two participants thought their writing skills were average. Participants in both groups agreed that writing skills were particularly important in an online environment because the written word is the main means of conveying their ideas across to their peers and professor. And their peers and professors judge them on

how well they are able to communicate their ideas in the written format (Meyer, 2003). Students who said their writing skills were above average felt that their grades were positively affected by their superior writing ability. However, the two students who said their writing skills were average did not feel that their writing skills had any impact on their grades because, they felt, the online courses they had taken to this point did not require much writing other than the discussion forums and short paragraph answers. This consensus amongst the six participants on the importance of good writing skills for online success is supported by scholars like Cole (2000) who identified the added importance that online education places on writing as well as reading skills and the need for students to have strong skills in these areas.

### **Instructor Related**

***Instructor contact and feedback.*** While all the participants expressed that the amount of instructor contact and feedback was dependent on each individual instructor and could be an issue in an online environment, only one participant had had a negative experience with the amount of contact and quality of feedback. She acknowledged that of the three courses she had taken online, she only had one negative experience but that affected her performance in the course. The instructor was absent online most of the time and communication was sporadic and limited. This student's experience is supported by the research of Johnson et al. (2005), who assert that contact between students and instructors is a valid predictor of performance. A classroom where the instructor is engaged, according to Prieto and Revilla (2006), encourages and stimulates the exchange of opinions, ideas, information, and knowledge and that leads to better learner satisfaction. Fortunately, this student's experience in another online course, in fact, had



been very positive. An area, however, that she felt was a definite issue with online courses was that when instructors returned assignments in a traditional classroom environment, they would usually address general as well as particular issues with the assignment. In her experience, in an online environment, the instructors would usually only respond to the questions the student thought of asking. The student did not get any extra information. She did not receive the benefit of a stimulating exchange of ideas that is typical of a traditional classroom.

The other participants in both groups felt that the online environment provided easier and more convenient access to the instructor because they could contact the instructor at their own convenience and generally got a response within 24 hours. Research by Buckely et al. (2010) also indicates students' favourable reaction to the immediacy of feedback that an online environment makes possible. Further, two of the participants stated that making contact online was easier than making an appointment and physically seeing the instructor during office hours. Of the six, one felt that lack of adequate instructor contact and feedback had a negative impact on performance.

***Presentation of information.*** All six participants felt that the information was presented in an online environment left much to be desired. Participants felt the instructors needed to put more thought into presenting information in a format that was conducive to learning. The format, they felt, should be determined by the type of information being presented. Rather than just plain text, students wanted to see more illustrations diagrams, pictures, and links to other relevant and related information. This expressed need of students is supported by researchers Singh and Pan (2004), who assert that instructors must design high quality course materials and lectures using a variety of

didactical elements such as text, graphics, audio and video messages. In addition, incorrect dates for assignments because websites had not been updated created a lot of unnecessary confusion and stress. Summers et al. (2005) also stress the importance of instructors not just translating their current curriculum to an online format. They point out that many instructors will take their lecture materials and copy them to their course website, thus simply presenting course content without considering new and innovative ways to facilitate learning using an electronic medium. It is important that web-based learning environments correspond appropriately with students' learning approaches in order to achieve successful performances in courses (Le et al., 2010; Ellis et al., 2007; Haapala, 2006) and that "The technology must serve the subject matter and not the other way around" (Sharpe & Hawkins, 1998. p.28).

The importance of putting careful thought into the presentation of information is highlighted by the experience of the participant in Group A who indicated that she was using the wrong text because the online course materials did not provide clear information. In addition, it also highlights the usefulness of some form of orientation for students so that they can form "mental models" (Schrum and Hong, 2002) of the online environment and can systematically look for the information they are seeking. Research by Dehler and Poirras-Hernandez (1998) (cited in Shrum and Hong, 2002) demonstrates that even in cases where students have had an online orientation, adding a component that requires students to interact with their classmates in some way is extremely beneficial to their ease and comfort with the technology and online environment.

## Communication

While all participants agreed that communication in an online environment was different, their opinions as to the degree of difference varied. One participant in the Better-In-Class Group (A) felt there was not much of a difference; whereas, a second participant in the same group felt that in online communication, misunderstandings were very common. Of the participants in the two groups, one participant in Group A felt that a lack of communication affected her performance in her online courses.

Isolation from the instructor and other students, which some researchers (Browning 1999; Gallagher & McCormick, 1999; McIssac et al., 1999) claim is an issue because of the lack of face-to-face interaction in an online environment, was, on the surface, not an issue with these students. One participant mentioned not having the same connection with her online course-mates as she did with the course-mates in the traditionally delivered classes. This student further stated that she felt the online environment tended to stifle questions. She expressed that in the tradition classroom environment she was always asking lots of questions, but in her online course, she asked very few. This experience of the student is supported by the findings of Jones et al. (2001), who in working with online students from five different universities found that students were generally hesitant about making unprompted interventions, which they considered to be an intrusion upon the instructor. In addition, research by Wisenberg and Hutton (1997) (cited in Schrum and Hong, 2002) revealed that students taking an online course had fewer interactions than students did in a traditional setting.

In that the participants in Group A gave preference to the traditionally delivered courses at the expense of the online course could possibly suggest that their superior

effort in the former may have been due to their feeling of connectedness with the course mates and the instructor. In general, they felt a greater connection to their instructor and classmates in traditional courses. And research by Hackman and Walker (1990) provides evidence that “teacher immediacy” contributes to student learning and satisfaction. The strong influence of teacher immediacy is explained by the social presence theory. Online communication with its lack of nonverbal communication is viewed as being extremely low in social presence in comparison to face-to-face communication and, as a result, is less appealing (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). The research findings of Maki, Maki, Patterson, and Whittaker (2000) also point to online students feeling a sense of isolation and consequently a reduced interest in the subject matter. According to Keegan (1990), limited contact with instructors and students in distance courses can lead to a sense of isolation which results in students dropping out of their course or program.

Online threaded-discussion was a feature that was unanimously praised by participants. They all felt that online discussions, first, gave everyone an opportunity to have their voice heard, and, second, it allowed them to construct well thought out responses after carefully reviewing the thoughts and ideas of other students. In addition, because the students were going to be evaluated on their participation, it forced even the reluctant participants to get involved in the discussion. The experience of the participants in both groups that online education promotes more equal interactivity among class and group members is well supported by research (Larson, 2002). According to Aubrey and Felkins (1988) (cited in Singh and Pan, 2004), “it creates a ‘leveling’ effect among team members. All members are equal.” And again, a report by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business states that “online learning allows everyone to participate

equally, unlike the classroom where three or four may dominate a discussion based on their verbal ability or their presence” (AASCSB, 1998. p. 7).

The participants in both groups also stressed the importance of regular instructor involvement in the discussion forums. According to Richard E. Clark, existing web-based studies suggest that students place a very high value on increased synchronous and asynchronous contact with their instructors (2004a). The students' positive feelings for online interaction both student to student and student to instructor is supported by research by Picciano (2002) which reveals that, “Both students and faculty typically report increased satisfaction in online courses depending on the quality and quantity of interactions” (p. 22). Similarly Dziuban and Moskal (2001), in a paper titled “Emerging research issues in distributed learning” report a very high correlation between interaction on line and student satisfaction (cited in Picciano, 2002). The research findings of Wu et al. (2010) indicate that student interaction has a positive influence on both performance expectations and learning climate. Moore and Kearsley (1996) in their book, *Distance Education: A Systems Approach*, also suggest that students who lack social interaction within the program have a tendency to drop out of class. Further, a number of distance learning experiments have shown that participants who have the highest levels of instructor interaction also report the highest levels of value for the course (Frederickson, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, & Swan, 2000 cited in Clark, 2004a).

### **Technology and Website**

Participants in both groups were comfortable using a computer, and though some of them had initial frustrations with Blackboard/WebCT, they were soon able to overcome them. All agreed that initial formal coaching and a standardized format for all

Blackboard courses would make the navigating easier. The participants' contention that initial coaching in the technology would be helpful is supported by current research which indicates it is not enough to have access to appropriate tools; rather, students need to have a level of comfort with using the tools – experience in solving simple problems, checking email, accomplishing basic tasks such as printing or file management (Schrum and Hong, 2002). The participants of the current study, however, seemed to believe that these annoyances with the technology were not something that affected their performance. In fact, even the lack of ready access to the internet did not seem to be an issue that affected performance. For example, a participant in the Better-Online Group (B) who lived in the country had to travel to the nearest library or internet café to do her assignments as her internet connection in the country was tenuous at best. Despite that inconvenience, she did exceptionally well in his online course. These findings are in keeping with extant research that though student comfort with technology is important (Davison, 2005), yet computer skills have little effect on student performance in an online class (McIssac et al., 1999; Rumpradit, 1999). While computer skills in themselves may have little effect on student performance, research by Navarro and Shoemaker (2000) suggests students' performance is negatively correlated with the frequency of technical problems in an online environment.

### **Convenience**

Though all six participants felt that the ability to study at one's own convenience was a big help; however, students in both groups felt that it was a hindrance as well. It was a help because one could work and continue with one's education and other commitments. The students in the Better-In-Class Group (A) expressed it was a

hindrance because the convenience of studying whenever, wherever lulled them into thinking that they could put things off; that they had plenty of time to get to the assignments or readings. However, as midterms or other deadlines approached, they found themselves caught in a bind where they had to juggle the assignments and the expectations of the instructor in their traditional class and the assignments due in their online class. And because the students reported that the professor/instructor in their traditional classes was more “real” than the professor in their online class with whom they felt little connection, the expectations of the traditional classroom professor called to them more urgently and so the traditional courses took precedence over the online ones. O’Hanlon’s (2001) research indicates that it is usually students who are self-regulated learners that unequivocally value the freedom and flexibility that online learning allows. Students who have not yet developed strategies for self-regulation may find that online courses despite their flexibility do not meet their needs as was consistent with the findings of the current study.

Further, research indicates that while students appreciate the convenience factor of online courses, they are unable to reconcile themselves to the substantial responsibility that comes along with it, the responsibility of completing assignments and being prepared (Schrum, 2002).

### **Approach to Studying and Preparation**

Participants in both groups agreed that the learning approach required for online learning was different than that required for traditional classroom learning. Online learning, according to both groups, required the student to be a self-directed learner with a greater degree of self-discipline and with better time management skills. The student

needs to have the ability to not only create a schedule but also stick to it. This observation of the participants is clearly supported by guidelines established by educational institutions which list self-direction as a primary quality of successful online learners (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). In distance and online learning programs, there is a clear expectation that learner take on a higher level of responsibility and initiative for their own learning (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000). As one of the participants expressed, in an online course one cannot ride on the coattails of others especially where participation is involved. Group A participants stressed that a student taking online courses should be able balance both her online and her traditional classroom courses, something that they had difficulty doing. They felt that it was their inability to balance the time and importance allocated to traditional versus the online course(s) that accounted for their lower grades in the online courses. McMahon and Oliver (2001) agree that online students must take a greater responsibility for their learning as they have limited access to instructional support.

The study findings did not seem to reveal significant differences between the two groups other than the issues of time management, instructor immediacy effects, and balancing time devoted to online and in-class courses. On the questions of instructor feed-back, presentation of information in online courses, online threaded-discussions, formal orientation to Blackboard and WebCT, all participants expressed similar feelings. However, in reviewing the study findings, it should be noted that the original intent of the research was to compare the experiences of two groups of online students, one who had done better in traditionally delivered courses and the other who had done better in online courses. But, as the interviews and the study proceeded, it became apparent that there



were two other factors that distinguished the two groups. The Better-In-Class, Group A, were full-time students taking and were taking both online and in class courses concurrently. Whereas, the Better-Online, Group B, were part-time students who were only taking online courses. These two additional factors need to be considered when examining the study results.

### **Summary**

Based on the online learning experiences of the six students interviewed, while access to the appropriate tools and having technology experiences prior to taking online courses was helpful, the factors that seemed to affect student performance were: instructor expectations; timely feedback; the ability to balance time devoted to online and traditional classroom courses; and the lack of a sense of a classroom community which leads to a weaker a sense of commitment to online assignments and course work. The findings of this study that highlight the importance of, instructor expectations and timely feedback, and student workload are supported by current research (Mcfarland and Hamilton, 2005-2006; McLaren, 2004) which indicates that the delivery method has limited effect on student performance. Rather the factors that appear to effect student performance are: instructor effectiveness, presentation of information/content by instructor, and overall course satisfaction. To conclude in the words of Phipps and Merisotis (1999), "technology is not nearly as important as other factors such as learning tasks, learner characteristics, student motivation and the instructor (8)." So it is essential that when educational institutions provide their students the convenience of online learning, they also provide them with a good quality online student experience which will promote the success and satisfaction of students.

### **Study Limitations**

The results of the study are limited because of the low number of courses students have taken online. The researcher recognizes that it may be problematic to classify a student as an online student after he/she has taken only one course because in his/her first course, he/she may be just getting used to this new environment. To attempt to overcome this obstacle the study did try to recruit participants who have taken multiple courses online, but this was not possible in the case of all six participants who were interviewed. Further, generalizations may be difficult to make because of the limited online experience of some of the participants.

In addition, Group A or the Better-In-Class consisted of full-time students whereas Group B or the Better-Online participants were part-time students who held full-time jobs. The Better-Online students may have done well in their online courses because they had a lighter course load than the Better-In-Class group who were full-time students. The researcher did not ask the Better-In-Class students the reasons behind their decision to take online courses, but the Better-Online group did share that their reason for taking online course(s) was they had full time jobs and other commitments, and online was the only way they could continue or get an education. So one group had full time jobs but they had a lighter course load, and the other group had a heavier course load with part-time or no job (as was the case with one student). While the workload of the two groups may well have been equally demanding, their motivations may have been different. The Better-Online students took the online courses because they wanted to, and so they knew what they were getting into and had likely planned how they were going to allocate their time. On the other hand, the Better-In-Class students may have

taken the online courses possibly because they needed to due to scheduling constraints etc. and had different reasons for taking their courses. Further research is needed to better understand the motivation for students to take online courses and the impact course load may have on their attitudes.

Despite the limitations, the value of the study lies in the fact that it aimed to analyze the lived experiences of online students and see how those experiences impact performance in online courses. It was hoped that a qualitative approach would provide insight different from that provided by the quantitative approaches used in the numerous studies done to this point, and that it might shed more light on the question how experiences unique to online learning affect students' performance in online courses. It is expected this new understanding will help in course design, delivery and better support of online students.

### **Suggestions for Implementation**

Based on the findings of this qualitative study and the other related research, the researcher makes the following suggestions to overcome some of the identified drawbacks of the online course environment. For in an era marked by the incorporation of networked technologies, we cannot ignore the importance evaluating the relevance of the current pedagogical approaches to learning and teaching (Buckley et al., 2010).

#### *Student focused*

- An online student orientation could give students information about the nature of online learning (Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007). According to Schrum and Hong,

(2002), cognitive scientists and software engineers suggest that in order to understand and internalize what is happening in the new environment of online learning, individuals need to create mental models (Clark, 2004b). And before students begin constructing new knowledge, they need to take time to move through the initial efforts of learning the tools (Yakimovicz & Murphy, 1995).

- There is a need to provide students self-regulated learning strategies to enhance students' achievement of intended learning outcomes (Zimmerman, 2002, Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990; King, Harner, & Brown, 2000; Whipp and Chiarelli, 2004, cited in Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007). Students should be instructed to use online lectures and other material to their benefit (Le et al., 2010).

From the perspective of the students in this study, useful strategies would be time management and the ability to balance the time and effort devoted to online and traditional classroom course.

#### *Instructor focused*

- Just like students taking online courses, instructors teaching an online course should be aware of the particular needs of online students and helps instructors master the supporting technology (Singh & Pan, 2004).
- Students feel that instructors need to be made aware of the special importance of timely feedback to students in an online environment. To ensure that students' need for adequate and timely feedback is fulfilled, it is important to create multiple avenues by which students can contact or access the instructor (Dereshiwsky, 1998. p.5). Richard Clark asserts that when students receive feedback stressing the benefits of the effort they are investing in learning

activities, they tend to be more persistent in their effort in distance learning (2004a).

- Since online discussions seem to be approved by the students in this study, the use of online discussions should be encouraged. Instructors must emphasize the importance of participation in enhancing students' online learning experience (Singh & Pan, 2004), and should establish minimum levels of participation in discussion groups (Schrum & Hong, 2002).
- According to the findings of this research study, online discussions can be a good source of information for students when the instructor is not immediately available. Instructors might view the discussion forums as a way to foster a sense of an online community of learners who can help each other when the instructor is not available. According to Wisenberg and Hutton, (1996), creating a sense of online community and encouraging students to become independent thinkers are two of the major challenges that instructors should consider when designing online courses.
- Students feel that instructors should make their expectations clearly known. And since students in the study felt that the instructor's presence was the reason that they focused more on in-class course, improving the online instructor's presence to be more like an in-class course needs to be examined in future research since this might help student focus.
- Study findings suggest that instructors need to devote more thought to the presentation of information and notes. Supplementing materials, where possible, by visuals, links, diagrams, illustrations etc. is desirable. Course content

consisting of rich materials such as interactive examples, multimedia applications, reference books etc. is useful for students (Yukselturk & Bulut, 2007). According to Summers et al. (2005), an instructor should have a pedagogical foundation for content delivery. It is pedagogical motivation that needs to steer the instructor's decisions with regards to the use of online technology (Boer & Collins, 2002).

### *Technology focused*

- As participants in this study expressed, as much as is reasonably possible, institutional standardization of the web design of its courses is desirable.
- To achieve standardization, best practices for course organization and navigation could be established across the institution. For example, when a student starts a new online course, he or she should be confident that the icon or tab that took him to the course outline in his last course will do the same in this new course. This sense of familiarity will help alleviate some of the anxiety associated with the isolation of online learning.

## **Conclusion**

The intent of this study was to examine the student experience of online students in order to understand and answer the research question posed at the outset: What are some of the factors in the online student experience that affect his/her performance in online courses?

The findings of this study indicate that student performance in an online environment is influenced by factors such as instructor expectations; timely feedback;

effective time-management; student course load, i.e. full-time or part-time; and whether the student is taking both online and traditional courses at the same time.

A finding of interest in this study that warrants further research is that when students concurrently taking both online and in-class courses were required to make a choice between the two different modes, they invariably gave in-class courses preferential treatment. However, there could be other explanations for their choice since all of these students were fulltime and all but one of their courses was in-class, so the only flexibility would have been around the online course.

An area worth examining further would be how students who have done well in online courses negotiate the flexible and less structured format of online courses and how they are able to balance their time between in-class and online courses.

Reflecting on the study design, there were not many differences between the two groups of students. Perhaps doing a comparative study of the experiences of three groups of students: those who have taken mostly online courses; those who have taken mostly face-to-face; and those who have taken a fair number of both online and face-to-face, help better understand the differences and similarities in student experiences of the three groups.

Online learning is an important method of delivery of instruction. Institutions responding to the demands of the market place are devoting more and more resources to online delivery. However, despite the increases in the online student population, questions remain about the efficacy of the online mode of delivery in instruction delivered online in quality education and ensuring student success as online learning environment a different set of challenges for both the student and the instructor. This

research has attempted to examine the online student experience and determine how the unique challenges of an online environment affects performance in online courses.



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## **Appendix I**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **General Information**

1. How many online courses have you completed?
2. Over all did you do better on the online courses or the traditionally delivered courses?

#### **Student Related**

1. Do you enjoy working on your own? If yes, why? If no, why?
2. Are you a self-directed learner? Yes/No? What learning behaviours make you describe yourself as being one way or the other?
3. How would you rate your time management skills? Good/Bad? If good, what time management skills do you employ? If bad, what aspects of time management do you find problematic?
4. Are you comfortable writing? Yes/No? How do you view your writing skills? Above Average/Average/Below Average? How do you think your writing impacts your performance in online courses?

#### **Instructor Related**

1. What do you think of the amount of contact you have with your instructor in an online environment?
2. Is immediate feedback important when working on your own?

#### **Technology**

1. How familiar and comfortable are you with using a computer?
2. Do you have ready access to the internet?



3. Are you able to intuitively use programs like Blackboard or do you require coaching?
4. Did you get any coaching before starting your online course?

#### Communication

1. How is communication different in an online setting?
2. If you find there is a difference in communication between the online and traditional classroom setting, is the difference a negative or positive one?
3. What do you like/dislike about online discussion as a way of learning?

#### Website

1. Was the website design user friendly?
2. Were you easily able to navigate it?

#### Convenience

1. The ability to study at your own convenience – was that a help or a hindrance?

#### Approach to Studying and Preparation

1. What kind of learning approach do you think is necessary for online learning?

## **Appendix II**

### **Transcripts of Interviews**

#### **Group A Interviews**

##### **Interview GA1**

**Q.** Okay, I am going to start by asking you how many online courses you have completed?

**Ans.** One.

**Q.** Did you do better on the online courses or the traditionally delivered courses?

**Ans.** The traditionally delivered courses.

**Q.** Do you enjoy working on your own?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** Working on your own than working in a group?

**Ans.** It depends.

**Q.** Depends on what factors?

**Ans.** On how complex the task is. Who my group members are.

**Q.** So if it is a complex task would you rather work alone or in a group? The complexity makes it....

**Ans.** If it is too complex to convey the idea of the topic to many members then I would like to work alone. If it is complex but you are easily able to explain it to other people so that they understand and are able to complete the task then I wouldn't mind working in a group. Then again it boils down to who the group members are.

**Q.** So what kind of group members do you like working with?

**Ans.** People who are hardworking and easy to get along with.

**Q.** So would you say you are a self-directed learner?

**Ans.** In some areas of study yes, in others no.

**Q.** So what learning behaviors make you describe yourself as being one way or the other. If you are self directed, what would you say.. how would you say..

**Ans.** Well, I consider myself to be self-directed in the sense that there is no formal way of teaching or there is no formal classes that I attend it is more so that I am doing it out of interest and I am researching the internet for various articles on certain topics and I am teaching myself the terminology and the foundations of the topic or the area of study.

**Q.** I just want to understand, you are saying you are self-directed because you are able to teach yourself .

**Ans.** Yes, I am self directed because I am able to teach myself without the need of any formal traditional class, formal lecture.

**Q.** How do you rate your time management skills? Are they good or are they bad.

**Ans.** They are okay. Average.

**Q.** So what do you mean by average?

**Ans.** Basically sometime I waste more time than I should. And sometimes I am less productive than I should be. It varies day to day.

**Q.** What aspects of time management do you find problematic?

**Ans.** Basically your day to day life also interferes with what you have set out for the day. Sometimes you have to push aside the time you have allotted to do certain things and basically attend to matters at hand, like family life or social life and that sort of thing.

**Q.** So if there is a pressing social engagement, you will pay attention to that or tackle that before you tackle your assignment?

**Ans.** Well it depends on the importance of the social engagement and the importance of the assignment. If the assignment is due tomorrow, then I will definitely work on the assignment and have to push the social engagement and maybe not even attend it. But if the social engagement is a really close friend or whatever, then I need to and I feel I need to attend that, however, it all depends on when my assignment is due and when the engagement is.

**Q.** Are you comfortable writing?

**Ans.** Umm, in certain situations, yes, in certain areas I am, but in others I am not.

**Q.** Okay what areas are you comfortable writing?

**Ans.** Umm just emails, any online social networks. I am comfortable writing in those types of situations, but essays and those things are times I tend to struggle.

**Q.** So you are comfortable writing informally?

**Ans.** That's right.

**Q.** So how about a discussion board, would you be comfortable writing there when there was a discussion happening in a group on a topic?

**Ans.** Yes, I would be comfortable writing there.

**Q.** But if you had to write a report you would not be that comfortable. Is that what I understand?

**Ans.** Well it depends. In a way yes; for the most part yes.

**Q.** How do you view your writing skills. Are they average, below average, above average?

**Ans.** I'd say average.

**Q.** And how do you think your writing impacts your performance in online courses, in the online course that you took. Did your writing impact it?

**Ans.** No there was no writing whatsoever in the online course.

**Q.** So it wasn't your writing that impacted it?

**Ans.** No.

**Q.** What do you think about the amount of contact you have with your instructor in an online environment?

**Ans.** I didn't really make use of my instructor in my online course.

**Q.** Did you think the contact was sufficient? The online contact? Did you feel you had enough contact? Was there was enough opportunity for you to contact the online instructor?

**Ans.** I did not really make use of any opportunity I had so I can't really answer that question.

**Q.** So can you tell me why you didn't make use of the opportunity.

**Ans.** Yeah, I just had a heavy course load that semester and I was just basically trying to stay on those courses and I pushed the online course aside.

**Q.** Why did you choose to push the online course aside and not one of the other ones?

**Ans.** Umm, I guess because there were formal classes that you had to go to so aaah doing the reading before those classes was pretty much imperative otherwise you do not know what is going on in class, as we covered a lot of material in class that was also important. Not to say that we did not cover a lot of material in the online course, there was a tremendous amount of material in the online course, but I guess not having it present in your everyday life as to having a professor that's there lecturing or anything like that made it easy to let that fall to the wayside and focus on other courses. Because you are not dealing with it every day, every other day; you are not going to class at a set time and all that so yeah, basically it is easier to ignore.

**Q.** So is immediate feedback important when you are working on your own?

**Ans.** Like in tasks or quizzes or things like that?

**Q.** Yeah from your professor, yes, feedback when there is something you don't understand. When you are in a class, you can ask the professor right after class. In an online environment things are a little different, so did that make a difference?

**Ans.** Well, I would say not really because you know in an online environment the professor is always able to check, you can always get in touch with the professor by posting on discussion board and they will be able to check it answer your questions. But again, I did not make enough use of that, however, you know, I do not think it is necessary to have an answer right away like, if anything, you can look it up on the internet something like that.

**Q.** So how familiar and comfortable are you with using a computer?

**Ans.** I am very comfortable.

**Q.** Do you have ready access to the internet?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** Are you intuitively able to use programs like Blackboard or do you require coaching?

**Ans.** No, I think I can intuitively use it.

**Q.** So did you get coaching on using Blackboard or Vista or what ever you use when you started your course?

**Ans.** No.

**Q.** Did your performance in the online course have anything to do with the complexity of the technology?

**Ans.** Umm.. I would say the technology wasn't that complex. Basically the complexity of the technology had nothing to do with my performance in it, good or bad. But sometimes the way notes were presented in some file format or stuff like that, basically the file format does make a difference to some degree because it allows you to manipulate them to the learner's favour instead of having the professor dictate that this is how it is going to look especially in an anatomy course. You know you need to see things in many different ways and being able to either color code or do something of that sort depending on what file format it is easier if you use PowerPoint, it is easier to color code using PowerPoint than using PDF. It can make a difference I found that it would have been nice if it was power point versus PDF or any other type of program that allows you to manipulate or color coding or adding notes to the notes that were provide to us by the professor,.

**Q.** I am not sure I understand, "adding notes to the notes that were provided."

**Ans.** Right so, basically, the professor gives you the topics you are going to be covering and what not ... and it is up to us to fill in any information from the online presentations that were given. Now so basically, you are adding notes on top of a blank slate of topics, right so a blank slate of notes you are adding your own personalized important things that are covered in the lecture. So depending on the file format, some say it's easier to do in PDF, some say it's easier to do in PowerPoint. For most people, I believe it's easier to do in PowerPoint. So to add notes on top of what you have already been given by the professor and then being able to manipulate that especially in an anatomy course you know colours definitely help a lot.

**Q.** So you think the fact that the notes were presented in PDF, deterred from, it was a detriment to your ability to learn from those notes. It made it more difficult?

**Ans.** Yes, I would say. I found a way around it. I found a way around it, but it made it difficult.

**Q.** How is communication different in an online setting?

**Ans.** It doesn't seem to be different at all. In a class you have a lecture and after the lecture you ask your questions or sometimes the lecture, which are very few, have an ability to, or are able to show their excitement of the material they are presenting, you know, being in traditional class settings, but that's very rare. You don't see too much of that even in traditional class settings. So having a traditional class and having an online

course basically is the same thing. You might get a professor asking questions to the class every now and again, but, aah, I don't think that is necessarily important. I think, it is basically up to the students to learn the materials and ask questions where they have, where they see there are gaps in their knowledge.

**Q.** Do you feel that there is a difference between communication in an online setting and in a regular or traditional class room setting?

**Ans.** Not really.

**Q.** So what do you like about the online discussion as a way of learning or what do you dislike about online discussion as a way of learning?

**Ans.** Umm.. I like online discussion as a way of learning in the sense that if a professor, if they are so inclined can go online every night and check on topics. So sometimes it makes the professor more readily available than if you were to go and visit them during office hours or preset times. So it can make the professor more readily if the professor chooses to use that, to be involved or not. Now if the professor is only signing on once every week or once every month, then yeah, that is something I would not like about it. There is really little professor interaction. Now sometimes it allows students to discuss common problems that they are having and then figure out basically why they are having those problems together versus someone basically giving you the information where you are not having to problem solve or think about it on your own. So that is also another reason why I like, I can like and dislike it because it depends on how much student interaction there is on student online forums as well.

**Q.** Are you saying that if the professor is involved then the online discussion is a good format because then...?

**Ans.** That's right. It saves you time going to the professor's office, seeking him out, aah, your questions are readily answered and students are able to talk amongst each other and also problem solve, but it depends how much the professor is willing to commit.

**Q.** You know, when you took your online course, was the website design user friendly?

**Ans.** I'd say so.

**Q.** Were you easily able to navigate it?

**Ans.** Yeah.

**Q.** So you wouldn't say that that affected your performance in it?

**Ans.** No.

**Q.** The ability to study at your own convenience when you took the online course – was that a help or a hindrance? Like you could study whenever you want, where ever you want. It was up to you, you did not have to ...

**Ans.** I guess it was both. Aaah... like if you did not understand something in a traditional class setting, you know you go through a lecture and then you have to go back and review, aaah, where as if there is ... during the lecture you don't have what the lecture is talking about, you basically know how to sight pictures out of the book, but here is other key information that the professor gives during his or her lecture. Now having that online, being able to review that any time you want and focusing on those key points if you

missed it, rewinding the lecture or spending some more time on the parts that you were not so clear on is a definite help and a great tool in that sense. It is also a hindrance in the sense that there is no formal class setting so it is easy to just sort of push it aside and focus on what needs to be done immediately, I guess.

**Q.** So are you saying that the ability to study on your own was a hindrance?

**Ans.** No, it was a convenience in the sense that you could go back and focus on the details that you missed the first time when you went lecture than if you are in a traditional class setting because you cannot go back and tell the professor, "Oh, can you re-lecture on that," because they have other things to do. They are not going to waste their time. In an online setting that information is in their database or whatever, you can access it anytime that you want, you can revisit anything that you missed the first time around and access that. So yes, (online study) is definitely more convenient in that sense.

**Q.** How was it a hindrance?

**Ans.** It was a hindrance in the sense that basically there is no set time for lecture, there is no anything like that. Basically you go and you look at it when you can. Right so.. again with the course load that I was taking, it basically, I did not have that time to commit an hour and a half to the lecture and then study another 2-3 hours on the material. So, it was a hindrance in the fact that I had a heavy course load. Besides I had to focus on what was happening on my day to day rather than focusing on something that.

**Q.** But why did you think that you could afford to not focus on this?

**Ans.** Well, as I said before to your other question that basically it is a day to day thing. You go to class every day, you have to be on top of your material but in your online course basically it is up to you to do it, basically just for whatever reason it defaults to as being not as important because you are working on the stuff that you got to class, the labs and all the stuff that you need to work on, that you actually need to prepare for because you have a formal class, and if you don't prepare you are lost in class. Whereas in this sense, in the online sense, because you can access it anytime, because you can read the material whenever you feel like reading it, basically, it gets pushed over, and there is no one reminding you every day that this or that needs to be done. Because you say "Oh, I can read it at any point in time I want." Because the lectures are there, I can go through them a hundred times because to access whereas in the lecture in a traditional classroom setting, it is that one fifty minute or hour 20 minute slot that you have to prepare for and understand what is going on and if you don't you can't ask the professor to back and lecture on that again. So you need to be prepared and know what is happening and so basically that is how it fell into the whole hierarchy I gave it I guess.

**Q.** So what kind of learning approach do you think is necessary for online learning? To do well on an online course what kind of approach. I mean, now that you have the experience, what kind of approach is necessary?

**Ans.** Well, it all depends on the course and what material you are covering like you know, if it is, for instance, a computer course and you are very comfortable with computers, then yes, of course, there is things that you can afford not to put in as much effort in because you know that material already or as if it something completely new to

you, you know, that this goes for both traditional and online courses, if it is new material to you then yes, you would have to spend more time and effort and do a lot of your homework, I guess, to understand the material. It just varies on what course it is and that dictates how much time and effort. Speaking about online courses probably, how I would approach it now having gone through it, basically structuring it as a formal class. As in you have your schedule for whatever class times you have during the day. Fit that in somewhere in your schedule, say “okay, this is not free time, this is not study time; this is class A, B, C that I have taken online structure. Put that in however long it is going to take you to review that one lecture, prepare for it as would for a formal class and then listen to the lecture and then continue on and then start studying for the rest of your courses. Basically structure it as a normal class, put it in your schedule, in our time slot that in between, this class and this class, I am going to do this class. At this time I am going to do this class every other day. It’s like you would any other class.

I learned a lot through my experience taking my first online course. It definitely helped with how I think about it now and how I would do things differently in future if I were to take another one. I think that basically making it as important [as the traditional course] wasn’t the only option, but that would have definitely helped me.

**Q.** So you think that because of the convenience it offered, it hindered you?

**Ans.** Basically, yeah. It allowed me to take my time and focus on other things.

**Q.** Okay so is there anything else you want to tell me about your online learning experience? Would you take another online course?

**Ans.** Again it depends on what type of course it is; if it is completely new to me, then probably not, but if I have some type of background in it or some understanding of the material, yeah, I wouldn’t mind.

**Q.** So if it is a totally new subject, you would rather be in a classroom environment?

**Ans.** That’s right.

**Q.** And why do you feel that?

**Ans.** Well in a classroom environment, you basically have the professor able to do, it is more dynamic, it’s not the professor just talking. There are diagrams that he shows etc.

**Q.** Do you think from your experience an online course requires less commitment from a student, more commitment from a student or the same commitment from a student as does a traditional course?

**Ans.** I would say the same. Again, it depends on the course and the subject matter being covered. If everything is equal, then I would say the same commitment.

**Q.** Okay, thank you very much. If I have any other questions, can I get back to you?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** One last thing – how old are you?

**Ans.** 24 yrs.



## **Interview GA2**

**Q.** I will start by asking how online courses you have taken?

**Ans.** I am in the process of completing Psychology 105 and Anthropology 101.

**Q.** Overall are you doing better on your online courses or your traditionally delivered courses?

**Ans.** I find my online courses to be quite easy and beneficial ... but because my program is in person, I am placing more importance on that even though there isn't any. So it is my program that I am going to school for that I am doing a lot better on compared to the online courses.

**Q.** So you feel that you are placing more emphasis on your traditional courses?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** Why?

**Ans.** Umm.. because I go to class and see the professor regularly twice or three times a week. I am constantly reminded of his expectations of us.

**Q.** Do you enjoy working on your own?

**Ans.** I do, yeah, I like the independent work. Ahh..

**Q.** What do you like about independent work?

**Ans.** I like not having to do presentations. That's my biggest benefit is not having to do presentations. I like to work on my own and like my grades coming from me and not with partners. However, with my actual program because it is so small doing partner work in that sort of environment is different compared to if I was in Psych in an actual class. So the psych 105 online, I prefer. Because I took the psych 104 in person and I like the Psych 105 online a lot better.

**Q.** Compared to 105, how were your grades in 104?

**Ans.** They were slightly lower. Over all, I am doing better on the traditionally delivered courses.

**Q.** Would you say you are a self-directed learner?

**Ans.** Umm.. I am a hands-on learner and if I can do it myself, I find it a lot easier that way compared to having a lecture. I can see what is required and do that.

**Q.** How would you rate your time management skills?

**Ans.** I'm a very busy person so this semester, I am putting in a lot more time with my online courses; however, because they are my first online courses I am finding that my time issue with them is still kind of ranging from non use to balancing out my time with an online course. Now that it is half way through the semester, my time management has gotten a lot better in that manner.

**Q.** What particular aspects of time-management do you find problematic?

**Ans.** Well I did not understand how the course worked at first and all the due dates and how long each assignment would take me. I was putting a lot of work into some of these assignments. When only a paragraph would be needed, because I was used to writing papers, I would write a full paper. So my time management and my writing skills is what was the worst for me.

**Q.** Are you comfortable writing?

**Ans.** Now I am; now that I understand the university qualifications of writing, I am getting a lot better with it. At first, though, it was a little downwards.

And how do you view your writing skills?

I would see myself as perhaps average. I am not an A+ student or a D student. I am in the middle; it depends on the topic and how much interested I am.

**Q.** So how do you think your writing is impacting your online courses?

**Ans.** Well, being as my online courses are mostly writing, and because they are only paragraphs actually, I have been doing well with those. If they were bigger assignments or actual reports or research papers, I think that would be very problematic for me because there would be a professor to ask questions on the big paper, but being as it is paragraphs, I am doing quite well in my writing.

**Q.** You don't think that is negatively impacting your performance?

**Ans.** No, I don't.

**Q.** So what do you think about the amount of contact you have with your instructor in an online environment?

**Ans.** Well emails is mostly the contact that I go through and because I am usually ahead enough to ask the questions if I have a problem, it's fine. But if I left something to the last minute, it would be a little more difficult and it would be nice to have something implemented there without ruining the instructor's social time either.

**Q.** Is immediate feedback important to you?

**Ans.** Not necessarily, and just like I said, because I am usually ahead of the game and ask questions before hand because I know people are busy and immediate feed-back is usually not typical. With my course instructor I have found that if I asked a question it has gotten back within the day. So the feedback is quite quick.

**Q.** How familiar and comfortable are you with using a computer?

**Ans.** I am familiar with using a computer, but designing websites and stuff, no. I use the typical Microsoft documents and the internet. Umm.. but if I were to do an online course as my first university experience, I think, Blackboard would have kind of thrown me off. I am happy I waited to get the experience of Blackboard before starting an online course.

**Q.** So how did you get the experience with Blackboard?

**Ans.** Because my other programs use Blackboard and that helped me out. Plus I went to a session on how to use Blackboard and I do have some friends who went to Grant MacEwan who helped me as well. So now they [skills] are a lot better.

**Q.** Actually that was going to be my next question - are you able to intuitively use programs like Blackboard? You feel the coaching really helped you.

**Ans.** Yeah, yeah, for Blackboard, just because of the amount of different objects or icons on Blackboard, there are a few things that I searched and found myself easily, but it's just kind of getting to know the system which takes time. Ahh.. there are a few problems I have had with the online courses like not being able to open up an interactive assignment, couldn't figure it out so I had to phone technology support. That was a little frustrating at times.

**Q.** And it's interesting, for some documents, if you are using Firefox you can open them but if you are using Explorer, you cannot.

**Ans.** That's what I was told to download was the Firefox. But my interactive assignments would work except when it became that day and when I went to do one of my interactive assignments, it is that day that they shut down on me and I couldn't get it to work. So that was only that time that I had my late assignments.

**Q.** Do you have ready access to the internet?

**Ans.** Oh yeah. Internet access is through out my home, lap top and wireless.

**Q.** So you know the way notes are presented on Blackboard, does that make a difference in how well you understand?

**Ans.** Well, what I preferred is with my online anthro, I received a package in the mail where as in psych, I didn't. So I was trying to use the wrong psychology book and I had to go and re-do that again. Again I was a little unprepared for the online courses because I did not know what to expect. I think an online course package in the mail would have helped me out a little bit more to kind of say you need to do this, this and course starts this day right in front of me. I think that would have been a little bit more helpful.

**Q.** If you had written instruction saying this is what you need to do etc. that would have helped?

**Ans.** Yeah, yeah. It's all there, but it's all online; it would have helped me better if was an actual little package with general information.

**Q.** How would you say communication is different in an online setting?

**Ans.** I am really close to the girls in all my online classes whereas I couldn't even tell you the name of one of the students in my online courses. Umm I have done rating of classmates, of marking them. With an online course, I like that a little better because it's a little more private. I like a little more privacy compared to being in the classroom where there is a lot less privacy.

**Q.** So you rate each other?

**Ans.** Yes, there is an assignment where we have to rate a paragraph on each other. You reply to a paragraph and then you write a paragraph. It's probably to ensure that we are reading everyone else's which is very beneficial; I like the fact of that. It is a simple mark and you are getting more information from the other students. It kind of helps you talk to the other students but very informal because you are not knowing who's who or what.

But they do, at the beginning they did an, "Introduce Yourself." As interesting as that was, I did not find that very beneficial only for the fact that when you are not talking with someone face to face, you are not going to remember that their favourite food is pizza. I did not find that beneficial but a "Hi my name is what ever." I would find that a little more beneficial. That is something I would like to see changed rather than a little paragraph, the chances of which somebody reading are slim. Something that would bring us closer.

**Q.** So you feel that there isn't the closeness in an online environment?

**Ans.** Right.

**Q.** Does that affect your learning in any way.

**Ans.** No, no. because it was psychology – I think if were a full program, it may. Being that it is only one course I don't think it is affecting my learning too terribly much. Like I said, because you have to read somebody else's paragraph, you are still getting some of the learning of other people's opinion without a huge discussion about it.

**Q.** So how about communication with your instructor? Is that different in an online environment?

**Ans.** Yeah, I find with my program, I am bugging my teachers all the time, but with online, I am asking very few questions.

**Q.** So does that negatively impact your learning?

**Ans.** No, like I said, if it was a full program, I think it would. Being that it is one course, I think it's fine for learning.

**Q.** So what do you like or dislike about online discussions?

**Ans.** We have discussion posts and our discussion posts are actually what we rate and write about. I enjoy the discussion posts because, I guess, you are reading other people's opinions, but in point form as there are a lot of opinions with the background of why the opinion is that way. I was used to getting information for putting down. So I really enjoy the being able to state an opinion and the facts of why that opinion is with other feedback. So I like the very informal and causal conversation in the discussions that we have.

**Q.** And how do you find that the online discussion is different from the regular/traditional classroom discussion that you have?

**Ans.** Ummm, everybody gets an opinion. I am very quite in my classes. I have my opinions. I am close to the girls so I'm not that shy, but I am just don't voice my opinions that much. I don't really care to. If I feel very strongly about it I will, but if I don't, I won't say anything about it. Where as in online discussion, it is kind of nice; it is getting me to out there to say rather than to sit back and listen. I enjoy that aspect on online discussions.

**Q.** The website, I know you have alluded to it already; would you say it was user friendly when you first started?

**Ans.** Umm, it is. But I found you kind of have to have a little bit of time to go through some of it before. Now that I know what it is, yes it is very easy to find things. Yes, you

have to go through it a little bit, not a lot of time. It's not as good as it should be for having to be a busy atmosphere.

**Q.** And were you easily able to navigate it?

**Ans.** Yeah. Yeah.

**Q.** So you know in online learning, you have the ability to study at your own convenience. Do you find that that is a help or a hindrance?

**Ans.** Because of my work, I found it helpful. As I said, I have two part-time jobs; working at the one it's very beneficial. Working at the other where I can't study, it probably, would have been more of a hindrance. Because I have that access to study at a job, it was quite beneficial for me.

**Q.** What kind of an approach do you think you need for online learning? Is it the same approach that you take towards regular learning in a classroom?

**Ans.** I don't think so. I think you have to be a little more prepared for online learning because you are doing it on your own because there is nobody there to remind you that an assignment is due this day and that day. Umm... what I did for myself, I made a list of each chapter and the due dates. So it was right in front of me. That helped me out. So I think there is a little more planning involved. Not much baby-sitting, I guess.

**Q.** Do you think then that the commitment that is required to do well in an online course is the same as the commitment that is required to do well in a traditional classroom?

**Ans.** Umm... well my commitment in the classroom is to show up every day because I am also getting marked on it. Whereas my commitment to the online is more for myself compared to working with other people. So I find that I am committed to my online courses but if I had to choose what I had to miss, I would, probably miss the online courses. Because of the in person [contact in class], for some reason it makes it feel like a different importance level.

**Q.** So what do you mean that you would miss?

**Ans.** If the online course had a set time to meet and it conflicted with something. I would probably give that up rather than the in-person.

**Q.** Is it the social aspect?

**Ans.** I don't think it is the social aspect. I think it's the fact of being in a classroom with a teacher who knows you are there doing your work compared to you are on your own, and if you don't do it, it affects you and you only. That kind of thing.

**Q.** Would you say an online course requires more work?

**Ans.** I wouldn't. There are a lot more assignments, but they are small assignments and I really, really enjoy that. And I find that a lot of the small assignments are a little more beneficial and the study questions that they put with each chapter, I find those quite beneficial as well, whereas in the in class programs a lot of the stuff isn't set out straight there because you are learning it as you go along. With online it is all set out. That is really important compared to the assignments and everything. It is not as much work because everything is a lot better laid out; the assignment are a little bit smaller.

**Q.** So is there anything else that you want to share with me about online learning?

**Ans.** I'd probably do better at it if I wasn't so busy, but with two online courses while you are in a fulltime program and my two part-time jobs – it's a bit much. That's about it. But I really, really enjoy my online classes and I am probably going to take my degree online and I guess it just depends on the person – how it's going to work for you. Because of the time schedule and the way every thing is laid out as well as the way you can time out the online courses, I find them a lot more beneficial for me.

**Q.** Just one last question- how old are you?

**Ans.** 23 yrs.

### **Interview GA3**

**Q.** I'll start by asking how many online courses you have completed?

**Ans.** I have completed three in total.

**Q.** Have you done better on the online courses or the traditionally delivered courses?

**Ans.** Aaah.. grade wise, I have done worse on the online.

**Q.** Can you tell me why you think that might be?

**Ans.** It is difficult to convey your expectations to a student online and for a student to convey, I think, to the professor what's going on in the online course as well. Because there isn't that face to face interaction, you are not getting the physical signs and contacts, the tone in people's voices and stuff like that. And that's funny because I've had a great online experience and I've had a really bad one. And even with a really great experience, I am not doing as well as my other courses.

**Q.** So what was the bad experience?

**Ans.** Umm.. it's very important for the profs to get back to the student right away because it is not self-paced. When you have a question, 24 to 48 hours is detrimental to what you are doing at the time. So I had a prof that was out of town a lot and did not return emails. The phone number was brought in and I would phone him and he did not get back for a couple of days. That made things really, really difficult.

**Q.** So do you enjoy working on your own?

**Ans.** I do actually. Umm.. the reason why I chose to take it at first was because my courses are in the evening from 6 to 9, and committing to four classes like that a week inhibits the ability to work. So I chose it to make my schedule more flexible and I liked it so much regardless of the fact that my mark wasn't as good just for the flexibility factor. And I found after I did the first online course it became a lot easier because I knew where to look to find things and I knew the fastest way to get a hold of other students and things like that.

**Q.** Are you a self-directed learner?

**Ans.** Definitely.

**Q.** Can you tell me what learning behaviours make you describe yourself as a self-directed learner?

**Ans.** Ummm.. I have a calendar on gmail that has set out every discussion that I have to have completed and the dates of my quizzes and my exams and my papers. And I start everything a minimum of one week ahead of time to make sure that everything is prepared before I get to the point that everything is due, and I think that is very self-directed. It's less procrastination. Also with online it is a lot of finding information not only in the text book. I have found that the text book is a very, very small part of the information that helps you to be successful. So I'll look up the concepts on the internet, and I'd find what other kind of information sources are out there.

**Q.** You kind of alluded to the next question in the previous one, but I'll ask it nonetheless. How would you rate your time management skills, are they good or bad?

**Ans.** I'd say they are very good till mid terms hit and then it gets really confusing and then it good till finals hit and then it gets really confusing again. And generally if I'll gauge my courses by difficulty and if a course is really difficult and I find I am not going to get an A in it, I'll move some of my study time to other courses where I know I can get a 4.

**Q.** Would you say you are comfortable writing?

**Ans.** Definitely.

**Q.** And how do you view your writing skills, are they average, above average, below average?

**Ans.** I think I would gauge them as above average just because based on how I did in my last communications course.

**Q.** Do you think your writing impacts your performance in online courses?

**Ans.** Definitely. Well thought out ideas combined with word choice and grammar get your idea across a lot easier which leads to better marks..

**Q.** So good writing skills make for better marks?

**Ans.** Definitely, definitely. Even when you are discussing with students, ones that use acronyms and smiley faces, no one takes them seriously.

**Q.** You know, going back to time management – are there any aspects of time management you find problematic?

**Ans.** With online courses specifically, because there isn't a time every week where you go to attend, it's very easy to forget that you have an online course. So in that regard, you really have to be careful about your time management for your online.

**Q.** Again you alluded to the next question a little bit, but I will ask it. What do you think about the amount of contact you have with your instructor in an online environment?

**Ans.** In that situation it all depends on what the course is. The course I am taking right now, the prof is fantastic. He has a lot of contact. He notifies the students every single week that he is reviewing our discussions and he will post the marks; he lets us know when he is going out of town and alternative ways to get hold of him. And that really makes students feel that he is taking care of them and making sure that their needs are fulfilled as students, and I have had the opposite. So I think the more contact the better. I

think it takes a lot of contact between the prof and the students taking the course to make it successful for everybody.

**Q.** So when you are working on your own is immediate feedback important to your?

**Ans.** I did something interesting this semester to see how it would work out and I specifically chose a professor who was doing an online course and an in class course two of which I needed. And that has put me at a huge advantage because I can text message him, I can phone him, I can email him and I can talk to him in class. So in that way, I do get immediate feedback from him. But in past courses even in which I did have a moderate amount of feedback from one prof, the faster you get that feedback the better because you are still thinking about it in that mind frame where as two days later you forget what was going on at that time.

**Q.** So online courses, would you say they are less structured or more structured than traditional courses?

**Ans.** I think that really depends, because if I compare an online structure to my accounting courses, accounting courses are very structured. This is what you learn, and then we are going to go over these examples and you are going to do these for home work and then we'll quiz you on them, and so it is very regimented. But if I compare it to something like sociology, psychology and management courses, it is more structured than all of those other ones.

**Q.** So how familiar and comfortable are you using a computer?

**Ans.** Very much so.

**Q.** And do you have ready access to the internet?

**Ans.** Ah ha.

**Q.** Are you intuitively able to use programs like Blackboard? Is that what you are using right now?

**Ans.** Blackboard, I use all the time, everyday pretty much.

**Q.** So when you first started using it did you require coaching or were you able to use the program on your own?

**Ans.** I found probably about 75 % of the material without any coaching, but there were a lot of emails between me and professors asking where do I find this, where do I find that, and I can't find this link and the weird thing about online courses is that the format that they are set up in and the location of the buttons are different in every single course. The first two weeks of your online course is a whole new learning experience because they can move things in different places and they can look totally different.

**Q.** So do you think that that negatively affects your learning and your performance? You know this having to figure things out every time. Do you find time is wasted or it doesn't make a difference?

**Ans.** I think if there was a standard template and if every thing was in the exact same, of course it would be a time saver absolutely. But I have found that some profs utilize a lot more than other ones. Some of them as an example will only use a grading button, they'll use course content and then the mail and discussion. Um... which is very minimal just using those four, but when they send announcements to all of the students and put all of



your learning modules under that heading and they put a bunch of different links in reference to what we are doing, it make it a lot easier, because as you are going along, you can go through these things and it directs you to the other places to find more information.

**Q.** So you don't think that this having to search for stuff affects your performance negatively in any way?

**Ans.** I think researching things gives me a very well rounded understanding of the concepts we are studying because I am putting that extra effort in and looking into it further; and when it comes down to writing papers and exams, I can reflect on that and it helps me and I think as a learner.

**Q.** So what do you think about the way instructors notes are presented in online courses? And also the way they are presented, does that make a difference?

**Ans.** Pretty much every prof. will lay out the chapters and the pages to be read which I understand for the student to get a basic understanding of the concept, but I feel that's very minimal and its not enough. When they have very direct need to know slides set up, I find that makes a huge difference and then when they add the links and a lot of them will also have professional insights that are associated with the concept that you can look into those. That helps a lot as well, but just having the pages that you read, I dislike that way of doing it.

**Q.** So how is communication different in an online setting?

**Ans.** Completely different. You can be taken the wrong way very, very easily, and it happens all the time. And doing a group paper online is the most disastrous thing I have done academically. It's extremely difficult. The communication between the people and they are all over. Like some people are in Hinton and Edson. Some people are in Edmonton and some might be in the North-West Territories. There is no way that you can meet each other and talking to each other on the phone is not an option either. So I find that the further along the project gets, because communication is strictly on the computer, the more tense it gets.

**Q.** So in your mind the difference between communication in an online environment and a traditional environment is a positive or a negative?

**Ans.** Definitely a negative.

**Q.** In your online courses you have discussions – online discussions?

**Ans.** Yeah, every week, and it's usually based on modules or chapters, we have to read a case study and then you answer a series of questions. And after you respond to a series of questions, it is mandatory for you to respond to another student's discussion as well and you have to go further than saying, "Yes I agree with you" or "No I don't." You have to go a little more in depth than that. I do find that helps, but a lot of students when you do make comments about their discussions, they don't respond so it's not much of a sharing experience. You read what they have to say and consider it, but the students don't interact with each other very much.

**Q.** So what do you like about online discussions?

**Ans.** I really like looking at what other people say and comparing it to my thoughts. Because one of the good things that I do like about that is that everyone has different

ideas. And the communication barrier on line is very difficult, so it is one part of the learning process where you do get to see things that you never would have thought of, and you could have heard in a classroom much easier. But that part is still there a little bit.

**Q.** I just want to make sure I have understood you correctly, you are saying that in an online discussion, you see others opinions written down; however, you would have heard that any way in a regular classroom environment?

**Ans.** Yes, that is a bit of a saving grace for online because you do not get to experience that online except for in the written discussion format.

**Q.** Okay, just a couple of questions about the website. Was the website design user friendly?

**Ans.** I think, most of it is designed user-friendly, but, I think, if you sit down and look at it and try to find your way around it and you've never used it before, the person who programmed it programmed it for themselves. Not as someone who has never looked at it. Because the first time I took an online course, I really had a difficult time, going okay how do I do that? how do I know what I am supposed to do? And I haven't found a tutorial that gives instructions – click this button your first day and this will take you there and this will instruct you where you have to go, so on and so forth.

**Q.** So the first time you were not easily able to navigate it. Is that correct?

**Ans.** Correct. Like on the front page, it always has your syllabus so you can look at that and see what the instructor has to say, and a couple of other things will be posted on there, but just looking at all the links that you have, you do not know where to start.

**Q.** With online courses you can study during the day or during the night or whenever. Do you think that is a help or a hindrance?

**Ans.** A help.

**Q.** Is there any part of that that is a hindrance?

**Ans.** That just comes back to you don't have to drive to campus and be in that classroom at that time, so it can slip your mind. That's why I have everything scheduled the way I do because I start everything a week before it needs to be done. Because the first semester, I did find that I would completely forget and miss a discussion which is worth 2% of your mark, also a big chunk of marks for me. So in that way there is no solid physical reminder.

**Q.** What kind of learning approach do you think is necessary for online learning?

**Ans.** I think you need to be able to learn independently. Because besides giving you the information you need to know, there is no guidance. And you also have to be very willing to force yourself to sit down and take the time and that took me a couple of months in my first one to get used to that. Because usually you sit in the classroom and the prof. goes over all the material and this is what you need to know and we are having a quiz on this day, so everything is laid out for you. Whereas this you have to figure it all out for yourself.

**Q.** Would you say there is a difference in the amount of commitment required for online courses versus traditionally delivered courses?

**Ans.** I would say the commitment for online courses is at least twice as much as in class.

**Q.** And why would you say that?

**Ans.** Ummm, because instead of taking notes, it says read chapter 1, page 20 to 36. You have to go through and read it. You can't just read it, you have to look at the definitions and the concepts it talks about and that in itself takes longer than being [in a class], and above and beyond that you need to make the notes for studying for your mid-term. And the concepts, it may be above and beyond, I look at the concepts and then I research them on the internet, which gives a really well-rounded idea of what is going on, but it is a lot. And when you are doing your papers in class, the profs will talk about your papers, what you need to do and what not to do and things like that whereas in online you can send questions to your prof. but a lot of those questions you have to decide for yourself.

**Q.** So is there anything else you would like to share with me about your online experience?

**Ans.** Umm.. the longer I have been doing it the better it has been getting.

**Q.** And why would that be? Why do you think so?

**Ans.** Umm...this being my third course, I am much more familiar with it now. I am realizing that the online is just as important as the classroom course, and I am learning to balance three in class and one online, and I think it is a really good balance for a fulltime student. The prof. I have had this semester has been easy to communicate with and I think that choosing to have an in class and online from the same professor is a fantastic idea. Yeah, a lot of it is I think getting used to where things are and getting the information you need, so the more you do it the better it gets.

**Q.** Finally, how old are you?

**Ans.** I'm 28 years.

Clarification:

I think I don't do as well with online because:

- There is no one to clarify things for you.
- Other cues may be missed such as tone of voice and body language.
- It is difficult to gauge what, exactly, the prof. wants unless it is laid out very clearly.

## **Group B Interviews**

### **Interview GB1**

**Q.** Can you start by telling me how many online courses you have done?

**Ans.** I have done about six so far.

**Q.** Are you working towards a degree currently?

**Ans.** Right now I am working towards, it's called an environmental practitioner certificate. You don't need to have a prior degree to get the certificate.

**Q.** So overall, have you done better in your online courses or your traditional courses?

**Ans.** I would say I have done better on my online courses.

**Q.** Do you enjoy working on your own, studying on your own.

**Ans.** No, not at all. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy to tell you the truth. I am not a fan of it. I wish I wasn't so much into it or I probably would have dropped out by now. It is absolutely horrible working fulltime and trying to do this fulltime as well. Well, not full time, but even one course a semester, it's brutal.

**Q.** You say you are working fulltime, is that why you don't like the online thing or are there also other reasons?

**Ans.** I also find that I procrastinate more with online courses, and I will look at my deadlines as to when things are due and it is only a couple of days before that I start doing it and then I stress myself out. I get it done, I get a fabulous grade on it with very little feedback usually. So you don't know why you are in the course sometimes if you get the fabulous grade. I get to take my electives from different universities throughout Canada, and the one university that I am taking courses through right now umm.. the first part of the course I took, it's a two part course, every grade I got back was a 100%, 100%, 100%... I mean I am proud of my work I try hard, I read over it and everything looks fabulous in my opinion, but it's a little discouraging when you are getting a 100% and you don't know why or what you can do to improve or why you are even taking this course when you get so much good grades, what do you need to take it for?

**Q.** What university is this?

**Ans.** The one I am getting the 100% in, it's through Cape Breton University. So now I have a different teacher and it is the second portion of that course and actually, I enjoy this teacher a little bit better because he .. the highest mark I got was a hundred but the lowest mark I got was an 87%, and it's not... I get feedback with every single assignment I send in now which is nice. I know why I got 87 which makes me feel good. 100% , okay maybe that one was perfect, but I have had less 100's maybe I have got 2 hundreds in the eight projects we have done.

**Q.** And what course is this?

**Ans.** This is called Environmental Site Assessments, Volume 2. CNBI417. That is what this one is. First one was 416. So two different teachers, the same curriculum. So I think it is dependent on the teacher. I kind of have the feeling and this is just my feeling that some of the people who take these courses are really stupid. That is what I am guessing honestly and so then when they read my assignments they are like, "Wow, this is so awesome." That's what I am guessing honestly. I don't know. Don't know if it's true, but...

**Q.** So would you say you are self directed learner?

**Ans.** No, I will learn it because I need to know it, that's why I prefer taking actual courses because I will learn it even though I do not need to learn it necessarily. I am the kind of person who with online will learn what I need to know for the exam or learn what I need to know for the assignment. I don't have time to read the huge pile of papers they want me to read. So I will read the module I have to read, I will read the assignment. If I have to read the supplemental readings, I will do that.

**Q.** You say you are not a self-directed learner because...

**Ans.** Because I would not take the time to do it on my own time, I do it because I have to. Because it costs money.

**Q.** How would you rate your time management skills? Would you say they are good/bad?

**Ans.** When it comes to online learning I would say not very good. I know when the assignment is going to be due and a couple of days before, like I have an assignment due tomorrow, today was the first time I looked at it. I looked at what the work-load was on it. Had it been a huge work load, I probably would have been starting it this evening. I might have a look at my module and read it so that I can do my assignment easier tomorrow, but I probably won't. I probably do it as soon as I am done work. I will stay at work, and I will stay there for three hours, read everything I need to do, do my assignment, hand it in and I won't think about my assignment until three days before the next assignment is due.

**Q.** Do you have to do online discussions?

**Ans.** Not in this course no, but I have had to. I have had to in different courses.

**Q.** So even though you say you are not good at time management, you get the work done.

**Ans.** Yes, yes. I am a bit of a keener, so I will always get the work done on time. I will always do it to the best of my abilities in the time period I have allotted for myself.

**Q.** What aspect of time management do you find problematic?

**Ans.** Umm...Making it a priority in my daily life is not a priority. As I said work fulltime, I have two dogs, I have a house and a boyfriend who is a slob. So I have to clean my house, make dinner, walk my dogs, train them, work out, so lots of things going on. It doesn't happen a lot so when I do have it due is when I will start stressing out about it and will get it done and I will forget it till another assignment comes up again. I am not constantly spending my Saturday, every Saturday afternoon, or an allotted period of time or twice a week an allotted period of time. I don't do that. Which will make my life probably less stressful, but I don't do that.

**Q.** So are you comfortable writing?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** And how do you view your writing skills?

**Ans.** They are actually really good. I did do a writing course which was one of my core courses, did really well in it. Another course I have done, I had to work in a group and do a group writing project. I find that really difficult because I find that a lot of people have really poor writing skills, and so I was constantly correcting everything people said to try to make it make more sense, quit using all these fancy words and blah, blah, blah... I got into a lot of fights with people. It didn't work very well. I think the goal of that course was to show you that it is hard to work with people in the real world, but, yeah, I found errors in all their work and was really annoyed with how poor their writing skills were. And a lot of them did have degrees. I do think I am a strong writer, yeah. I am not going to get a crappy grade because I feel bad about hurting somebody's feelings on the other side of the country. My workers don't really like it when I am in courses like that because they have to hear me bitch about that. I work with a couple of perfectionists when it comes to writing as well and I show them and they just laugh; they get all involved too and want to edit them.

**Q.** Do you think your writing impacts your performance in online courses? In a positive or negative way?

**Ans.** Yes, yes. If I make a spelling mistake which I have never been the best speller in the world, it will be corrected and in this course, I do not get my assignments back. The last course when I was getting 100% all the time, I did get my assignments back because it is you know it is an environmental impact course, it really is all about writing and writing an impact statement so I would get... if something didn't make sense, there would be question mark. So I would get graded on that for sure.

**Q.** You alluded to this earlier on, what do you think of the amount of contact you have with your instructor in an online environment?

**Ans.** It really depends on the instructor. Honestly, I've had a couple of courses where I would talk to my instructor every week. Or I would ask them questions, they'd back to you very quickly, which is very nice. I can hand in an assignment tonight and it will be graded by tomorrow morning. So I think they are really good at their time management, I guess they would have to be. If they go on a vacation or something, they'll let you know ahead of time I'm going to be way, have a look at your assignment; if you have any questions let me know. I've only had that happen once. But depends on the instructor how much contact. These last couple of courses from Cape Breton University, I haven't had a lot of contact other than handing in my assignment, asking a question here or there. Umm..., other courses have been a lot of interaction and there will be like chat groups and that.

**Q.** How do you feel about this course you are taking where there isn't much interaction?

**Ans.** Hummm ..., I think I probably prefer it. I find the others stuff is just a waste of my time, sometimes. I probably do learn more having more interaction. Umm, but one course I did have a .... My group had to get together and chat about one assignment. It was

really difficult because half of these people live in Ontario; I live here and only get off at a certain time; some of them have kids. You know it's 11:00 O'clock there. It was really difficult, you know, having real time chats. I think the messaging back and forth, which my actual school is Royal Roads University, they have a chat form where you can leave your bubble and reply to other people's or reply to the one before it and I thought that was great because you can check it every couple of days. You work with people but on your own.

**Q.** Is immediate feedback important when you are working on your own?

**Ans.** Yes, especially me with my poor management skills. I am usually working on the assignment the day before it is due. So if I need to have to have something answered, I need to have it answered right away.

**Q.** How do you reconcile that in an on line environment?

**Ans.** As I said my instructors have been really good. Usually, if I send them a message, it will not take more than 24 hours for them to get back to me. It never has. So they are really good with that. I think they have Blackberries; that's how they do it.

**Q.** How familiar and comfortable are you with using a computer?

**Ans.** Extremely familiar.

**Q.** And do you have ready access to the internet?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** And are you intuitively able to use programs like Blackboard? Is that what you are using – Blackboard?

**Ans.** No, I just use whatever. Umm... through Royal Roads I took webCT. They've got...umm.. I haven't done anything through Royal Roads for the last year. Through Cape Breton University they have something called Moodle now. Oh yes, Moodle. Grant MacEwan uses Blackboard.

**Q.** Are you intuitively able to use the program.

**Ans.** Yeah, it takes me a couple of minutes.

**Q.** Did you get coaching when you first started?

**Ans.** No, what they ask you though they need you to be oriented by somebody and that university, I called and called and called and they are trying to orientate me five o'clock in the morning when it's eight o'clock there [Cape Breton]. And I said, this is not really going to work for me. Umm.. so I just ended up getting my teacher to sign off that he orientated me, but he didn't. I just figured it out. If you were computer challenged, I think you would have a difficult time because they don't tell you, Okay, you are starting this course, this is what you need to do; this is where you need to go. When they transferred from WebCT to Moodle, I had no idea. I was looking all over for my course, I had no idea where it was. It took me a while till I finally got a hold of somebody, which is difficult again because of the time change and they are going to get back to you allegedly and it takes them a couple of days sometimes, especially when people are registering for classes and stuff. It's busy, so...

**Q.** They didn't inform you that they were doing the switch over?

**Ans.** No, I did not get an email or anything like that saying we are switching to this.

**Q.** So this was Cape Breton University?

**Ans.** Yeah, so I am only like a temporary student there, a visitor, I think they would call me. So, maybe they don't care about the visitors ha, ha, ha. Royal Roads though, I would get emails from them every week; I could vote on who is going to be, you know, the faculty this and that; security information. They were always sending me emails there. I found they are very informative there; they'd tell you, "hey, if you did not know, you need to register for your courses by this time or else you are not going to get into them and you need to have a letter. They are very informative and tell you exactly what you need and they get back to you right away.

**Q.** How is communication different in an online setting?

**Ans.** I guess when you are in a course, they will give you what your reading is for the day or they will go through a Power Point presentation let's say. So when you get an assignment or module, it looks more like this. You are reading it, there are no pictures: you can refer to this website or the other, but are you really going to? Probably not, and it..... so for me, I am a visual learner, I don't get that aspect of it. I like to look at pictures and see what they are talking about and even my text book doesn't have any pictures. So that I think would definitely affect the way people learn, I think. Umm so communicating is that you sit there and read and if reading bores you, and you are so bored that you read the same sentence four times... You know, it can be definitely hard to communicate what they are trying to get across to you.

**Q.** Communication in an online setting, the difference – is it a positive difference when compared to traditional communication or is it negative?

**Ans.** I would definitely say it is negative because of the heavy reliance on text.

**Q.** So, you know, you said you had online discussions in some of your courses. So what did you like or dislike about online discussion?

**Ans.** I like the fact that you can answer on your own time; you can be on the computer at 3 o'clock in the morning. I like that I can look back to my notes and get back to them. I can make an educated response instead of just spitting out whatever comes out of my mouth. I hated being called on in class. I despised it. And if I knew I was going to be called on in class, I would definitely be prepared for that class. But still I was never a fan of it, even if I was prepared. So you don't have that. No one can see you,; you're not embarrassed. You are a little more comfortable, you are in our own home. Doesn't matter what you are wearing. What do I dislike? Umm... you know, not much, you know you can refer back to what someone said earlier and you can scroll through what someone said weeks ago; you can look around at other conversations that could be similar. It's nice that you can actually see... sometimes they'll have a section where you can look at discussion topics. You start anew topic every time you make a new discussion, so if somebody has asked a question about, they may be ahead of you, they've asked a question about a specific module or something like that you can go and look at what they have asked and maybe get your answers from there without have to ask and bother the teacher. So, you know, I don't think so there is anything that I don't like. Again, I guess, online discussions versus having a discussion in a course – would be the visual aspect of



it. That's all that I can tell you really. You can see pictures of things that you are discussing in class, and that's probably the only thing I can think of.

**Q.** The online courses you have taken, was the website design user friendly?

**Ans.** You know, the one I am with at Cape Breton, I would say, No. Ummm.... I had a exam to write two weeks ago and it said you have tow hours to write the exam. It was a word document. What does that mean? I mean you are just trusting me to have two hours? And the last course I had done through them, I had an exam door. I opened it up, I had two hours, the exam door opens and shuts at a certain time. This was just the link, like on the link, it's a word document. So I just sent the teacher, is there an exam door I am missing somewhere, like I don't understand. Do you just want me to write on the word document and send it to you? I mean, I could have just spent hors on this mid-term exam if I wanted to. I mean, I could have spent five or six hours. I mean, it's open book anyways; so what are they going to do? But I didn't because it wasn't that much of a grade for me to spend a few hours on it. But some things like that can be confusing. I mean this guy's assignments that he has too will say do..., actually, I had most of my assignments late because I would go through the module, at the end there would be an assignment and it would say the date that it was due. He said originally, "Your assignments are due at the end of the module." And the module, book when you clicked on it would say March – to March- . March 10<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> let's say. So I had an assignment due tomorrow. But when I go into the assignment, it has a different date on it. I didn't realize till I realized that there is no 29<sup>th</sup> in February this year, that 2008 was the date on all these modules. So all my assignments had been 2 or 3 days late, but he never said anything to me. So the day that I finally realized because its pretty clear that there re not 29 days in February, I sent him an email saying, "Sorry this assignment was late, but..." He said no worries, no problem, and I didn't get docked any marks I am assuming. So that can be a little tricky when they haven't updated anything and they've got dates like that, it would be really nice if they a re clear.

**Q.** You know you had said that when Cape Breton University switched from WebCT to Moodle, were you easily able to navigate the site?

**Ans.** Once I got in there, I didn't have any issue. Umm..., it was pretty much straight forward courses. Like your WebCT courses. Like on that we only had the one course. But it was really easy to navigate. WebCT was the same way. It's pretty much the same thing, I don't even know why they changed it. I have no idea what the difference is. I would say WebCT is a little nicer. A little less Mickey Mouse.

**Q.** When you are doing online course, you have the convenience of studying whenever you want, where ever you want. Do you think that was a help or a hindrance?

**Ans.** Umm... probably hum, with regular school you can study where ever you want, whenever you want too, I guess, right?

**Q.** For instance you don't have to attend class, you know.

**Ans.** Yeah, I guess, you can do it all on your own time. Umm... definitely it's a help if you have a mortgage to pay. It's definitely a help. You can do things... if you don't sleep at night you can do it then or if you stay up late, you can do it then. You can do it whenever you find the time, which is nice, I guess. You can do the readings on your own

time. Umm... I prefer actual school though because I have to go to class and learn. I don't want to miss anything so I will go to class. It means I will be continuously learning versus learning everything for the assignment and probably losing it all the next day. So for long term retention of the knowledge, I would say, I would prefer an actual class to the convenience of being able to do it when ever, where ever.

**Q.** What kind of learning approach do you think is necessary for online courses?

**Ans.** I think, they really try to get you to learn by doing a lot of assignments. If you want to count science classes and labs, obviously there are more classes and labs, I would say there are more classes when it comes to regular school. I guess it is more important for you to do assignments, because if you didn't you would always be doing exams. And that is not that much fun. You are going to cheat and learn what you have to for the exam. I don't think you are going to retain it. So, probably actually doing assignment and taking the time to go through things, learn on your own and do research, I think that is probably important in doing assignments.

**Q.** Do you think online learning requires more or less commitment from the students?

**Ans.** I think, more. I think, you can get away with a little more. Ummm.. so in that sense it would be less commitment because you can get away with more. As I told you, I handed in a bunch of late assignments; I did not get docked marks. So I think actual course and actual professors are a lot more strict. Some of them you have to be in class; some of them don't care. So I would say more commitment is required from students in actual courses.

**Q.** It's interesting though, according to you, online studying is not what you prefer, but yet, you have done better in online courses.

**Ans.** Yeah, I find, a lot of the assignments, they build on the last assignment. So if you've done something wrong, you don't do it again for the next assignment. Another reason I have done better in online courses is that I have already got a degree. This is what I have chose to learn, and this is what I want to learn. These specific courses that I have chose not because I was told that you need to have so many different courses. I got to choose from a wide array of courses. I was interested in this or I need that or I want that. In U of A or Grant MacEwan, you have to take English 101, you have to take so many arts courses, so many of this that or the other, right.. and so some of those, I'd rather not have taken. Ummm.. with this one, I mean, I did have to take the core courses. I would have preferred not to take stats. again, I definitely would have preferred not to take stats again on the stupid program that they make you. I've never even learned it on excel ever, which I think would be productive for the real world. But for the most part you are taking courses that you are going to need for what you want to do, so I think that it's probably better in that sense. You're not being forced into, you need to take this and that where you are not learning one topic, you are learning a whole bunch of everything.

**Q.** So you say, because it was a conscious choice...

**Ans.** I am a little more interested in it.

**Q.** Is there anything else you want to share about your online learning experience?

**Ans.** Umm... as I mentioned, it is definitely difficult when you are doing group projects with people across the country. When people have way different backgrounds than you, some of them are really good at some things and they know a lot about some things. Some of them are really big keeners, but they are not very smart. So I find that difficult and a massive headache. So and I told my teacher that as well and she kind of said yeah, that's what this project was supposed to show you that people are difficult. Umm... and I think she kind of felt my pain on it because I found out that I ended up having to do a lot of the work because these people's work was not up to my standards. So that was very difficult. Ummm... working on my own, I don't have a problem with it. Ummm... as I mentioned the time management is extremely stressful. It's like trying to have a life, as you can ask A----, I haven't seen her in probably 6 months or 7 months because I don't have a life. If I do have spare time, I will be trying to work on these things or doing laundry and stuff like that. So ummm... I would not suggest it for anybody. I would say go to school, live at your mom's house as long as you can and finish school all day long and work at Starbucks and get it done when you can. Because doing it after, I can imagine if I had children.

**Q.** Can you tell me how old you are?

**Ans.** I am 28 years old.

## **Interview GB2**

**Q.** Is this your first online course?

**Ans.** Yes, that is correct

**Q.** So, up to this point, are you doing better on your online course or did you do better on the traditional courses?

**Ans.** I'm actually doing exceptionally better on online

**Q.** Do you enjoy working on your own?

**Ans.** Ya, I like the autonomy.

**Q.** Would you describe yourself as a self-directed learner?

**Ans.** Ya, absolutely.

**Q.** What behaviors make you describe yourself as a self-directed learner?

**Ans.** I've always been a leader and aggressive. I don't know if I'm always the best team-player. I always end up doing the whole thing and letting other people just sign their name.

**Q.** How would you rate your time management skills?

**Ans.** Good, actually. I book off every Sunday which gives me time to read and do my assignments. I keep my schedule pretty clean.

**Q.** Are you able to organize your schedule/activities?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** Are you comfortable writing essays/research projects?

**Ans.** Yes, absolutely.

**Q.** How do you view your writing skills? Good/above average/below average?

**Ans.** I would say they're slightly above average. I was always pretty good at English, I enjoy it.

**Q.** Do you think your writing impacts your performance in online courses? How?

**Ans.** I think so, yes. I would just say my wording helps to make things more clear for other people. There are a lot of beginners in my class, and I find I am able to communicate easily with them.

**Q.** What do you think about the amount of contact you have with your instructor in an online environment?

**Ans.** I was pretty skeptical coming into it. I thought it would be pretty boring, I guess. It's been really good. She gets back to me within 24 hours. She is marking assignments way quicker than I ever had at Grant MacEwan before. Even class participation, I thought it would be pretty poor but everyone's commenting on everything you write and it's truly a class discussion, I guess.

**Q.** Why do you say it's truly a class discussion?

**Ans.** She makes us post our assignments for everyone to read, and then everyone can kind of criticize and make remarks about it. I didn't think people would take it that serious but everyone comments just like you would in a class, probably even more. I think some people have an easier time hiding behind a computer and feel they can give feedback easier.

**Q.** Is immediate feedback important when you're working on your own?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** So, how do you reconcile the fact that when you're working online, you cannot get immediate feedback?

**Ans.** I actually find I get feedback quicker online than I did when I was in school. A lot of the time with my professors, they would have phone numbers and certain office hours which would be hard to get into because they are teaching a bazillion classes. I find my teacher, given I've only had one class online, but she's been very quick with responses.

**Q.** What do you think of the way notes/information is presented in an online environment?

**Ans.** I think, that is something that can be improved. Rather than just notes, it would be nice to see the instructor use different aids to present information such as short movie clips, illustrations, etc.

**Q.** How familiar and comfortable are you with using a computer?

**Ans.** I grew up in a home that didn't have a computer until I pretty much moved out. I'm decent with it. I can get by, use e-mail and Facebook. I did take a couple classes in college. I would say I'm average.

**Q.** Do you have ready access to the internet?

**Ans.** Right now, I'm in the country and I'm trying to get on the internet and it's not working the best. If I ever need it, I usually go into town. So I'm usually in town doing my assignment at the library or something.

**Q.** So that's interesting. You don't have immediate access, like I can go to my computer whenever I want?

**Ans.** Well here, the connection is kind of bad. So, I'm actually getting a new place and moving into Edmonton shortly. Hopefully then, everything will be better.

**Q.** You're saying you're doing exceptionally well, so that hasn't hindered your performance, has it?

**Ans.** I don't think so, the internet is everywhere and anyone can get it, so I don't think anyone can use that as an excuse not to complete everything.

**Q.** The course you're taking, is it on Blackboard/webCT?

**Ans.** Blackboard.

**Q.** Are you intuitively able to use programs like Blackboard or did you require coaching?

**Ans.** I needed a little bit of coaching. I was in Grant MacEwan when I was in college about two years ago, so I remembered it from then. But yes, there was a day when we had about an hour of training on it where they show you anything. That's probably the kind of learner I am when it comes to technology, as long as I am shown the website I can pick it up from there.

**Q.** So the one hour coaching session was done by Grant MacEwan?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** Did you find it to be useful?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** So how would you say communication is different in an online setting?

**Ans.** I think it can be similar, like I said, from the online postings, I think it's a lot like in class. I think you can get your point across better online. In class, you can kind of walk around in circles and professors tend to ramble on. In an online class, they have to get the point across the first time for their students to understand. It's a lot more clear, and I think the people taking the class are at that level, too. They're driven and they know what they need. You don't really get bogged down by dumb questions (not that any questions are dumb questions).

**Q.** You say there is a slight difference between communication in an online setting vs. a classroom setting. Is that difference a positive or a negative one?

**Ans.** Right now, it's a positive. I never thought that it would be coming into the course, but I found the communication to be a lot easier online.

**Q.** So, you have online discussions?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** What do you like/dislike about online discussions?

**Ans.** I really like that everyone's involved. Part of it, they have to be. The teacher makes it that you have to comment on two other people's postings on each assignment. It forces people to get involved. In doing so, I think a lot of people found that you take the time to understand everyone else's point of view and I feel people can see everyone else's work and they're actually learning a lot more than you would in class. Just that you can't really force a student in class to give an opinion because some people are painfully shy or you'll tend to get people who dominate a class, which can actually happen in an online discussion, I've seen it. Some people comment on everything but I think more people are just involved online.

**Q.** Is there anything you dislike about online discussions?

**Ans.** Yes, sometimes my downfall would be that there has been some glitches with IT. Sometimes the questions aren't coming out clearly so she has to send an update out saying that the questions have changed, or in some cases the modules that were listed one through ten may get scrambled, I'm not too sure how that happens but it has thrown some people off.

**Q.** Was the Blackboard website design user-friendly?

**Ans.** Yes, I think so.

**Q.** Were you easily able to navigate it?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** Doing online courses, you can log on wherever/whenever. Is this ability to study at your own convenience a help or a hindrance for you?

**Ans.** For me, I tend to procrastinate, that's why I book off my Sundays to do my assignments. Overall, I do think it's a help. I'm able to check my grades quick and make sure I get the documents all printed off, I can do all that at my convenience. I think it's more of a help than a hindrance because it allows me to work as well as attend school.

**Q** What kind of learning approach would you say is necessary for online learning?

**Ans.** Independence, you have to be able to think for yourself, I would say. I think sometimes students in class can kind of ride the coat tails of others. Especially participation-wise too, you can easily ride the coat tails of others. Online, it becomes pretty evident if you're involved or not. You also have to be more responsible because there are no reminders that you have to do your work everyday like there are when you attend a regular class.

**Q.** Is there a difference in the amount of commitment that's required for online courses versus traditional courses?

**Ans.** I think your quality of work has to be a little bit higher for online, just because you don't have that person to person connection. You're selling what you have to say clearly and concisely, so that others understand, as compared to in class, where you can just throw in some thoughts here and there and get participation marks that way.

**Q.** I understand that you're working, so is being able to take courses online, does that allow you to work while you study?

**Ans.** Yes, honestly, I don't think I would be able to go to school if I couldn't do it online.

**Q.** Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your online learning experience?

**Ans.** Not really, I just was really skeptical coming into it but it has been quite surprising for me. I've really enjoyed the environment with it. I didn't feel that I would be quite connected with my teacher or even the other students but it has just been quite surprising. It could just be the teacher, since I've had some bad professors in the past as well, but it's been very good.

**Q.** What courses are you taking?

**Ans.** I'm taking Human Resources Management 180.

**Q.** Finally, can you tell me how old you are?

**Ans.** I am 23.

### **Interview GB3**

**Q.** How many online courses have you completed?

**Ans.** I've completed two and I'm on my third one.

**Q.** Overall, have you done better on your online courses or on the traditionally delivered courses?

**Ans.** On my online courses.

**Q.** Why is that?

**Ans.** I'm not sure. I'm a pretty self-sufficient person and I like being able just to go at my own pace and I find maybe in a classroom setting I'm more easily distracted and sometimes we get off topic, I guess. So I can concentrate a little more on the learning objective I'm supposed to be concentrating on. I find that I'm able to make my own notes and go at my own pace and it usually sticks in my head a little better.

**Q.** Do you enjoy working on your own? Why?

**Ans.** I do, yes. It's a little more flexible, I've got a pretty busy life and it's nice to be able to work, I guess, without the distractions that I usually have to go through throughout my day.

**Q.** Would you say you're a self-directed learner?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** Do you think you can identify what behaviors make you describe yourself as a self-directed learner?

**Ans.** I prioritize. I make time for what needs to be done. I am able to look up information when something is not clear.

**Q.** How would you rate your time management skills?

**Ans.** On a scale of one to ten, I'd say about an 8.

**Q.** Can you tell me what time management skills you employ?

**Ans.** There are a lot of things going on in my life and I'm pretty good at maintaining and keeping to schedules, I guess. I have to, or else my whole world would be chaos. Also as I mentioned earlier, I am able to prioritize what needs immediate attention.

**Q.** Would you say you're comfortable with writing?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** How do you view your writing skills?

**Ans.** They're pretty good.

**Q.** Would you say they're above average?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** Do you think your writing skills impact your performance in online courses?

**Ans.** Yes, I think it helps. I mean, for sure. You have to take your own notes and you don't have someone instructing you and writing notes for you to copy down like in high school. You have to be pretty self-sufficient, I guess. Also good writing skills help you express yourself better in online discussions.

**Q.** Do you feel you have to do more or less writing in an online course?

**Ans.** I think more, in my opinion.

**Q.** What do you think about the amount of contact you have with your instructor in an online environment?

**Ans.** I think I'm fine with it. If I ever have any questions I can email her or even call her, I think she said but she always gets back to me in a timely manner, I've never been sitting here wondering or waiting on a question.

**Q.** So is immediate feedback important when you're working on your own?

**Ans.** I think so.

**Q.** Do you feel you're able to get that feedback?

**Ans.** Yes.



**Q.** How familiar and comfortable are you using a computer?

**Ans.** Very comfortable.

**Q.** Do you have ready access to the internet?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** The courses you're taking, are you using Blackboard or webCT?

**Ans.** I think I've used both.

**Q.** Are you able to intuitively use these programs or do you require coaching?

**Ans.** No, I think they're pretty easy to navigate around.

**Q.** Did you get any coaching when you started your first online course?

**Ans.** Nope.

**Q.** How did you manage?

**Ans.** I was really nervous at first but I just took an hour or so to play around with the different tabs and links and I felt pretty comfortable. I picked it up on my own.

**Q.** The way notes are presented in an online environment, does that make a difference to how well you can understand?

**Ans.** Not for me, because in this course, there hasn't been any instructor notes. I've had to completely make my own from the textbook. In the previous two courses I've taken, there has been instructor notes and I've made my own notes from what they were saying and what the text was saying and I've found that the tests and the exams that I've wrote were based straight from the text and I understood what the text was saying, I guess. I didn't really need the instructor notes is what I'm trying to get at. But it would definitely make things easier if instructors put more thought into the way they presented information online. If the information was presented online in an easily understandable manner, then I would not have to spend time making notes from the text.

**Q.** How would you say communication is different in an online setting?

**Ans.** Well sometimes you do have to wait. If you're an impatient person and you want an answer now, they're usually pretty good with getting back to you in a good amount of time, whereas in a classroom setting you put your hand up and get your question answered right then and there on the spot, whereas online, you would usually have to wait, I'd say no more than a day but if you need an answer now then I guess you'd have to have a bit more patience and understanding.

**Q.** You feel that there is a difference. Is this a positive, negative or neutral difference?

**Ans.** I'm pretty neutral with it. There's good and bad things to both in structured and online courses. I know there's a difference, and I guess, I'm more partial to online. To me, the difference isn't anything positive or negative, it's just there.

**Q.** In this course or the courses you've taken before, did/do you have online discussions?

**Ans.** Yes, we do. They're pretty informal I find but they're there.

**Q.** What do you like/dislike about the online discussion as a way of learning?

**Ans.** This course and the last, I don't like having to rate, because as a part of ours we have to rate somebody else's discussion, I don't like rating or giving negative feedback. There have been times where I've come across something where they just regurgitate exactly what the text said and they really strayed from what the assignment of the discussion was supposed to be. I've had to give some constructive criticism on that. I don't like rating anybody else's work, I guess. Though, I do like the fact that in online discussions, everyone is able to voice their opinion.

**Q.** Besides that, you don't have a problem with having to post a certain number of posts?

**Ans.** No.

**Q.** Did you find that the website design was user friendly?

**Ans.** Yes, I think so.

**Q.** Were you able to easily navigate it?

**Ans.** Yes.

**Q.** The ability to study at your own convenience, was that a help or hindrance for you?

**Ans.** It was a huge bonus, a huge help for me.

**Q.** You said it was a bonus because you have a really busy life?

**Ans.** Right. I work, I volunteer at the RCMP, I am taking this course and I've got three kids. I have a very busy life, so being able to work around my schedule is very important right now since my little one is still at home with me.

**Q.** What kind of learning approach do you think is necessary for online learning?

**Ans.** You can't put things off. You have to keep going at a steady pace and you can't wait until the day that everything's due and expect to do your whole chapter and your assignments and test in one day. You have to be self-sufficient and be able to prioritize and make time each day, in my opinion, to work a little bit on it if you're a pretty self-sufficient person. You have to be disciplined and dedicated to want to get a good mark and not thinking that you're not going to just rush through it and be able to do a course in a week or something.

**Q.** Would you say that online courses require more/less or the same amount of commitment as do traditional courses?

**Ans.** I think the same amount. It's a different kind of commitment, I think, but the same amount.

**Q.** How is it a different?

**Ans.** You have to be committed to working on your own. You have to be more self-directed and self-reliant.

**Q.** Just one last question, can you tell me how old you are?

**Ans.** I'm 30.