STUDENT AND INSTRUCTOR PERCEPTIONS OF CARE IN ONLINE GRADUATE EDUCATION: A MIXED METHODS CASE STUDY

A Dissertation by

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DEDICATION

       To my husband, Terry Marx, who worried about me starting this endeavor, but who nevertheless has supported me in ways too numerous to mention. You are my rock and the love of my life, and because of you, I have been able to achieve this life goal. To our three children, beautiful daughters Bobby and Margo, and "my precious" John Henry – thank you for putting up with me in my stress! I have tried to model for you that you can achieve any goal you set for yourself, no matter what obstacles you encounter in your lives – just keep the end vision in your minds, even if others doubt the value of your dream. As Mother Teresa said, "In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them, anyway." To my sister and best friend, Deanna Talbott - thank you for always being my supporter and for your willingness to listen. Finally, to my mother, Marge, and my late father, John Talbott, for encouraging me to go to college and for your consummate support and pride in my accomplishments. I love you all; you are the wind beneath my wings and give my life purpose

No one cares how much you know,
Until they know how much you care.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to understand what language and strategies instructors and students perceived as conveying caring in online graduate education. Using Nodding's (1984, 1988, 1995, 2001, 2002) care theory, questions were crafted for structured interviews and a survey. The study was conducted at a Midwestern, midsized university. Structured online interviews were conducted with the instructors, and an online survey was offered to students in the eight participating graduate instructors' courses with 46/222 students responding. The researcher conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of all data, including a document review of the instructors' course delivery shells, investigating language usage in Announcements, Discussion Boards, and Assignment Feedback in the Gradebook for triangulation of the data. The findings supported the three major constructs of Noddings' care theory. The first construct was mental attentiveness in which students indicated the importance of the immediacy of feedback. The second construct was affective engagement, in which students expressed that feedback include specific comments and praise with caring language and concern for the students' personal situations. The third construct was reciprocity, which students conveyed the importance of student-instructor interaction in the discussion board and also of video conferencing in order to promote reciprocal interaction. The findings of this study may lead to actions by instructors that could convey more caring and increase student engagement, satisfaction, and achievement, thereby assisting colleges and universities in their retention efforts. Most importantly, the findings may add to the existing literature of what a caring graduate instructor-student relationship encompasses in online education.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND, RESEARCH PROBLEM, PURPOSE OF THE STUDY, AND

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

What a difference a decade makes. *Online learning*, education over the Internet where the instructor and student are not in the same place, was in its infancy at the beginning of the 21st century. Ten years later, the growth of online course enrollment exceeded the growth of *face-to-face* (F2F) courses with more than one in four college students taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010)

The Babson Survey Research Group publishes an annual report of online learning, or *e-learning*, known as the Sloan Report. There were 994 colleges and universities that responded to the survey of online learning for the first 2003 Sloan Report. This report revealed that, in the fall of 2002, there were 1.6 million American college students taking at least one online course in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2003). In comparison, the 2010 report with 2,500 institutions responding indicated that in the fall of 2008 there were 4.6 million students enrolled in an online course. This constituted an annual growth rate of 7.6%, and it is apparent online learning is showing no signs of slowing with the number of online students nearly quadrupling between 2002 and 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010)

The demand for online courses is fueled by part-time adult students who are the new majority of *e-learners*. Nearly 50% of the post-secondary student population are now adults working full-time while studying part-time (Ausburn, 2004). These busy adults are referred to as *non-traditional* students because they are not the typical undergraduate. Many institutions feared these students would lack the technological skills to allow them to maneuver online courses.

However, e-learning is actually the preferred style of learning for this working population (Ausburn, 2003). Non-traditional learners need the flexibility of online because they may not live geographically close to a college, or if they do, the program options may be limited. Other reasons students cite for choosing courses online include the cost of transportation, conflicting work schedules with F2F courses, working opposite shifts of F2F courses, traveling often on business, working long hours, serving in the military, or family conflicts with caring for children or aging parents (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

Online learning has opened the boundaries between states and nations, giving colleges and universities the ability to recruit students from anywhere on the globe. Additional students are crucial to the future of American colleges and universities, especially in the current era of strained budgets and declining revenue sources (Liu, Gomez, Khan, & Yen, 2007). Institutions of higher education are responding to both traditional and non-traditional students' increased demand for online courses. Eighty-nine percent of 4-year higher education institutions now offer some type of online learning, and 90% of 2-year colleges offer online learning in some form (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

For all types of courses offered, student enrollment in higher education increased at an annual rate of 1.2% (Allen & Seaman, 2010), far less than the 17% increase in enrollment for online courses. Despite the increased demand for online courses, there still exist those who doubt online education is as rigorous as F2F instruction (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Not all faculty members in higher education accept the validity or rigor of online education, and faculty acceptance of online learning has only increased incrementally since the first Sloan Report of 2003. Interestingly, of the 2500 institutions surveyed in 2010 report, chief academic officers conveyed a belief that only one-third of faculty

accepted the legitimacy or the value of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) published a meta-analysis (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) comparing online learning to F2F instruction. This meta-analysis concluded that students in online learning performed better than students in F2F instruction. The report compared research on traditional and online classroom settings from 99 studies conducted over a 12 year span from 1996 to 2008, mostly in higher education but also some in K-12 education. The USDE found students in online education, on average, ranked in the 59th percentile in tested performance, as opposed to students in the traditional classroom ranking in the 50th percentile. Although this is not a huge divide, this variance remains statistically meaningful. Also, with the entrance of video conferencing software, Web 2.0 collaborative tools, social networking technology, and instant messaging, online learning is poised to make even more dramatic inroads in how students communicate with their colleagues in learning communities and how students and instructors communicate together.

However, the report noted the meta-analysis should not be interpreted to mean all courses should be moved to the online format, nor that the vehicle of online education is superior. Rather, the report suggested that effectiveness of online courses may lie in the combination of elements present in the research studies, which likely included more personalized learning for students in online courses, additional learning time and/or materials, and additional opportunities for collaboration (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Finally, to assure faculty, students, parents, and higher education accrediting agencies of the quality of online learning, institutions are adopting quality assurance practices that have helped to bring respect to this instructional delivery (Chua & Lam, 2007). Online education is

now expected to expand sharply in the next decade as evidence of its value continues to increase (U.S. Department of Education, 2009)

The Research Problem

It is evident that students are taking advantage of the opportunity to learn in a virtual setting in greater numbers than ever before instead of attending traditional courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Online learning affords students a hands-on experience, flexibility in their schedules, cost savings on transportation, and the ability to devote additional time to their learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Yet, with a national average online course dropout rate of 20-50%, colleges face an on-going challenge not only to attract students, but to retain them until they graduate or complete their goals (Liu, et al., 2007). Research (Liu, et al., 2007) on the history of college dropouts over the past thirty years show that a students' decision to drop out of a course is composed of a complex array of factors, one of which is the interaction students have with their instructor. Research (Cotton & Wilson, 2006) also indicates that positive student interaction with their instructors is associated with greater course satisfaction; beyond that, this increased satisfaction also correlates to increased satisfaction with the college and the institution.

However, with the explosion of online courses, there exists an absence of understanding about what type of relationships are being developed between instructors and students in the online learning environment. It is generally assumed higher education instructors who teach online courses have a harder time establishing a positive and caring instructor-student relationship than instructors in on-campus courses do (Burnett, 2001; Frankola, 2001; Holley & Oliver, 2010; K. Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, & Ison, 2002; Seidman, 2005; Willging & Johnson, 2009). This lack of personal face-to-face interaction has been a criticism of online

education since its inception, but there exist several possibilities that could perhaps explain why this criticism exists: (a) instructors may never meet their students face-to-face; (b) instructors may not write with voice or take the time to type timely or detailed feedback to students, thus appearing uncaring; (c) instructors may not use positive presuppositions with students, and assume negative intent on the part of the student; or (d) instructors may not understand the language or strategies students feel convey caring in online instructor-student relationships.

Research (Chang & Smith, 2008) suggests that instructor interaction with students over the Internet has a significant impact on students' satisfaction ratings of their online courses. The preponderance of this research centers around student-instructor and student-student interaction in online discussion groups, which can have positive effects on student satisfaction and student achievement (LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2004). However, there is a dearth of findings pertaining to the specific language and strategies that graduate students and instructors perceive as conveying care in the online setting. There is also a dearth of findings on how students perceive their achievement or satisfaction in a course in relation to their perceptions of an instructor as caring or non-caring.

We know language is a powerful tool that has the ability to change relationships with others for better or for worse (Haden-Elgin, 2000). What does caring graduate instructor language look like in a virtual environment? Noddings (1984, 1988) indicates that caring is a key component of the instructor-student relationship, but little is known about how her care theory is translated into the virtual setting of the past ten years. Perhaps caring instructor-student relationships may be formed, at least in part, by positive human dialogue.

Purpose of the Study

The main question guiding this research was what do caring graduate instructor-student relationships look like in a virtual setting? One means of addressing this question was through Nodding's (1984) theory of care. The purpose of the study was to understand the instructor's language and strategies that students and instructors perceived as conveying caring in graduate online education.

Theoretical Framework

One main body of literature provided the basis for the theoretical foundation of this study: *care theory*. Because care theory was such an important component of successful instructor and student relationships, one way of addressing the purpose of this study was to look at online instruction through the lens of care theory.

Care Theory

Americans hold dear to their hearts certain ideals regarding how instructors should care about their students, and it is generally assumed in this country that instructors care or they would not be in the teaching profession. Building an environment of instructor-student care in online instruction poses an even greater challenge than face-to-face instruction (Chang & Smith, 2008). The lack of non-verbal and body language cues, combined with instructors not actually meeting their students, makes it a particularly demanding social challenge. But, according to seminal care theorist Noddings (1984), it is a central moral task to create, maintain, and enhance caring relationships among others. To do so, she suggests that people should give caring attentiveness to particular persons in particular situations, an act that she terms *engrossment*. Noddings theorizes caring as a universal social process made up of three distinct phases: engrossment or mental attentiveness (being fully present), affective engagement or empathy, and

a mental imperative to act on behalf of another. However, Noddings posits that caring is a learned process (Barber, 2002).

Nodding (1984) argues that people should want more from the education system than merely academic achievement for themselves and for their students, and she asserts that humans will not achieve success unless students believe they are cared for and learn to care for others. She also believes that curricula should be organized around themes of care rather than around traditional disciplines. Nodding's themes of care include caring for self, for intimate others, for strangers and global others, for nature and its nonhuman creatures, for the man-made world, and caring for human ideas.

Receptive attention is an essential characteristic of a caring encounter. Nodding asks what people are like when they engage in caring encounters. In a caring encounter, the carer is open to what the cared-for is saying and might be experiencing and is able to reflect upon it (Noddings, 2002). At a deeper level, the carer sends out a flow of energy towards the object of his or her care, presumably in a helpful way. However, this cannot be called "caring" unless there is another ingredient: some type of recognition on the part of the person being cared for that there has been an act of caring. There must be a connection and some type of reciprocity between the carer and the cared-for in order for an act of caring to have occurred. In other words, both the carer and the cared for must give in order for both to gain (Barber, 2002).

Building on Nodding's (2002) emphasis on the importance of care, research supports that instructors must build relationships with their students first and foremost (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). To build instructor-student relationships of care, higher education online instructors and their students generally develop receptive attention through a text-based modality. However, instructors' use of other technologies, such as video conferencing, can give students more visual

recognition that caring has occurred, making the probability of a connection more likely and allowing for reciprocity on the part of the student (Liu, et al., 2007).

A caring encounter, thus, has three elements according to Noddings (2002). One is that A cares for B, and A's consciousness is characterized by attention and motivational dislocation. The second is that A performs some act in accordance with caring for B. The third is that B recognizes that A cares for B. A caring person is characterized as one who "fairly regularly establishes caring relations and, when appropriate, maintains them over time" (p. 19). Noddings asserts that modeling is critical and that educators must walk their talk by actually showing students that they truly care through their behaviors. Caring is not something that is taught in a textbook (Noddings, 1988).

Dialogue must also be present in caring relationships and should include directly talking about caring, allowing caring to manifest itself in various ways. Dialogue can help people to reflect on their behaviors, vocabulary, and better evaluate and understand themselves and their practice as educators. This dialogue contributes to the growth of the cared-for (or in this study, the online graduate student). The experiences instructors immerse themselves in produce a mentality, and if they want to produce students who care for one another, then students need practice in caring and practice in reflecting on the practice of caring (Smith, 2004).

Noddings care theory (1988) asserts that when a student is confirmed by an instructor (the affirmer), he or she has been assisted in visualizing a better self-identity and encouraged in the development of this identity. Rather than setting a goal for the entire class, instructors could differentiate and recognize something admirable in each student, and help this trait to emerge in each conversation (Marzano, Gaddy, & Dean, 2000). The goal must be seen as worthy by both parties, because a person cannot be confirmed in ways that the affirmer does not believe to be

true (Noddings, 2001). This study seeks to learn if online graduate students believe their success or goal attainment in a course is enhanced when they feel their instructor cares about them.

Additional assertions from Nodding's care theory include the necessity of the instructor talking with students about their goals, which also serves to improve students' goal setting and planning skills (Marzano, et al., 2000; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Another is that the relationship between the caring and cared-for must be ongoing and continuous and must include trust in the relationship (Smith, 2004).

Noddings believes that schools need to be more like a home setting, with more opportunities to explore interpersonal subjects that are at the "center of life," such as personal commitment, family, children, friendships, and neighborhoods (O'Toole, 1998). She sees the most fundamental change needed by instructors is that of attitude. Instructors can be very important people in their students' lives. Therefore, Noddings (1995) asserts that instructors should invest the time to develop trust in their relationships with students, talking with them "about problems that are central to their lives, and guiding them toward greater sensitivity and competence across all domains of care" (p. 5).

Overview

Through the lens of care, the foundational piece of the proposed study, the research study focused on the relationship between the instructor and the online graduate student and the caring language embedded within their online relationship. Nodding's work from the 80's and 90's involved face-to-face instruction, and it is not known how this theory applies to the virtual setting. With the rapid increase in online instruction, this study urgently seeks to build on Nodding's care theory by collecting instructor and student perceptions of caring and analyzing online communication between graduate instructors and their students. Understanding how

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graduate students in online courses experience care in the instructor-student relationship may

offer educators new knowledge about how Nodding's care theory might apply to the online

setting or how her theory may differ in an online environment.

Chapter 2 will present the status of research regarding student online disengagement and

engagement, the components of interaction in the instructor-student relationship, and some

characteristics of effective online instruction.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This chapter consists of a review of empirical research relevant to understanding the instructor-student relationship in an online environment. The review begins with a look into student disengagement, or why students drop out of online courses. Following this is a deeper look at what actually engages students in online learning. Next, research on student interaction in online courses is presented including social presence, feedback and the language used. Finally, the review looks at what research shows regarding the characteristics of an effective online instructor.

Student Disengagement in Online Learning

The dropout rate is a valid measure of the effectiveness of an entity's online program (Willging & Johnson, 2009). Colleges and universities report that dropout figures for e-learning courses are often 10 to 20% higher than dropout figures in traditional courses. Dropout rates range from 20 to 50% for online course enrollees (Frankola, 2001). It is obvious that the challenge for colleges and universities is not necessarily the recruitment of students but the development of effective curriculum design, delivery, and support structures necessary to retain students once they have started (Aragon & Johnson, 2008).

A dropout is typically defined as a student who continues enrollment in an online course after the official count date or census but does not complete the course or does not complete the course with a passing grade (Liu, et al., 2007), although many institutions use a different criteria. There are many effects associated with students dropping out of courses. According to Aragon and Johnson (2008), there are obvious costs to the student both financially in lost potential, costs to the college in lost revenue, and also lost productivity that is a loss for society.

In a study of the past thirty years of literature on drop-out factors, Liu, et al., (2007) synthesized the drop out factors from this meta-analysis into two main categories: learner controlled and learner uncontrolled factors. The first of four learner-controlled drop-out factors was *psychological*, which included the student's motivation, learning style, self-direction discipline, efficacy, orientation towards setting goals, resourcefulness, independence, time management, satisfaction, and finally, procrastination. The second learner controlled factor was *technology*, or the student's technology efficacy. This included their skills in email management, Internet searching, file management, word processing, software installation, and trouble shooting. The third learner-controlled factor was *social*, or the student's ability to interrelate in the course with peers and the instructor, to turn to peers for support or assistance, his or her online participation, his or her teamwork, and the environment of the learning community. The fourth and final learner controlled factor was *other*, which included such student skills as communication, academic writing and reading, research, exam capability, and note taking. This factor also took into account the student's GPA, credits completed, and remedial courses needed, as well as the instructor's approach to feedback.

Liu and colleagues (2007) found there were two learner uncontrolled drop out factors, with the first was *institutional,* which included such things as poorly designed courses, class size, inexperienced and/or non-dynamic instructors, lack of management support, and the promptness of the instructor feedback. The second learner-uncontrolled factor was *environmental*, which could include the readiness of student, financial resources, etc., The most used and predictive measures for institutions to identify potential dropouts were in the learner-controlled drop out factors of psychological, social, and technical issues. The study recommended that colleges use student self-assessments to scrutinize these main factors to see if

there exist issues which would predict potential online dropouts. Because this research showed most non-completers left school after their first year, it was also recommended that colleges survey freshmen after their first semester about their intent to leave or to stay in school because a student's intent to leave was the top identifier for course drop out (Liu, et al., 2007). However, the impact of a caring or non-caring instructor on incidences of online course dropout was not discussed in any of these fifty-four empirical and theory-based studies of post-secondary student retention between 1978 to the present.

In a another study (Aragon & Johnson, 2008) of online non-completers, no significant differences were found pertaining to characteristics of race or age. Aragon and Johnson's (2008) findings, however, showed gender differences were significant in that more females completed online courses compared to males, but more males completed traditional courses than females. Their study also found that in students' self-reported reasons for leaving a course, only 43% of the reasons related to student variables, while 57% related to institution or college/university systemic reasons. Although the presence or absence of a caring or non-caring instructor may have been part of the institutional reason for the student dropping the course, it was not mentioned as a variable in the study.

Based on Seidman's (2005) attrition intervention model, to address attrition proactively, it was recommended that college intervention plans include a blended learning program, psychological advising and counseling, timely technical support, and social learning communities (Liu, et al., 2007). Again, the impact of a caring instructor was not mentioned in this intervention model.

Gappa, Austin and Trice (2007) found the quality of instruction was a variable in retention of students. Hiring of part-time faculty, or adjuncts, at community colleges is a

common practice that is increasing at an astounding rate. In fact, nearly 67% of all courses taught at community colleges are being delivered by adjunct instructors (Gappa, et al., 2007). Adjuncts usually receive little training and low pay, and the ramifications of these factors may lead to even greater attrition rates (Christensen, 2008). However, the impact of a caring or non-caring adjunct in the student-instructor relationship was again not discussed in these studies.

Student Engagement in Online Learning

One way of looking at student engagement is in terms of caring. The literature was reviewed to find if students' perceptions of their instructor as caring or non-caring affected their engagement in the online course.

Student engagement is defined as a student's effort to study a subject, practice, obtain feedback, and analyze and solve problems (Kuh, 2001). *The National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE) began in 2000 and is a widely used assessment at many four-year institutions to measure dimensions of student engagement. This assessment is based on the *Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996) and has been adapted and widely applied to e-learning (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001). In the last decade, institutes of higher education have focused on accountability and assessment, resulting in the development of various assessment tools to measure students' learning and satisfaction with their college or university experience, and the NSSE is designed to help institutions in program assessment, school improvement, and accreditation. The key areas in the survey assess how often students engage in their courses and interactions with their instructors, as well as how their college experience has affected their knowledge, personal development, and propensity to return to the institution again. Kuh and colleagues (2000) assert that engaging all learners in a mainly text-based learning modality is a challenge compared to the

traditional design of curriculum courses, which is why engagement is at the forefront of design and instructional conversations.

Wang (2007) coined the term *cybergogy* to refer to the pedagogy of engaged learning strategies for e-learning. There exists a plethora of cybergogy for online instruction, much of which includes student engagement as a critical ingredient (Graham, et al., 2001; Marzano, et al., 2000; Marzano, et al., 2001; White & Weight, 2000; Zen, 2008). Wang (2007) maintains that existing courses with high attrition rates must be re-evaluated or reconfigured to be more responsive to students' needs. She also notes that a better understanding between the learner's culture and e-learning could enhance the potential of success of all online learners. Wang elaborates further,

> Knowing the differences in student perception regarding course content,
> technology and facilitation of courses is an important consideration in the
> design and development of online curricula, where real-time cues that aid
> and impact the instructor–learner communications are not readily apparent
> (Wang, 2007, p. 309).

This study aimed to learn if the student's engagement in a course and instructor-student communications were affected if a student perceived an instructor as caring or non-caring. Marzano and Marzano (2003) studied student engagement and found key instructor strategies that determine student engagement. First, instructors should be cognizant of student non-engagement and react quickly when they notice that their students are not engaged, often termed *instructor immediacy*. Instructors should also manage the response rates of students to ensure engagement, as well as monitor the pace of the course to assure it is neither too much information overload for students, nor too slow a pace, both of which contribute to student

disengagement. They found that when instructors demonstrated enthusiasm for the content, and encouraged friendly controversy or lively debates, students were more engaged. Also, allowing students to talk about themselves, relating the content to their personal interests or their personal lives, is an effective engagement-building strategy (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). This study may find that students perceived these strategies as caring strategies.

Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) separated engagement into three areas: instructor-student (which was the focus of this study), student-student, and active learning. Robinson and Hullinger (2008) found that factors of engagement in the instructor-student area included such things as discussion of ideas, communication about grades or assignments, discussion of career plans, and immediacy of instructor feedback. However, Koljatic and Kuh (2001) found that engagement in American colleges has not significantly changed between 1984 and 1997, although enrollment has significantly increased.

A persistent criticism of e-learning is student isolation, which has also been linked to attrition. Conversely, students who felt socially connected at the course level, as well as at the institutional level, were more likely to complete the course (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2009). In fact, isolation and disengagement from the learning community was cited as the primary cause of attrition in e-learning (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Online Instructors must be diligent in determining the best structures for their courses and the best research-based instructional strategies if they want to effectively engage the various types of learners in online instruction, as well as assist their university in student retention efforts (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The following section examines the components of interaction in the instructor-student online relationship, including research on social presence, feedback, and language.

Components of Interaction in the Online Instructor-Student Relationship

Interactions between the instructor and the student in e-learning are much more confined than in traditional face-to-face learning because key interactions are usually asynchronous and in a predominantly text-based modality. Online instructors must carefully plan for these key interactions to occur in e-learning. Moore (1989) defined three main types of necessary online interaction: learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content. This study focuses on the learner-instructor interactions, which Moore defines as communications that occur before, during or immediately after instruction; these communications can be initiated by the student or by the instructor. A study of the roles and competencies necessary for e-learning instructors (Williams, 2003) found that the competencies of interpersonal and communications skills were paramount to the role of the instructor and dominated the top ten competency findings.

It is obvious that learning is a *human* activity. The more students feel they are treated as human beings, the more they feel their needs are met; they also are more likely to learn and to *learn how to learn* (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Instructors are vital players in providing care to their students, a feeling of community to their classes, and feedback to counter their students' feelings of disconnect (McIsaac, Blocher, Mahes, & Vrasidas, 1999). The following section provides a deeper look into the student-instructor relationship in online learning, and the interactions therein.

Social Presence. In an online learning environment, social presence is how the participant presents him or herself as a 'real person' in the virtual setting. Social presence in online instruction is a very strong predictor of satisfaction, achievement and success in e-learning (Wang, 2007). If a student shows strong social presence, it means that they are expressing themselves through interpersonal communication and that they are perceived by others in the

course to be an active and meaningful participant (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Tu, 2002).

Students and instructors have been found to reveal themselves online in three ways: cognitively, emotionally, or socially (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). When a participant has cognitive presence, they share information and resources and are able to construct their own new knowledge. When a participant exhibits emotional presence, they are able to express their feelings about themselves, the online community of learners, and the culture processes involved in the online learning. However, when a participant is able to show social presence, they are able to project their real selves into the learning environment. Social presence is an interpersonal and psychological space between students in a course, and between the instructor and the student (Wang, 2007). This is the space where instructor-student caring can manifest.

Social presence has also been linked to online course design (Tu, 2002). Tu found three components of course design that influence the degree to which participants experience social presence. The first component of course design is social context, or the way the tasks, topics, processes and privacy are oriented by the instructor. The second is the language used to communicate with each other. The third component of course design is interaction, or the way in which feedback and reciprocal communication is delivered between the participants. McIsaac and colleagues (1999) found these three online course components should be considered whenever an online course is designed. These components allow for the exchange of caring encounters to occur between the instructor and the student.

The degree of social presence a student has in a course can affect how he or she perceives the instructor in the instructor-student relationship (Tu, 2002). Tu gives an example of how language can affect students:

Students perceiving high social presence also commented on the highly personal

tone of their instructors' interactions and reported their own interactions after

them, noting particularly the ways in which their instructors addressed them

by name and shared personal experiences. Interestingly, the low social presence

students did not pick up on these aspects of their language (p. 126). Tu (2002)

suggests instructors can enhance relationships with their students by exhibiting

a high level of social presence in the course and by carefully designing the course

itself. Tu adds that instructors should also receive on-going training to continue to

develop their skills in social presence.

Thus, if online courses can achieve a high level of social presence, why do criticisms

persist that, because there is no physical presence of the instructor and student, e-learning is sub-

par to traditional F2F instruction? When the focus is on the student-instructor relationship and

the interactions between the instructor and the student, it is evident the same type of interactions

can take place over the Internet as take place in traditional instruction. Therefore, perhaps the

criticisms are really that some instructors who teach online courses have not done a good job of

developing social presence (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Interaction may be the caveat to developing social presence. It has been shown that

interaction among students and between the students and the instructor is critical to student

satisfaction and retention (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006; McIsaac, et al., 1999; Tu, 2002).

Rourke & Anderson (2002) suggest that seven types of social expressions by the instructor have

been found to build the instructor-student online relationship: (s) addressing others by name, (b)

complimenting, (c) expressing appreciation, (d) using the reply feature to post messages, (e)

expressing emotions, (f) using humor, and (g) using salutations. Social expressions that were not

found to build the instructor-student relationship included expressing agreement, referring

explicitly to the content of others' messages, using software features to quote from others' messages, asking questions of other students, using informal register, using personal examples, chitchat, or self-disclosure. Students indicated they valued social expression embedded in discussions of content but felt that online classes were not the correct venue for unrelated social interactions (Rourke & Anderson, 2002).

Hewson and Heiglus (2005) found that when the instructor showed affirmation of the learner, a positive, supportive learning climate was created; also, they found that private one-on-one interactions between the instructor and the student positively affected the social presence perceived by the student. Garrison, Andrum and Archer (2000) established that when instructors were respectful, affirmed students in public, and acknowledged student success, the virtual classroom climate was enhanced.

Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (2002) found that social presence was one of three fundamental presences that supported learning. Cognitive presence and teaching presence were the other two, which could be regarded as the ability of learners to socially project themselves in to a community of inquiry. However, for students to feel successful in online learning, they need to have a high level of social presence to feel connected to the instructor (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Therefore, it may be wise for institutions to address social presence in student orientations, and instructors might design grading rubrics and discussion topics to help students understand the importance of social presence and how to increase their own social presence in the virtual community (Swan, 2001)

Feedback. Online learning involves a shift from oral discourse and nonverbal cues in face-to-face instruction to a dependence on more written, text-based communication, which can involve additional time in order for instructors to read and respond in this medium. (Gallien &

Oomen-Early, 2008) noted that instructors must be very concise in the way they communicate their thoughts with the written word, but not all instructors possess high levels of skillful typing ability, computer skills, or even writing skills.

Feedback is considered to be interaction designed to promote learning; it occurs between an instructor and a student or between students (Wolsey, 2008). Feedback should be meaningful and adaptive (Bonk & Zhang, 2006). General or novel feedback is easily ignored by students, but motivational feedback tied to a learner's specific performance level or effort, rather than merely posting a student score, was found to be superior when incorporated into the learning experience (Marzano, et al., 2001) . Marzano also found that general feedback to an entire class was effective, but not as effective as individualized feedback. It is the individualized and personal feedback than can touch a student's heart. In a recent study by Gallien and Oomen-Early (2008), one class of students received all collective feedback (feedback directed to the entire class), while another class received all personalized feedback. Their research indicated that students were significantly more satisfied and performed better with the personalized feedback.

In a study of student nurses, Wolsey (2008) asked students in four online nursing courses if they preferred feedback to be embedded in their assignment or if they preferred a summary paragraph of feedback. Not one of the students responded that they wanted the summary paragraph, but 28% of the students wanted both types of feedback and 72 % of the students preferred the embedded feedback, which can be done with Microsoft Word's *track changes* feature (Wolsey, 2008). Another study found that instructors' feedback tended to trail off as the course went on and as the instructor grew busier, with students not receiving information about their postings until they had already moved on to other discussion topics or assignments (Graham, et al., 2001).

Findings from the Graham et al. (2001) study also noted that instructors predominately gave two types of feedback: acknowledgement feedback and information feedback. However, instructors rarely gave acknowledgement feedback to the students because this type of feedback was more difficult and took purposeful effort, so it was often lacking in online instruction. Instructors mainly gave information feedback about the assignment, grades, or answered questions. Adult learning theory posits that students need frequent feedback, as well as many opportunities for feedback through their assignments, discussions, and on their overall performance in online courses (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). The instructor also needs feedback, or *feedforward,* (Wilson & Scalise, 2006) from students throughout the course to understand students' perceptions of how the course can be improved (McIsaac, et al., 1999).

Marzano and colleagues' (2001) meta-analysis revealed that, over the course of a school year, the percentile gain over and above the 50th percentile for student achievement was a (-3) percentile gain when the instructor only gave feedback to students if their answers were *right* or *wrong*. However, students' achievement jumped a (+9) percentile gain when the instructor provided the correct answers over the course of the year; achievement catapulted to a (+20) percentile gain if the student was allowed to correct his or her work and continue working until he or she achieved the correct answer. Findings of the meta-analysis also noted the timing of feedback was critical (Marzano, et al., 2001). If instructors gave feedback immediately after a test, the student achievement percentile gain was (+26), but feedback delayed after the test dropped achievement to an average (+21) percentile gain over the course of the year. Research on feedback is clear: personalized feedback improves student course satisfaction and student achievement. Yet much research remains unclear as to how different forms of feedback influence students' feelings of connectedness to the instructor (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008).

Language. Moore (1989) found that interaction between the instructor and the student includes such components as dialogue, feedback, and motivation. Another study noted, "This interaction is one component that is critical in stimulating discussion and providing the needed motivation to students who often feel isolated from the rest of the class" (McIsaac, et al., 1999, p. 122). Instructors use different forms of communication with different students and for varying purposes; but, how the instructor communicates is just as important as what they communicate. McIsaac (1999) believes the use of video conferencing (such as Skype) with students before major learning assignments will set the tone and start the dialogue, affording students all the visual and verbal cues they would receive in face-to-face instruction. Positive dialogue can develop immediate social presence, leads to instructor immediacy, and improves the students' motivation for the rest of the course (Woods, 2002).

Students reported they want and need a respectful and supportive learning community (Anderson & Carta-Falso, 2002). Negative interactions with instructors can significantly decrease the amount of interaction in which a student is willing to participate. Another study found, "Students report with disturbing frequency that they often feel belittled, even degraded, by faculty" (Cotton & Wilson, 2006, p. 512). This study seeks to determine what exactly are the instructor language and strategies that students perceive to be caring and/or non-caring in graduate online instruction.

Research indicates online courses need to be perceived by the student as sociable, sensitive, warm, and personal, and as a place for safe and successful interactions (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Cotton and Wilson (2006) note that students may often need repeated encouragement in order to feel comfortable approaching their instructor. Their research also

makes clear that the interactions between the instructor and the student are a strong predictor of student outcomes in the course, hence the importance of learning

which interactions students perceive as positive and caring or negative and un-caring.

Gorham (1988) found that language choices could help create a sense of *immediacy*, which is the perceived psychological and/or physical closeness between the instructor and the student. Instructors improved immediacy with verbal behaviors such as encouraging students to communicate, addressing students by name, using inclusive language, and praising students' work. The literature has repeatedly associated an instructor's verbal immediacy with increased motivation, satisfaction, and learning (Anderson & Carta-Falso, 2002; Gorham, 1988).

Positive presuppositions, or positive language that assumes positive intent of another, is a powerful teaching strategy to build social presence and instructor-student relationships and is used extensively in the field of leadership coaching (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). Language can change relationships with others, for better or for worse (Haden-Elgin, 2000). Bloom and colleagues (2005) found that instructor language can send messages that are overt or covert, and students may interpret dialogue at the covert level (reading-between –the-lines) or they may interpret language at the overt level of the literal syntax.

Words can deeply affect students and the way they think about themselves; the path of their thoughts and future actions can hinge on spoken or written words (Haden-Elgin, 2000). Because language matters (Orem, Binkert, & Clancy, 2007), especially in online teaching, an instructor who uses positive language enables students to become more aware of their own strengths and abilities in ways that increase their efficacy and effectiveness in all parts of their life (Sloan & Canine, 2007). Liston and Smith (2008) found that people who go through emotions that are positive also experience a heightened level of creativity, focus, and a greater

inventiveness in tasks. Positive emotions have even been found to undo the cardiovascular aftereffects of negative emotions (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005), commonly known as *stress*.

Educators can ease the stress of students with the use of positive presuppositions. Frederickson and Losada's (2005) research found that positive attitudes, like interest and curiosity, produce more accurate subsequent knowledge than do negative attitudes, like boredom and cynicism. In their study, instructors using positivity created experiential learning opportunities that confirmed or corrected initial student expectations rather than promoting avoidance with negativity. The transformational affect on inquiry, affirmation, and reflection by using positive presuppositions could be powerful (Haden-Elgin, 2000). Presupposition posits a particular thing is true before there is any proof of it, and a positive presupposition then, as a teaching strategy, elicits efficacious thoughts and behaviors in the receiver. The effects of positivity are further supported by Frederickson and Losada (2005), "Positivity can transform individuals for the better, making them healthier, more socially integrated, knowledgeable, effective, and resilient" (p. 679). Students appreciate instructors who affirm them, recognize their potential, and build their efficacy by encouraging them to do better (Perry & Edwards, 2005).

On the other hand, in a study of forty-nine college students at one university, Cotton & Wilson (2006) found that students were commonly related negative encounters they experienced with faculty who were particularly discouraging or intimidating. One student wrote,

> No matter how you talk to some faculty and no matter how you Try to get their
> help; they make you feel like an idiot. And it's Their demeanor, it's the way that
> they speak to you, it's the tone of voice that they use, and it's the hurriedness of
> their body language. Like, you're wasting my time, you're in my space, get out.
> Or, you know, they just make you feel like you're another number and you're

completely unimportant (p. 501).

Although online instruction does not allow the student to witness positive or negative body language from the instructor unless video conferencing is utilized, there are verbal cues in phone conversations and linguistic cues in syntax. An instructor's language can be positive, affirming, and efficacy-building, or it can be negative and debilitating. Research from Cohen and colleagues (2004) found that both verbal and non-verbal immediacy could be promulgated in online instruction if the instructors purposefully integrated the techniques into their instruction. They found that certain instructor comments, such as telling a student that he or she was doing a good job, really strengthened the instructor-student connection. Austin and Austin (2002) suggested that, if instructors want to improve their teaching and their relationship with their students, perhaps instructors should begin to consider students' opinions worth listening to. After all, care is fundamental to good teaching.

Characteristics of Effective Online Instructors

What do instructors and students perceive to be the characteristics of effective online instructors? In a qualitative study of thirty exemplary instructors, Lewis and Abdul-Hamid (2006) asked instructors to identify what they perceived to be the characteristic traits of effective instructors. The study found that instructors considered interaction with students, providing feedback, facilitating learning, maintaining enthusiasm, and organization for the course to be the main characteristics of effective instructors. While all these characteristics might also be applicable to successful face-to-face instructors, they were seen by the instructors as especially critical to the success of distance learning.

In a recent and highly cited study, Onwuegbuzie and colleagues (2007) examined the perceptions of 912 undergraduate and graduate students. These students were asked what they

believed were the characteristics of effective instructors. From this study emerged the *CARE-RESPECTED Model* of Teaching Evaluation. This model brought students' perceptions of the most important attributes of effective instructors into the evaluation process, while most colleges and universities continue to use student ratings on other factors.

In the Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007) study, nine themes that explain the CARE-RESPECTED Model emerged from students' perceptions of the characteristics of effective college instructors. The themes are discussed here in order of student endorsement, beginning with the ninth theme, and continuing to the highest student ranking listed as the first theme. In the ninth theme, students perceived great instructors as *responsive*. This is instructor immediacy, where students wanted timely, frequent, and also meaningful feedback from their online instructors. Students described responsive instructors as understandable and informative and noted their quick turnaround with assignments. The eighth theme that emerged was *ethical*. Students expected to be treated fairly and equitably in their interactions, with their concerns, and in the ways that the instructor implemented or enforced classroom policies. Students described ethical instructors as consistent, fair evaluators, and respectful. The seventh theme of effective instructors was *director*. Students perceived effective instructors as adept at creating a safe space for students, organized, efficient, and able to optimize resources for students. Students described directors as flexible, organized, and well prepared for class. The sixth theme to emerge tied back to student interactions with the instructor: students want their instructors to be *connectors*, providing conditions where they can connect not only within the class, but also outside of the class. Students described connectors as instructors with open-door policies who are always available when they need help. The fifth theme was *transmitter*, which means students wanted their instructors to be stellar communicators, clearly and concisely sharing relevant examples

using a variety of techniques. Students described the transmitter instructor as a good communicator who speaks clearly and in fluent English. The fourth theme that emerged was *enthusiast*. Students perceived that effective college instructors must have a passion for the delivery of their content, as well as for the content itself. An enthusiastic instructor was portrayed with the words encouragement, positive attitude, and enthusiasm. The third theme was *professional*; students wanted their instructors to show exemplary temperament and behaviors that are expected of their discipline. Students used words such as organized and punctual to describe professional instructors. The penultimately ranked theme was that of *expert*; students felt effective instructors were up-to-date experts in their content and were able to make connections for students with prior knowledge. Students described experts as knowledgeable and intelligent. The final and number one theme emerging was *student centeredness*, meaning that students perceived effective instructors as sensitive to students' needs. These instructors differentiated instruction according to student interests and diversity and also possessing strong interpersonal skills. Students described the student centered instructor as caring, compassionate, and willing to listen to students (Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2007).

Although originally created based on characteristics of traditional classroom instructors, *The Seven Principles of Effective Teaching* (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996) have been modified for online education. This framework of good practices can be used as a lens for evaluating online courses (Graham, et al., 2001). Graham and colleagues found that an effective instructor, online or face-to-face, exhibits prompt feedback and encourages student-faculty contact, cooperation among students in the course, and active and engaged student learning. Effective instructors also adhere to time on task, high expectations for students, and respect for students' diverse talents and ways of learning.

In the early days of online learning, instructors were pioneers who taught themselves how to instruct via an online platform. Even with the dramatic increases in online courses in the past decade, 19% of higher education institutions still do not offer training or mentoring for their online faculty (Allen & Seaman, 2010). One might think it critical for institutions of higher education to provide ongoing professional development to online instructors in order to continually develop their expertise and to ensure every instructor exhibits characteristics of effective online instructors that our students deserve.

Summary

From the review of the literature, specific questions emerged to be answered by this proposed study. These questions determined the research methodology to be employed.

Theory

Instructors must care about their students in order to be socially present for them (Noddings, 1988); therefore, care theory affects social presence and the engagement or disengagement of students. One way to look at student engagement and instructor language and interactions with students is through a kaleidoscope with care theory in the center fractal. Advances in technology have transformed how teaching is viewed, whereas traditional teaching was viewed through a single lens for many years. Now, teaching online must be viewed through a complex, shifting, yet colorful kaleidoscope lens. The researcher inserted the mirror of care theory into this kaleidoscope as one way of viewing virtual learning. Through this rotating lens, the researcher sought to answer the following:

Research Questions

1. How do graduate students and instructors describe care in a virtual world?

2. What language or strategies do online graduate students perceive as conveying care in online instruction?

3. What language or strategies do online graduate instructors perceive as conveying care in online instruction?

These questions guided this study of student and instructor perceptions of care in online graduate education. The methodology utilized in seeking answers to these questions is discussed further in the following section.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research design, the positionality of the researcher, and the research methods. The methods include information about the site of the research, the participants, the instruments used, the data collection procedures, and how the data were analyzed. The chapter closes with a discussion of the research quality. The data collection tools are attached as appendices.

Research Design

Objectivity and subjectivity came together in the researcher's constructivist epistemology for this mixed methods case study (Crotty, 2004). Through the theoretical framework of care theory (Noddings, 1984), the findings of this study emerged through social constructionism, whereby "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage in the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, p. 43). The study was a single bound case study that involved researching the dynamics of an issue explored through a case that was qualitative in nature (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). However, the case was also was explored through quantitative means; therefore, it was a mixed-methods research design with a fully mixed sequential dominant status design (Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2007). The quantitative and qualitative designs were mixed across the stages of data analysis and data interpretation with more weight given to the qualitative design. The rationale for using both quantitative and qualitative data was that richer results could be found by utilizing both forms of research rather than by using only one or the other (Creswell, 2003). "Where quantitative exercises reveal relationships, follow-up qualitative studies may provide descriptive information about the processes involved in the production of those relationships" (Cotton & Wilson, 2006, p. 491). The researcher wanted to look at not only the

relationships that emerged from a quantitative analysis of student and instructor perceptions, but also look more deeply at what the participants said and how they experienced the instructor-student relationship in online instruction.

Researcher Positionality

At the time of the study, the researcher was an online adjunct instructor for the university used in the study. Therefore, to avoid any conflict or bias by being in a parallel role, no adjunct faculty members were used in the study, and only full-time faculty members were asked to participate in the study. The researcher did not have close contact on a regular basis with any of the full-time faculty in the graduate education department at the university. However, the researcher was the main gatherer of data and was able to utilize previously established connections to the location of the study to benefit the research process (Merriam, 1998). The researcher's prior connections with the technology department and department secretary proved helpful in data gathering and also with small technical issues that arose.

Another position of the researcher was a belief based on personal teaching experiences and her own student testimonials that instructor-student relationships would become stronger if an instructor showed care for students' personal situations and professional endeavors. To avoid any possible influence of these beliefs on the participating faculty members' interview responses, the researcher intentionally conducted the faculty interviews online in order to avoid any possibility of her tone of voice and/or body language leading instructors' answers.

Methods

The methodology of this study was grounded in care theory (Noddings, 1984), and all instrumentation sought to answer the research questions related to instructor and student perceptions of care in graduate online instruction. The data were collected sequentially: first by

mixed-methods instructor interviews, then by a mixed-methods student survey, and finally by

triangulation with a document review of instructor-student interactions in the course delivery

shells. Purposeful, nonprobability sampling was used in the document review based on the

researcher's desire to "discover, understand, and gain insight" (Merriam, 1998, p. 61), and all

data were analyzed with a constructivist approach (Crotty, 2004).

The Research Site

The research site for this mixed-methods case study was a virtual setting between the

researcher and the Advanced Education Program department (AEP) of Virtual State University

(VSU). Virtual State University is a Midwestern rural university with a progressive online course

delivery program. VSU delivers online courses through course management software called

Blackboard (Blackboard, 2010). Blackboard served as the virtual location where seven instructor

course shells were studied for document review and triangulation of data. However, one

instructor was innovatively using a Ning ("Ning," 2011) social network site for course delivery,

which was also accessed by the researcher for document review. All online courses delivered by

faculty at VSU were considered part of their Virtual College. In the 2009-2010 academic year,

2,047 students were enrolled in one or more online graduate courses in the VSU Virtual College.

There were 550 students enrolled in the AEP division of the Virtual College (King, 2010). This

study was limited to and focused on the AEP department.

Research Participants

Research participants for this study included eight online graduate faculty instructors

from Virtual State University. Additionally, the fifty-five adult students enrolled in their courses

also participated.

Instructors. In the fall of 2010, the Advanced Education Department at VSU was made

up of ten graduate faculty members, four of whom were male and six of whom were female. All ten of the instructors were invited to participate in the study and eight chose to participate (three males and five females). These eight educators were all Caucasian, full-time graduate faculty members who taught at least two courses online, with most teaching entirely online. Two of the faculty titles were instructor, five were assistant professors, and one was a full professor. For purposes of this study they will all be referred to as instructors or faculty. The average age of the faculty members was 58.25 years, with a range of 49 to 67 years of age. The faculty members' average years of service at the university was 9.25 years, with a range from 4 to 22 years. The instructors' combined online teaching experience totaled 270 courses, including their current course load. While the average online course total for each instructor was 33.75 courses, the range varied from 15 to 45 total courses taught online. However, because there was confusion with several of the instructors as to the difference between synchronous and asynchronous teaching modes, the data that were collected on how many hours were spent in each were not considered to be accurate; therefore, the data were not used in the study.

Students. To select the student participants, one course was purposefully chosen from each instructor's course load for the study. The courses were chosen based on enrollment (the courses with the highest enrollments were chosen) and to ensure that each instructor was teaching a different course. All students in each instructor's chosen course were invited to participate in the mixed-methods online survey. The university's maximum online student enrollment per course was 28 students; the total enrollment of students invited to participate in the survey equaled 222.

Although there were 55 surveys submitted (25%) within the two week survey window, nine respondents opted out before completing the survey; therefore, the quantitative data are

based on 46 completed surveys (21%). The survey completers were 83 % female, and 17% male, while the collective 222 students invited to take the survey constituted 70% female and 30% male. There were no students from foreign countries represented in the sampling, and 19% resided out of state while 81% resided in state. The age range varied from 22 to 60 years, with the average age of the respondents being 38. It was the first online course for three of the students (8%) and 43 had taken one or more courses online (92%). The experience the students had with their current instructor varied. Eleven had never met them (23%), 14 had met their instructor in a video conference (30%), 22 had taken a prior online course with the instructor (47%), and 12 had met the instructor previously face-to-face (26%). Two students were not seeking a degree, 11 (23%) were seeking a master's in counseling, six (12%) a master's in administration, 17 (36%) a master's in special education, four (8%) a master's in technology, three (6%) a master's in library science, and five (10%) a master's in education with various emphases. Forty-four (96 %) of the students provided their name and phone numbers in order to be included in the incentive drawing. Also significant to note is how many students responded by course. The eight instructors were numbered 1-8, and the number of student survey responders for each was instructor was: 1 (n=4), 2 (n=8), 3 (n=10), 4 (n=4), 5 (n=4), 6 (n=3), 7 (n=2), and 8 (n=11).

Instrumentation

All data for this study was sequentially collected virtually over the Internet. First, structured faculty interviews were conducted, followed by a student survey. The last instrumentation was a course document review of the instructors' Blackboard/Ning course shells to verify that the quantitative and qualitative data gleaned from the interviews and the survey was supported.

Faculty consent to participate. Ten graduate faculty were asked to give consent to participate in the study. The instrument was a short consent form created with Survey Monkey (SurveyMonkey, 2010) software (see Appendix A). Eight instructors completed the online consent survey and consented to participate.

Structured online faculty interview. The online interview questions were adapted from a survey on nursing care in baccalaureate education by Sitzman & Woodard-Leners (2006) and a survey on social presence by Gunawardena & Zittle (1997). To strengthen content validity and reliability, the online structured interview was pilot tested in the spring of 2010 with two instructors from another university who were selected because both had extensive online teaching experience in graduate courses. Based on these pilot interviews, it was determined that there was some confusion over one of the demographic questions regarding the number of online courses taught; this was then modified in the instrument to be more specific by asking for the total of online courses taught. Another area was modified after the first instructor noted that the questions should all be asked in smaller groupings or individually. These instructors also performed the interviews on Skype in twenty-one minutes each. In this way, the final structured interview protocols and questions were determined (see Appendix B).

There were six demographic questions in the interview including data such as age, gender and total online course teaching experience. There were sixteen Likert-type questions for gathering quantitative data ranging from 1=Disagree to 4=Agree and 1=Never to 4=Frequently in the Skype interview for gathering quantitative data (see Appendix B). Scoring for these quantitative questions ranged from a total of 16 to 64 points. Eight questions addressed the issue of social presence with a scoring range of 8 to 32. Five questions addressed the instructor's perception of caring in online learning, with a scoring range from 5 to 20, and these questions

were aligned with Nodding's care theory (1994). One question was asked about the instructors' use of media to communicate with students, with options such as email, phone, Skype, etc. There were three questions addressing the quality of student learning with a scoring range of 3 to 12. Finally, there were five qualitative, open-ended questions to elicit instructors' perceptions of caring in the instructor-student online relationship. Several probing questions and several clarifications followed a few of the quantitative and qualitative instructor responses, mainly in order to provide clarity or a definition of terms (e.g., synchronous verses asynchronous) or to obtain additional views or more detailed responses from the graduate faculty members.

All faculty members were identified by name in the interview so that the researcher could correlate instructors to their courses. However, no names of individual instructors were included in the study, and all interview transcripts will be destroyed within five years following the study's completion (no later than October of 2015).

Student online consent and survey. The survey instrument was also adapted from a survey of nursing care in baccalaureate education by Sitzman & Woodard-Leners (2006) and a survey on social presence by Gunawardena & Zittle (1997) (see Appendix C). The instructor interview questions and the student survey questions were nearly identical. However, the student version included the consent form as the introduction to the survey.

To strengthen the reliability and validity of the instrument, the researcher conducted a pilot of the student survey in the spring of 2010 with two online courses. Based on the pilot study responses, it was determined that some questions were repetitive, one was unclear, and many could be eliminated. Thus, the final survey questions were determined based on graduate student input. There were seven demographic questions in the survey, including age, gender, geographic location, and online course experience (see Appendix C). There were sixteen Likert-type

questions ranging from 1=Disagree to 4=Agree to gather quantitative data. The scoring of these quantitative questions ranged from a total of 16 to 64 points. Eight of the sixteen questions addressed the issue of social presence and had a scoring range of 8 to 32. Four of the sixteen questions addressed the students' perception of their instructors' caring in online learning, with a scoring range of 4 to 16. Just as in the instructor interview questions, these four questions were aligned with Noddings care theory (1994). Three of the quantitative sixteen questions addressed the quality of student learning with a scoring range of 3 to 12. There was one question that asked about the instructors' use of media to communicate with students, with options such as email, phone, Skype, etc. Finally, there were five additional qualitative, open-ended questions to elicit students' perceptions of care in the instructor-student online relationship. There was an option for students to add additional comments to any or all of these quantitative and qualitative questions in order for the researcher to obtain additional views or more detailed responses from the graduate students.

In each of the chosen courses, instructors used an Announcement posted in the course delivery shell to invite their students to voluntarily complete the electronic survey within a two-week window. The online survey link was included in the Announcement. Students were given the opportunity to give consent at the start of the survey, and only then could they proceed to complete the survey. Participants had the opportunity to opt out at any time with no consequence. Students could fill out the survey anonymously or provide their names and phone number if they wanted to be in the incentive drawing. However, no student names were used in the study.

Course document review. To better identify the variables in the online student-instructor relationship, the researcher obtained voices directly from participants by surveying students and

interviewing instructors in addition to analyzing online course documents (Graham, et al., 2001; Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008). Instructor course materials reviewed included Announcements, Discussion Boards, and the Assignment Feedback area of the grade center where students and instructors exchanged dialogue. The online documents were randomly reviewed only for the forty students who provided their full names in the survey consent.

Data Collection Procedures

The data for the study were collected in the fall of 2010 and in the first few weeks of 2011. All data were collected virtually over the Internet.

Faculty consent. All ten graduate faculty members in the AEP department at VSU were individually sent an email in August to inform them about the proposed collaborative study between VSU and Wichita State University. Within the email was a link to a short consent form (see Appendix A). Only faculty members who filled out the consent form were included in the study, and this was communicated in the body of the email communication.

The consent included permission to do the structured interview, acknowledgement that they would be responsible to post the student survey link as an Announcement (see Appendix D) in one of their courses, and consent to add the researcher to the course with full viewing rights for the document review at the course's completion. The email also informed instructors of an incentive to encourage students to complete the survey: a drawing for five $15 iTunes gift cards and an iPod Shuffle.

Faculty structured interviews. The eight instructors giving consent were contacted by email in September to arrange appointments for the structured interviews (see Appendix B). The interview dates were scheduled in September and the interviews were conducted immediately after the fall midterm grading period in order for the instructors to have time to build

relationships with their students. The interviews were concluded by the end of October 2010.

The average 25-minute interviews were conducted online using the chat feature of a free video conferencing software called Skype (Skype, 2010); however, one interview was conducted via email per the instructor's request because she was not comfortable with the Skype program. Skype was initially chosen because the entire AEP department at VSU was trained in 2009 on the use of Skype, so all faculty members were familiar with this medium and/or had used it with their students. The online, text-based modality was the natural environment for the online instructors' interaction with their students. Additionally, the instructors were not influenced in this medium by the researcher's beliefs about caring in online instruction, which might have been evident through body language or tone of voice. The instructors were able to schedule the interview at a time of the day or evening that was most convenient for them, thus allowing them to be less hurried and distracted in their responses; all were scheduled late in the evening. Although the interview was structured, the researcher used probing questions to better understand the instructors' full perspectives and elicit more detailed responses.

Student online consent and survey. One course was purposely selected from each participating faculty members' course load for the study and student survey (see Appendix C). Two criteria were used for selecting each instructor's course: (a) class size (the largest classes were preferred), and (b) course variety, so that there were no duplicate courses in the study. Only students from those eight courses were given the opportunity to participate in the online survey. A separate survey was sent for each of the eight selected courses, and each was titled with the name of the course as a separate data collector.

The faculty members were sent an email in November with a scripted Announcement

containing the student survey information and a link to the electronic survey. Instructors were asked to post the invitation for the survey to their Announcement board in the specified course by no later than November 1, 2010 (see Appendix D). Students were given a two-week window to complete the five- to ten-minute survey. The researcher monitored the number of student survey responses at the midpoint of the two-week window, and instructors were emailed their total student completer numbers and encouraged to gently remind their students of the survey opportunity.

Students were able to give their consent to participate in the study within the study instrument. Students were asked to give consent to take the survey and to have their instructor-student dialogue from the course delivery shell examined in the document review. Students could complete the survey anonymously, or they could include their name and phone number to be eligible for the incentive drawing held before the end of the fall semester of 2010; those students had the opportunity to win one of six $15 iTunes gift cards or an iPod Shuffle, but they had to complete the survey to be eligible for the incentives. Of the forty-six student survey completers, forty or 87% provided their full name and phone number to be included in the drawing; the six winning students were contacted by phone and their incentive award was mailed to them in December 2010.

Document review. Participating faculty members were requested to add the researcher to the selected course shell and give the researcher full viewer rights at the end of the course in December 2010. With viewer rights, the researcher was able to access the Assignment Feedback area of the Gradebook to view feedback from the instructor, the Discussion Board to review instructor interaction with students, and the Announcements for group communication. The researcher randomly extracted instructor-student dialogue from the course document review and

placed the data into Excel software. The document review occurred in December of 2010 and concluded in January of 2011.

Data Analysis

All collected data were analyzed in accordance with the research questions of the study:

1. How do graduate students and instructors describe care in a virtual world?

2. What language or strategies do online graduate students perceive as conveying care in online instruction?

3. What language or strategies do online graduate instructors perceive as conveying care in online instruction?

Data collected in this mixed-methods case study were presented in graphic form. Analysis was based upon a visual inspection of the quantitative and qualitative graphs and the trends therein. The significance and implication of the data were discussed in further detail in the results and conclusion chapters of this study.

Instructor interview analysis. Quantitative data from the online interviews were analyzed using SPSS software to answer research questions 1 and 3. Items were entered into the quantitative software program and were analyzed for faculty perceptions of care, looking for frequencies of answers. The data also included gender comparisons. The sixteen questions were based on a four-point Likert-type scale resulting in scores ranging from 16 to 64. These answers were correlated to the student survey responses to the same questions; these student surveys included multiple choice questions related to related to online social presence and to perceptions of caring and their effect on students' satisfaction and success (quality of learning). Instructor perceptions and student perceptions of care were the main correlational analysis performed. The open-ended qualitative data from the interviews were unitized (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), coded,

and entered into Excel software for analysis to determine themes. The researcher planned to use NVivo8 (QSR International, 2010) qualitative software, but due to the mixed-methods nature of the study, it was determined that Excel would serve both types of data analyses. The constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to determine what unique themes and categories emerged from the software analysis.

Student online survey analysis. The student survey was analyzed to answer research questions 1 and 2. The survey was analyzed in a similar manner to the faculty interview questions with quantitative items analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software (SPSS, 2010). Quantitative data were analyzed for students' perceptions of social presence, care, and quality of learning, as well as for frequencies related to gender, age, geographic location (Kansas vs. Non-Kansas), and online experience (first online course versus more than one online course taken). Frequencies related to students' different degree tracks were also analyzed. The researcher looked for differences in frequencies within the demographic questions. Student and faculty responses were correlated to determine if variance occurred. Although it was acceptable for a student who was enrolled in multiple participating instructors' courses to take the survey more than once because there were separate but identical survey collectors for each instructor, no IP addresses were duplicates, which indicates that all respondents took the survey only once.

In the student survey, there were four opened-ended questions that were the same as in the faculty interview questions. These were aligned with Nodding's care theory (1994) and were correlated to the instructors' responses. The researcher sorted the qualitative data collected from the survey into initial coded categories using the theoretical framework of care theory as the basis of all coding decisions. These data were analyzed using the *constant comparative method*

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998). The constant comparative method of data analysis was used to repeatedly compare the data sets, and these comparisons lead to tentative categories; these categories were then compared to each other until themes emerged (Merriam, 1998). The constant comparative method is a constructive process, and the themes that came forward were expressed through the underlying theoretical framework. Next, the data were analyzed with *axial coding* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which means that the researcher searched for relationships between all the initial coding categories. The outcome of this analysis was theoretical statements responding to the research questions. The statements were validated by examples from the data and direct quotes from the participants (see Chapter 4).

Document review analysis. The document review encompassed reviewing the seven instructor Blackboard course shells and one instructor's Ning site. The researcher examined the Assignment Feedback area of the Gradebook for feedback from the instructor to those students who gave the researcher permission to view their Blackboard records. Also examined were the Discussion Board interactions and dialogue of the instructor and the students, as well as the Announcements area that the instructors used for group communication. This review was performed as a triangulated data piece to determine whether what the instructor reported was actually what was occurring in his or her class; the review also determined whether what students were reporting about their instructor was actually what was occurring in the course. The researcher was not able to analyze other reported communications between the instructor and the students, including phone calls, emails, Skype conversations, Facebook, Adobe Connect, and discussions in Flash Meeting conferencing software. In summary, the document review determined if course dialogue between the instructor and the students supported what the students said in the survey, supported what the instructors said in the interviews, or both.

Research Quality

The researcher used several techniques to ensure that the results were trustworthy. To improve the validity and reliability of the instruments, the survey was piloted with twenty-four online students (a 60% response rate of the forty students invited to participate), and the instructor interview questions were piloted with two online instructors in the spring of 2010. For consistency and validity in the coding of participant responses, a disinterested outside educator coded approximately 10%, or twenty-four, of the total 235 qualitative student survey responses. The coding of the researcher and the outside educator was compared for inter-rater reliability (Merriam, 1998). There were thirty-nine total codes identified by the researcher within the sample of twenty-four responses, and the outside coder marked the identical thirty-nine themes. The only variance between the raters was that the outside coder also marked three additional themes for a .07 difference in inter-rater reliability. Finally, to minimize any threats to validity, the researcher presented the data to interested students, faculty, and administrators on campus at Virtual State University before defending her dissertation and emailed the preliminary findings to those online graduate students who asked for a copy in the consent.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented according to graduate student survey responses and instructor interview responses according to the three research questions. The three research questions are interpreted through mixed-methods, presenting quantitative results first, followed by qualitative results.

The first section discusses research question number one, where students and instructors describe care in a virtual world. The second section presents research question two where students reflect on specific instructor language and strategies they perceived as conveying care. The third section addresses research question number three, where instructors reflect on their own use of specific language and strategies they perceived as conveying care to the students. Finally, to triangulate the data, a document review of the eight instructor course delivery shells is discussed.

Research Question One: How do Graduate Students and Instructors Describe Care in a Virtual World?

The quantitative survey data were examined in three main areas: social presence, perceptions of care, and student learning. For students, the analyses were conducted for gender, age, and location (instate and out of state). For instructors, analyses were based on gender only, as the location was the same for each instructor (instate) and ages were all in the same 41+ grouping. The qualitative data from the five open-ended questions were examined related to the students and instructors thoughts and feelings about care in their online course.

Graduate Student Responses

When analyzing the graduate student responses in SPSS software, the researcher found no statistically significant differences revealed, which are likely due to the relatively small number of respondents (46/222). There were, however, many findings of interest that may signal future research is needed.

Quantitative analysis. First, the researcher looked at the quantitative results of the student survey (see Appendix A). The following tables illustrate the means, numbers, and standard deviation for social presence, perceptions of care, and student learning by gender, age, location and instructor. Scores were derived by totaling the questions for each of the three quantitative sections, and then divided by the number of questions for each section in order to get the Leikert scale numbers.

Table 1

Student Responses by Gender for Social Presence, Perceptions of Care, and Student Learning

Gender	N	Social Presence M (sd)	Perceptions of Care M (sd)	Student Learning M (sd)
Male	7	3.09 (.59)	3.61 (.38)	3.33 (.69)
Female	39	3.42 (.53)	3.60 (.51)	3.62 (.52)
Total	46	3.37 (.55)	3.60 (.49)	3.58. (.55)

When looking at the main sections of the student survey for gender differences as depicted in Table 1, the mean response for social presence showed the largest variance (+.33) in how females perceived the social presence of their instructor verses the way males perceived

social presence There was very little difference in their perceptions of the instructor's care in the online setting , but the female students, who comprised 83% of the sample, scored higher (+.29) than the male respondents in how they viewed the quality of their own learning.

Table 2

Student Responses by Age for Social Presence, Perceptions of Care, and Student Learning

Age Group	N	Social Presence M (sd)	Perceptions of Care M (sd)	Student Learning M (sd)
22-30 years	18	3.38 (.53)	3.68 (.51)	3.72 (.34)
31 -40 years	10	3.20 (.54)	3.48 (.51)	3.53 (.36)
41-60 years	17	3.46 (.54)	3.65 (.43)	3.53 (.27)
Total	45	3.40 (.53)	3.60 (.48)	3.61 (.52)

Because the ages ranged from 22 to 60, the ages of students were combined into groups for easier analysis. The youngest grouping was 22 to 30 years of age (n=18), the second grouping was 31 to 40 years (n=10), and the third grouping was 41 to 60 years of age (n=17). Table 2 allows comparison between student participants by age group to see if generational differences exist in the responses. While there were not statistically significant differences because of the small sample size, there were still differences worth noting. The youngest age group was more positive in their perceptions of the instructor's caring than the 31-40 year group (+.18), but the oldest age group of students scored highest of all three age groups in their perceptions of the importance of social presence by the instructor, scoring (+.08) above the younger group. The youngest group of students held the highest perceptions of their instructor's caring (3.68), with

the 41+ age group coming closely behind (3.65), followed by the middle age group, who perceived the least caring in their courses (3.48). Again, the youngest age group was most positive about the quality of their learning, rating their courses higher (+.19) than both the 31-40 and 41+ age groups.

Table 3

Student Responses by Location for Social Presence, Perceptions of Care, and Student Learning

Location	N	Social Presence M (sd)	Perceptions of Care M (sd)	Student Learning M (sd)
In State	40	3.33 (.57)	3.59 (.51)	3.56 (.57)
Out of State	6	3.63 (.26)	3.71 (.37)	3.72 (.39)
Total	46	3.37 (.55)	3.60 (.49)	3.58 (.55)

When looking at the quantitative data by the geographical location of the students who participated in the online survey, Table 3 shows 13% (n=6) of the student responders were located in a U.S. state other than Kansas, while 87% (n=40) resided in state. Interestingly, the out-of-state students felt more positive across the board than in-state students in their perceptions of the instructor's social presence (+.30), their perceptions of instructor caring (+.12), and their perceptions of the quality of their own learning in the course (+.16). Although this may be attributable to particular instructors or the low number, it could be an area for further research.

Table 4

Student Responses by Instructor for Social Presence, Perceptions of Care, and Student Learning

Instructor	N	Social Presence M (sd)	Perceptions of Care M (sd)	Student Learning M (sd)
1	4	3.28 (.31)	3.81 (.38)	3.33 (.39
2	8	3.17 (.55)	3.34 (.44)	3.33 (.67)
3	10	3.21 (.75)	3.58 (.70)	3.57 (.50)
4	4	3.34 (.82)	3.44 (.66)	3.92 (.17)
5	4	3.84 (.12)	3.81 (.24)	4.00 (.00)
6	3	3.33 (.73)	3.25 (.66)	3.11 (1.26)
7	2	3.56 (.08)	4.00 (.00)	4.00 (.00)
8	11	3.49 (.30)	3.68 (.30)	3.64 (.41)
Total	46	3.37 (.55)	3.60 (.49)	3.58 (.55)

Table 4 shows that instructors 5, 7, and 8 scored above the total mean for students' perceptions of their social presence. The same three instructors (5, 7, and 8) plus instructor 1 all scored above the total mean for students' perceptions of instructor caring. Again, the same three instructors (5, 7, and 8) plus instructor 4 scored above the mean in the students' perceptions of the quality of their own learning. This indicates a potential link between students' perceptions that an instructor is caring and students' perceptions of that instructor's social presence and/or the quality of the faculty member's instruction.

Qualitative analysis. This analysis included questions 1, 2, and 5 of the five qualitative open ended questions asked of students (see Appendix C). The first question asked whether or not it were possible to convey care in online instruction, and if so, to describe it, and if not, why

not? The second question asked if the presence or absence of caring on the part of the online

instructor influence the student's success in the class, and if no, why not, and if yes, in what

way? Question 5 asked students what guidance they would offer to instructors who wished to

convey a sense of caring to online students.

Figure 1

Top Themes for Graduate Students' Description of Care in Online Instruction
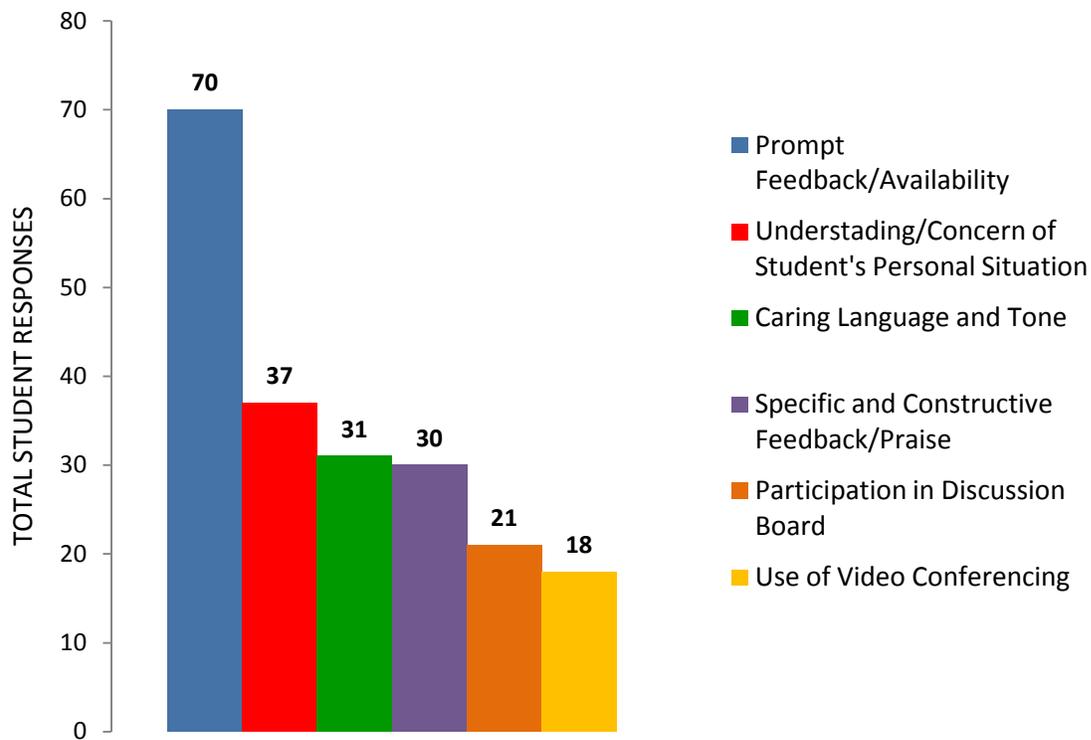
The student responses in were interpreted by the researcher and coded, with top themes

emerging as shown above in Figure 1. There were six themes that surfaced when students

described instructor caring in a virtual world. These themes, in order of priority with the first

being most cited, were: (a) prompt feedback in responding/being available, (b) instructor

concern/flexibility for students' personal situations, (c) instructor use of caring language and

tone, (d) specific and constructive instructor feedback, (e) participation of the instructor in the Discussion Board, and (f) instructor use of video conferencing.

When students were asked if it were possible for an instructor to convey a sense of caring in an online classroom setting, 43/46 students responded that it was possible and then went on to describe that caring. One student responded that it was not necessary because he or she was "low maintenance." Another stated, "I have not experienced a feeling of caring towards me—I think this is because the formality of the coursework comes first." A third student expressed that he or she had experienced it in other online courses, but not in that particular course.

The majority of students noted that an instructor shows caring by his or her prompt feedback in email and grading. "It can be challenging since most of communication is nonverbal so a good way to convey that you care through an online class is being quick in your responses", said one student. Another student suggested that if instructors wanted to be more caring they should, "Write weekly emails to the class about the class's progress, just to show us you are 'there.'"

As far as prompt grading is concerned, one student suggested that:

> If you really want your students to grow, give them feedback immediately.
> Don't wait until 1-3 weeks after they have submitted the assignment because
> it is no longer fresh in their mind and it does not give them enough time to
> add what they have learned to the next assignment.

Another student asserted that "Feedback from the teacher about where the students are is a must," while another stated that "At times, it is difficult to believe that some of the essays are read. I would say more feedback on essays and written assignments." Many students said that instructors could show caring by being available for the students. "It is possible for an instructor

to convey a sense of caring by being available," said one student. "If the instructor makes an effort to be available 'after hours' he/she cares what the students are experiencing." One student described how a lack of feedback showed non-caring: "I have had instructors that give you the assignment timelines and then abandon you the rest of the semester until it's time for finals."

Students also described care in a virtual world by expressing their desire to have the instructor interact with them in the Discussion Board. "As long as they put as much effort into discussions and take part in the discussions as the students do, I feel they care about our learning experience," one student said. One student suggested that if instructors want to be more caring, then "Every once in a while [the instructor should] take time to comment on discussion by writing more than a word or short sentence on discussions that students answer from the weekly discussion prompts." Finally, another added that a caring instructor will "participate in the discussion and support your findings or provide guidance to assist you with a better understanding of the material."

A third way that students described instructor caring in a virtual world was when the instructor gave specific and constructive comments or praise. "I feel that the instructor is conveying a sense of caring when they comment specifically on my papers, and make suggestions to make it better," one student said. Another added that caring was possible "when they [instructors] make positive comments about your work on the individual assignments." Another said,

> I feel it is possible to convey a sense of caring--I feel that from my instructor.
> She took the time to compliment us all on our efforts and I felt that she is
> carefully reading our assignments and cares about our success.

Some students just wanted any type of feedback; as one student said, "It doesn't have to be much, but a comment on something we did well says you actually read the work and cared about our thoughts." Another asserted that

> The instructor feedback on a finished assignment is crucial to motivation
>
> for the next assignment, even if it is 'good job' or 'I see that you took a lot of
>
> time and thought on this one.' BUT PUT SOMETHING FOR A COMMENT!
>
> DO NOT LEAVE IT BLANK! IT IS THE ONLY FEEDBACK WE GET
>
> BESIDES THE GRADE!!!!!!!!

But most students wanted very specific feedback. One said, "Comments such as good, great, or nice work are just not effective when grading. Comments that are specific to the work of the student show that the instructor is invested and allows the student to feel as though they can approach the instructor for assistance if needed." Students clearly connected caring to specific feedback. One student wrote that "Writing comments and constructive criticism on assignments and papers lets you know the professor cares and want to help you learn." The absence of feedback also consequently expressed non-care; one student noted that "When there is no feedback or grading with comments on assignments, I don't feel like the instructor cares very much."

A fourth theme that surfaced when students described care in online instruction was when the instructor showed concern and flexibility for students' personal situations. One student suggested that instructors should "Make a huge effort to understand that many students are teaching, coaching, parenting and juggling other roles other than just taking online courses," and another wrote that caring instructors "understand life situations and are flexible throughout the course." Yet another asked that instructors "Try to understand where students are coming from.

Usually students working on a Master's Degree online have families and full time jobs. Be considerate of those things, but still demand the excellence. It can be done in a positive manner." Finally, one student suggested the following guidance to instructors who want to be more caring: "I would suggest they remember that their students are usually non-traditional students who have full time jobs, multiple classes and even families. If they can't devote 100% at that time, there may be a valid reason why."

The fifth theme that surfaced was that instructors can show care by using caring language. According to students, instructors can use caring language through careful "word choice, responses, 'being there' for the students" and "by responding to emails in a timely manner and with kind concerned words." One student shared that caring instructors "answer questions in a friendly manner. They add extra little e-mails or posts to let you know any changes or sometimes just to check in and clarify what's going on at that time." Another student noted that instructors' language "can come through as caring and show some of the professor's personality. The only way this is possible, though, is if one receives a more detailed comment - usually more than one sentence." Another student offered guidance for instructors who want to be more caring: "Convey that you recognize that most of us are working full time and going to school… and make statements of understanding." Finally, one student cautioned that for reciprocal caring language to occur, both the instructor and the student must "give the needed attention before they proceed with their thoughts during the conversation."

The sixth and final theme that emerged in student descriptions of caring in online instruction was the instructor's use of some type of video conferencing. Many students recommended more video conferencing for building the instructor-student relationship; one student suggested that instructors "should schedule at least one 1-1 [one on one] video

conferencing session each semester. This makes it feel more like an in-person relationship."
Some students just really liked the media:

> I really liked when the professor had us do an online conference at the beginning
>
> and at the end of the class. I also liked when another professor of mine had us
>
> each have an individual Skype conference with her.

One student offered the following guidance for instructors who want to appear more caring: "Having at least one online meeting with the class is helpful. Two is better. I would have them if I were teaching online again. The idea of having a face to go with a name is helpful to me." Another student encouraged instructors to "Require an online video conference between each of your students and you."

Students were divided on how caring instructors affected their success in an online course. Some 42% felt it wasn't necessary for their success to have a caring instructor, citing reasons such as self-motivation and that their drive for success comes from within. However, most expressed a caveat: "I'm a very independent learner, and I'm determined to do my best. However, an online instructor who is aloof may affect how well I enjoy the course," said one student. Another said, "No, it [teacher caring] doesn't affect my success, because I try to do my best regardless. However, it affects my enjoyment." Other students chimed in on this theme, claiming that "No, teacher caring does not impact success, but it does impact the enjoyability" and "I don't think so because I am internally driven to do well. However it is always easier to do a good job or enjoy the course when you are working with a caring instructor." Some students noted that having a caring instructor makes the course easier:

> I try hard no matter what because if they care or not isn't going to affect my future.
>
> It is nice to know that someone cares and it is much easier to ask questions and

have a sense of ease when you know you can communicate with the instructor

and know they are willing to help you solve any issues.

Others noted caring instructors were not necessary, but did affect their motivation. In the words

of one student, "Personally no, but I admit it does help a student to feel uplifted when the

professor does show concern for your work, health, etc." Finally, several expressed that although

caring did not affect success, it helped to give meaning to the learning. In the words of one

student, "Success.....NO......getting meaning and interaction through the course....YES. The

instructors that interact create a connection to the learning and content."

Graduate Instructor Responses

There were eight online structured interviews completed. There were seven conducted via

Skype, and one conducted by email, per the instructor's request. When analyzing the graduate

instructor responses in SPSS software, the researcher found no statistically significant

differences revealed due to the relatively small number of respondents (n=8). There were,

however, many findings of interest that may signal future research is needed.

Quantitative analysis. Gender was the only demographic analyzed for instructor

responses in the social presence, perceptions of care, and student learning quantitative sections of

the structured interview. Other variables were not used because of similarity: all faculty

members were in the 40+ age group, all resided in state, and all had similar faculty rank.

Table 5

Instructor Perceptions by Gender for Social Presence, Perceptions of Care, and Student Learning

Gender	N	Social Presence M (sd)	Perceptions of Care M (sd)	Student Learning M (sd)
Male	3	3.92 (.14)	3.75 (.43)	3.67 (.33)
Female	5	3.50 (.29)	3.50 (.40)	3.08 (.68)
Total	8	3.66 (.32)	3.59 (.40)	3.29 (.63)

The male instructors (n=3) ranked higher across the board in their perceptions of social presence, caring, and the quality of students' learning in their courses. The males perceived their social presence with students higher (+.42), their caring higher (+.25), and the quality of students' learning higher (+.50) than the female instructors (n=5) did. The total overall mean for instructors in social presence was 3.66, and for students, it was 3.37; this means that instructors rated themselves higher in this area than students did (+.29). Instructors overall mean in their perceptions of care was 3.59, slightly under students' overall mean (-.01). For student learning, the overall mean for how instructors perceived the quality of learning was 3.29, while students rated their learning higher (+.29) with a mean of 3.58.

Qualitative analysis. The analysis of instructor interview responses included questions 1, 2, and 5 of the five qualitative open ended questions asked of instructors (see Appendix B). The first question asked instructors whether or not it were possible to convey care in online instruction, and if so, to describe it, and if not, why not? The second question asked if the presence or absence of caring on the part of the online instructor influence the student's success

in the class, and if no, why not, and if yes, in what way? Question 5 asked instructors what guidance they would offer to other instructors who wished to convey a sense of caring to online students.

When collapsing all qualitative question responses as shown in Figure 2 below, three themes emerged that were most noted by all eight instructor interview respondents. The research showed instructors believed the top caring themes were (a) understanding and concern for graduate students' personal situations as non-traditional students with busy lives, (b) prompt feedback and availability for students, and (c) use of caring language and tone in all communication media.

Figure 2

Top Themes for Graduate Instructors' Description of Care in Online Instruction
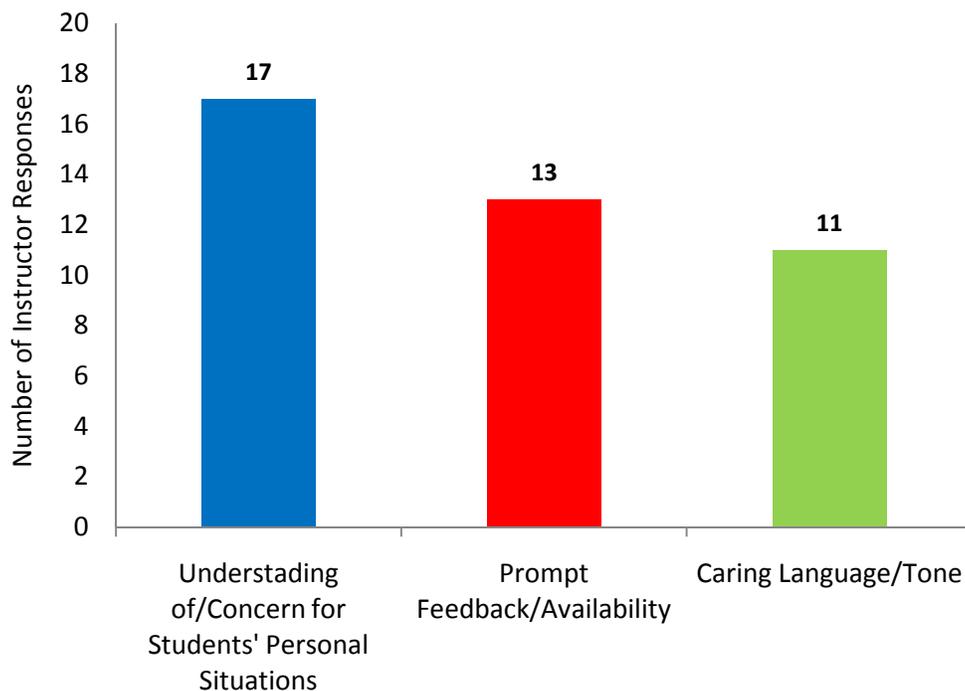
When asked if it were possible to convey caring in online instruction, 8/8 responded yes. The instructors very much understood that their students were graduate students with full lives outside of their online course work, and the researcher recorded the most instructor responses in this category. One instructor described caring in online instruction as "Understanding when they have issues that keep them from the course; understanding that families are important and that 'life happens' outside of class and giving them some flexibility." In a similar vein, another instructor wrote that "My students are all at the graduate level so 'life' happens and I try to be very understanding of this—they appreciate that as well." Yet another instructor described caring as being "flexible with students' individual situation and giving them the benefit of the doubt." Several instructors noted the reciprocal nature of instructor caring for personal situations: "I see them [the students] return the favor if I am away at a convention or have family obligations, they understand that it may be a day before I get to their emails."

Another theme emerged as instructors commented frequently on the importance of prompt feedback and being available to students. One instructor said, "I feel it is important to get back to students in a timely manner—first sign that you care." Many made statements like "Get back to your students quickly. They appreciate timely feedback and a quick response to emails or phone calls" and "Throughout the semester, the teacher should answer emails promptly and grade quickly." One instructor gave this guidance for instructors who want to be more caring:

> When giving feedback, come at it from a positive perspective - you can
>
> help with their growth by asking questions and giving suggestions, rather
>
> than just telling them something is 'right or wrong' - make it clear that you
>
> are a learner along with the students and that you may learn as much from them
>
> as they will from you.

The perception that instructor availability shows care was expressed in several comments, such as "I tell my students, 'I am here for you,'" and one instructor stressed the importance of "letting them [the students] know that I am here for them at any time if they have questions or possible misunderstanding."

The third area instructors seemed to agree on was the importance of using caring language in online instruction to project care to students. "Instructors can express sympathy when a student has experienced loss; joy when a student has celebrations to share and understanding when a student is experiencing difficult times in life," said one, while another instructor described caring language use as "injecting personality, having fun, making class social and informal." Honesty as caring language was noted by several instructors: "I would suggest that on-line instructors strive to be as forthright and sensitive with their comments as possible and try to put themselves in the shoes of the student who will be receiving their message," one instructor said, while another asserted that "Honesty, caring, and building those relationships comes through in 'voice' in writing."

Although video conferencing was a main theme for students for showing instructor care, video conferencing was only mentioned twice by instructors. For example, one instructor said, "I didn't want to take the time to infuse this new technology into my course…I know I could be more effective but I am not willing to take on the new technology at this time in my life."

Instructors were unanimous in believing that instructor caring increased student success in online instruction, but attributed the increase in success to increased student motivation through caring. One instructor suggested that the absence of caring can also influence student performance "Not all students connect with teachers whether they are on-line or in the classroom. When a positive relationship is not established, the student's motivation to do well in

the classroom is decreased." Another instructor asserted that "If the student senses that the instructor doesn't really care about them, he/she will not be motivated to succeed in the class." Yet another said that instructor caring "does affect the students' opinion of how beneficial the class was to them… they should be more motivated to participate if they know the instructor is interested in them." One instructor thought that some students didn't care but that "most students want to please you if they feel like they know you and you know and care about them," and another proclaimed that "If they know you care, regardless of the rigor, they will work their tails off to please you."

Research Question Two: What Language or Strategies Do Online Graduate Students Perceive as Conveying Care in Online Instruction?

The following section presents the results from the quantitative question about how instructors used various media to communicate with the students, and two qualitative open-ended questions from the student online survey. By studying what students perceived as caring language and strategies, as well as what they did not perceive as caring language and strategies, the researcher was able to learn more about what students believed constituted care in the virtual setting.

Quantitative Analysis

To better understand how students communicate with their instructors in a virtual world, students were asked to share which media their instructor used to communicate with them in the online course. Students were also asked how often the instructors utilized the media using a Likert scale of Frequently Sometimes, Seldom, or Never. The researcher examined these channels of communication to better understand how students were receiving the instructors' caring or non-caring language and strategies.

The researcher wanted to learn how online instructors primarily communicated with their students; through which features in Blackboard or through what other media was the instructor-student dialogue taking place. Students reported that the instructors' most used means of communication was posting Announcements in Blackboard (or Ning). Second, they cited Email as a main communication vehicle, along with Assignment Feedback section in the Gradebook. Again, over half the students (31/46 or 67%) reported that the Discussion Board was used by their instructor, but mainly for posting discussion prompts. The media used less frequently were Skype, Phone, and Flash Meeting. Three students cited Other Media but did not elaborate in the optional comments as to what constituted the other media.

Figure 3

Instructor Communication Media Use Reported by Students
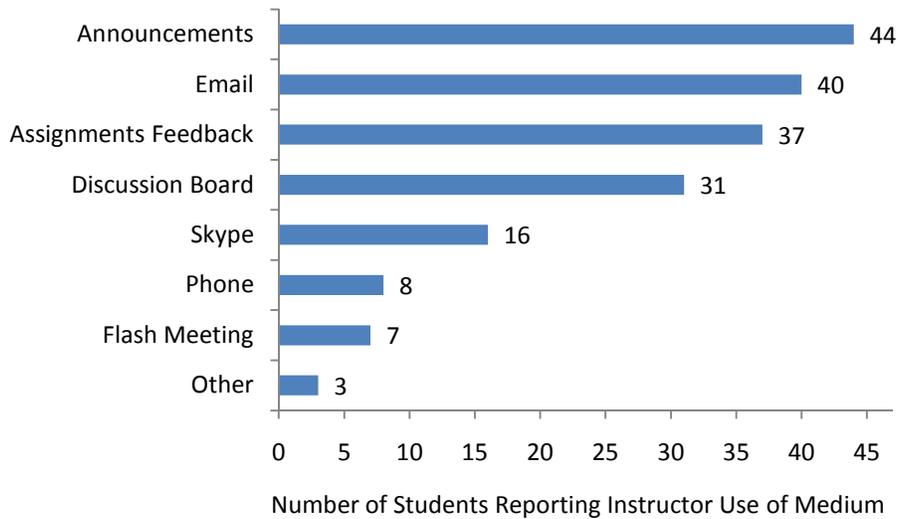
Students shared a total of 186 responses to this question, and Figure 3 depicts the aggregated students' responses by media type.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis included responses from questions 3 and 4 of the five open-ended questions asked of students in the survey (see Appendix C). In question 3, students were asked what specific words or language the instructor used that affected them positively and conveyed caring. They were asked to think of specific quotes that stuck out for them and how the instructor's language made them feel. Conversely, question 4 asked students what specific words or language the instructor used that affected them negatively and did not convey caring. They were asked to think of specific quotes that stuck out for them and how the instructor's language made them feel.

Language students perceived as conveying care. Two main categories came forward from student responses to question 3: (a) feedback and praise, and (b) concern for the students' personal situations. Two main categories of instructor language came forward from what students shared in question 4: (a) lack of prompt feedback and availability, and (b) lack of understanding and concern for students' personal situations.

Students referenced complementary statements from their instructor that provided either positive feedback or simply praise, such as "You really showed a great deal of patience and caring in working with that student. I am sure they really appreciated it." Students offered other examples like "I like how you answered this question," "Thank you for your input on your personal experience," or "You must have felt disappointed when this happened, but it sounds like you handled that professionally. I would have done the same thing." Another student said, "I had one instructor tell me my work was exemplary. I am going to copy this comment and keep it for my portfolio." The researcher noted that students' names were used frequently in the language that students remembered. For example, students remembered language like "[Student name],

excellent point about relevancy" and "Great job, [student name], sharing your experience - it really helped to remind me of how much we really miss." Students remembered other instructor language because they perceived it as caring language, including statements like "I am glad you are looking forward to the unit potion - this model can be a bit overwhelming at first, but go slow and really look through those ideas." One student remembered that "[the teacher] related that she felt that we are 'the best overall class she has ever taught' in this course, which made me feel proud to be a part of this class."

The second theme that came forward was language related to students' personal situations. For example, one student remembered his or her instructor saying,

> Take the time you need in order to get your life back together and then worry about assignments. You are doing fine and I know you will do the assignments correctly and to the best of your ability when you are able to.

Figure 4

Number of Caring Language Statements Reported by Students
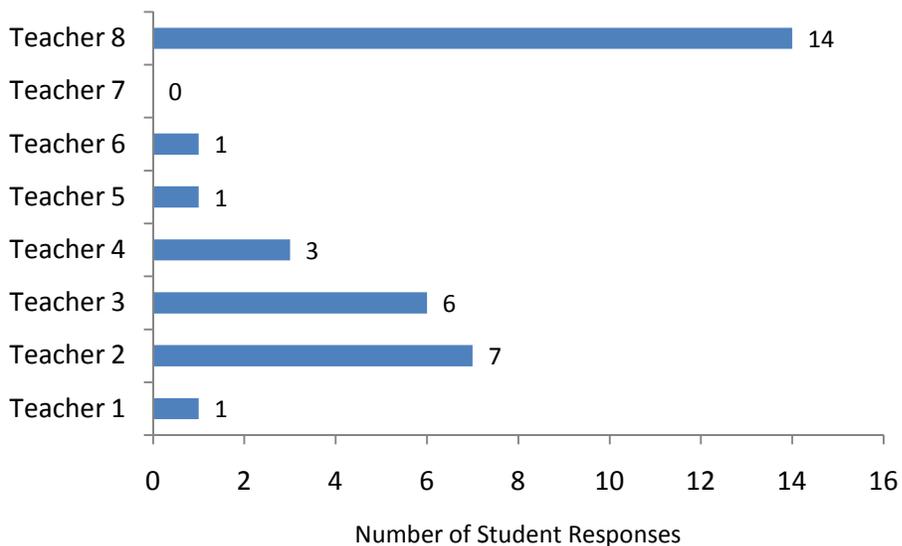
Students offered thirty-three separate statements that included language or strategies that these students perceived as conveying instructor care. In analyzing the data, it became apparent that many of the statements were attributable to certain instructors as shown in Figure 4, which could be due to the varying number of students who responded from each course. The number of student survey respondents for each was instructor was: 1 (n=4), 2 (n=8), 3 (n=10), 4 (n=4), 5 (n=4), 6 (n=3), 7 (n=2), and 8 (n=11).

Language students perceived as not conveying care. To enhance learning about care in online graduate instruction, it was necessary to also look at what language and strategies students perceived as non-caring. Students were asked what specific words or language the instructor used that affected them negatively and did not convey caring. They were asked to think of specific quotes that stuck out for them and how the instructor's language made them feel. Three main categories came forward from the comments students shared: (a) lack of prompt feedback and availability, (b) lack of concern for students' personal situations, and (c) lack of caring tone.

Students did not share specific language about instructors' lack of communication; instead, they shared how the lack of communication in online instruction made them feel. One student shared that "Sometimes, it takes a while for the professor to respond to questions, while face to face contact is sometimes easier or telephone conversations may assist with resolution of problems in a quicker manner." Another felt that "It's the lack of online interaction or a lack of timely interaction that creates the negative feeling." Other students echoed this negative feeling about instructors "not getting back to me as quickly as I wanted them to on a couple of questions" or "just not grading and responding in a timely manner." Students clearly perceived that a lack of instructor promptness in communications conveyed a lack of caring. For example, one student stated that "The complete lack of communication from the instructor indicates lack

of caring toward me." Another student summed up the feelings elicited when instructors do not communicate promptly by saying, "The only thing that I sense conveys non-caring is the lack of communication. It reminds me of being ignored and unimportant."

The second area where students felt non-caring from online instructors was in their response to students' personal situations. One shared their personal issue and the instructor's non-caring words: "You had more than enough time to figure out from the beginning of the course to get the materials." Others shared the stories they cannot forget; for example, one student wrote that "When I first started taking online courses, I missed several deadlines…I simply couldn't read the syllabus. I emailed…he said he didn't 'buy' my excuse. I was floored because my excuse was so dumb it had to be true!" Another student shared this story:

> I was in the middle of moving in one of my classes and missed a due date by a
>
> day before I could get everything set up, and on top of that had a serious sinus
>
> infection, so all my spare time was sleeping. I asked if I could turn it in late; she
>
> highly suggested I drop the class and take it again when I could give it some
>
> attention. This interaction really made me dislike her and her class (when I took
>
> it again). I think she should have taken into consideration that most online students
>
> have full time jobs and most are taking multiple classes (I was taking 4 that
>
> semester). A little latitude wouldn't have hurt.

Again, many students did not share specific language but voiced why they did not feel cared for by their instructor. One student suggested that instructors need to "understand that every student may have a different circumstance… how you respond to a student may be better said in dialogue over the phone and not in literal words typed out on the computer.

Figure 5

Number of Non-Caring Language Statements Reported by Students
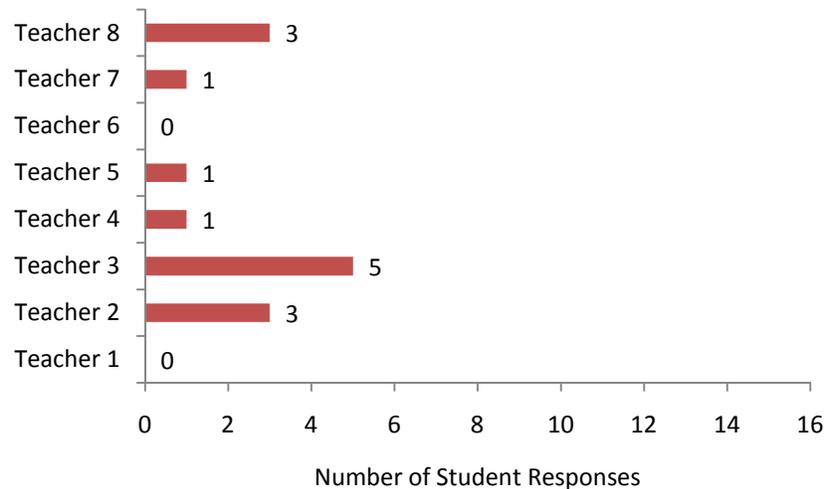
Students reported fewer examples of negative language and strategies than positive language and strategies, citing only fourteen negative examples used by their instructors that were not perceived as caring. Figure 5 shows a visual of the examples attributable by instructor.

Online strategies students perceived as conveying care. When collapsing all five qualitative open-ended question responses, there were six themes that emerged from research questions one (See Figure 1) that received the most responses from all 46 graduate student survey respondents. In studying research question two, students shared specific caring language and strategies that aligned with two themes from Figure 1: (a) specific feedback/praise, and (b) understanding/concern for students' personal situations. Students also shared specific non-caring language and strategies that aligned with three themes from Figure 1: (a) prompt feedback/availability, (b) understanding/concern for students' personal situation, and (c) use of caring language/tone. Of the original six themes, the only two not evident in research question two were participation in the Discussion Board and use of video conferencing.

However, when the researcher looked at all student responses from research question one and two, six specific strategies became clear that students perceived as caring in the online setting. The research indicated that online graduate students wanted their instructors to use the following caring strategies: (a) be prompt with feedback and be available, (b) show understanding and concern for students' personal situations as non-traditional students with busy lives, (c) use caring language and tone in all communication media, (d) provide specific and constructive feedback on assignments and include the use of praise generously, (e) join the Discussion Board and participate in the discussions with the students, and (f) use video conferencing software to help build the instructor-student relationship.

Research Question Three: What Language or Strategies Do Online Graduate Instructors Perceive as Conveying Care in Online Instruction?

The following section presents the results from the quantitative question about how instructors used various media to communicate with the students, and two qualitative open-ended questions from the instructor interviews. By studying what instructors perceived as caring language and strategies, as well as what they did not perceive as caring language and strategies, the researcher was able to learn more about what instructors believed constituted care in the virtual setting.

Quantitative Analysis

To better understand how instructors and students communicate in a virtual world, instructors were also asked to share which media they used to communicate with students in the online course. They were also asked how often they utilized the media using a Likert scale of Frequently, Sometimes, Seldom, or Never. The researcher examined these channels of

communication to better understand how instructors were delivering caring or non-caring language and strategies.

Figure 6

Instructor Communication Media Use Reported by Instructors
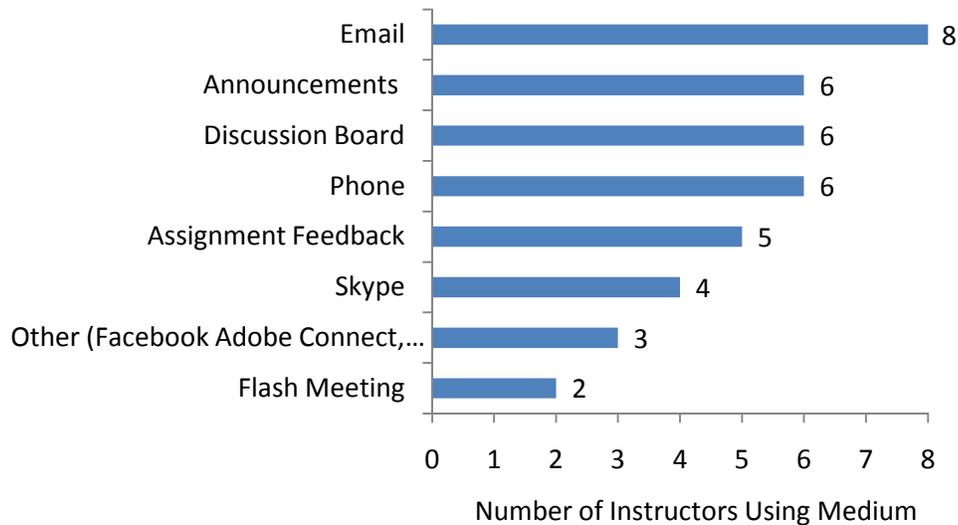
The researcher wanted to learn how online instructors primarily communicated with their students; through which features in Blackboard or through what other media the instructor-student dialogue was taking place. Figure 6 depicts the instructors' responses. The online faculty rated Email as the most universally used communication medium, followed by Announcements, the Discussion Board, and then the Phone. However, the top communication media use reported by students from their instructors was Announcements, followed by Email, the Assignment Feedback section of the Gradebook, and then the Discussion Board.

Qualitative Analysis

The graduate instructors were asked the same open ended questions as the students were for this section, only the questions 3 and 4 of the five qualitative questions asked about their own

use of caring or non-caring language in the course (see Appendix B). The following section

shares the instructors' perceived caring and non-caring language and the strategies for online

instruction they deemed to be the most caring. Instructors' responses of caring language divided

into two main themes: (a) concern for students' personal situations and (b) specific feedback and

praise.

     Language instructors perceived as conveying care. The instructors' self-identified

caring statements included things like recognition of students needing more time. Instructors

offered examples like "Go ahead and finish up the assignment as soon as you are able" and "If

you need additional time in either course, please feel free to make use of it." Another said, "I

will grant you and your husband extra time to submit this assignment due to the unusual

circumstances surrounding your automobile accident."   Other caring statements they shared

were related to personal health issues, like "I hope you husband's health improves. You are right

to put your energy and time into his care" and "I am sorry for the loss of your friend." One

instructor shared his or her personal philosophy in online instruction: "If students are having

difficulty at home, my response is always 'family first.'"

Figure 7

Number of Instructor Caring Language Statements Reported by Instructors
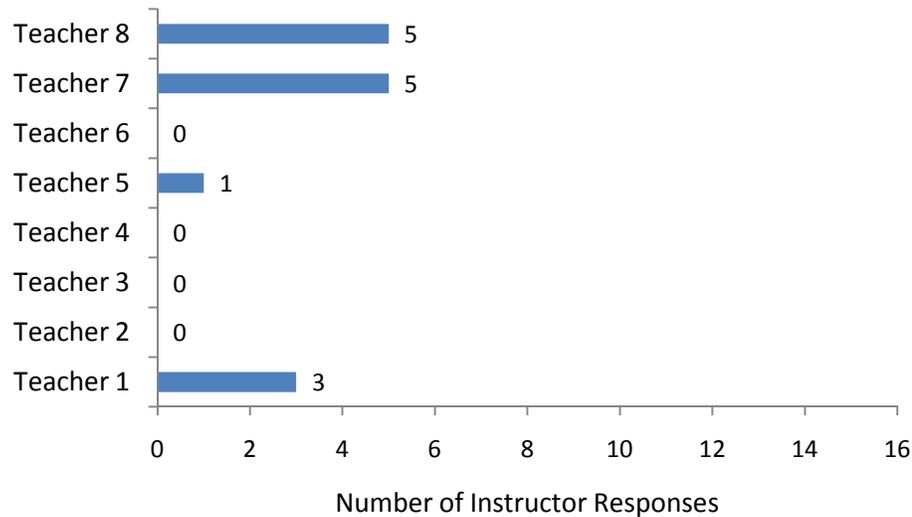
A total of fourteen caring comments were noted by the instructors. The comments were disaggregated by individual instructor.

Language instructors perceived as not conveying care. The majority of instructors did not believe that they made non-caring statements to students. Instead, instructors made comments like "I can't think of any. If I have said them, I didn't mean to" and "Don't operate that way, only positive comments come out my mouth." Another said, "I would hope that no comments I have made would affect them negatively. I try for a win-win situation and seek first to understand, then to be understood. I find this is turns negative situations into positive." Only two instructors noted possible negative statements.

Figure 8

Number of Non-Caring Language Statements Reported by Instructors
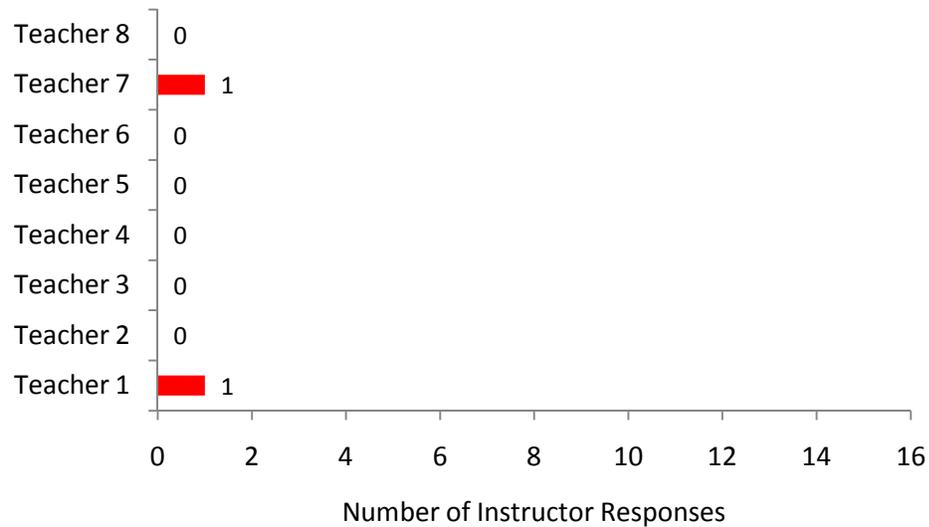
As previously stated, there were only two instructors who reported non-caring language usage, and they are reported in Figure 8 disaggregated by instructor.

Online strategies instructors perceived as conveying care. When combining responses from all five qualitative open-ended questions, the researcher studied the codes of instructor responses and noted the existence of three main themes or strategies (see Figure 2). Instructors shared specific caring language that aligned with two of these three strategies: (a) understanding of/concern for students' personal situations, and (b) specific feedback and praise. In studying the small sample of specific non-caring language examples instructors shared, no themes emerged.

However, when collapsing all qualitative question responses, the three strategies in Figure 2 were most noted by all eight instructor interview respondents. The research showed that instructors believe the three primary online instructor caring strategies are: (a) showing understanding of and concern for graduate students' personal situations as non-traditional

students with busy lives, (b) being prompt with feedback and available to students, and (c) using caring language and tone in all communication media.

Triangulation

In this section, the researcher examines comparable student and instructor responses to the quantitative and qualitative questions. The document review of the course delivery shells is also discussed.

Document Review

The researcher studied the Blackboard course shells of seven instructors, and the Ning social network site of another instructor who used this as the course delivery shell. The researcher looked at the instructors' Announcements area, the Assignment Feedback portion of the Gradebook, The Ning site had various discussions through a blog, but the researcher had no access to grading feedback. Due to research quality, the researcher was only able to view the instructor dialogue or feedback with the 46 students who gave consent to be in the study. The researcher also had no way to study other ways the instructor may have communicated with the participating students through Email, Phone, Skype, Flash Meeting, or Other Media.

Announcements. There were 28 announcements recorded by the document review. The researcher interpreted the language and tone of the announcements, rating them on a Likert scale of (5) Positive, (4) Somewhat positive, (3) Somewhat negative, (2) Negative, or (1) Not Found. There were 19 announcements rated positive or somewhat positive, and eight announcements rated somewhat negative or negative. No announcements were found for one instructor.

Discussion board. Other than posting the discussion prompt, there was no evidence of instructor participation in the participating students' discussion threads. There were seven posts

to students from an instructor's teaching assistant and all were rated as positive or somewhat positive.

Assignment feedback in gradebook. Instructors posted 30 instructor assignment feedback responses to participating students in the Assignment Feedback area of the Gradebook. Of those responses; 19 were rated as positive or somewhat positive, six were somewhat negative or negative; and, in five cases, a student wrote to the instructor when they submitted the assignment, but there was no response found from the instructor other than the grade. There was evidence of 41 assignments turned in by students where the student did not write a note to the instructor and the instructor gave no feedback in return other than the grade. One instructor repeated the same positive comment for every participating student in the study for that course, leading the researcher to question if the lengthy written assignment was read and evaluated. One instructor gave very personalized feedback to each student. It is important to note that the researcher was not able to access the Assignment Feedback area for grading in the instructor's Ning site and that three other instructors had already deleted students from the gradebook by the time the document review occurred.

Quantitative Analysis

The following section compares the overall total mean for student and instructor responses for the main three quantitative sections of the survey and interviews, which included Social Presence, Perceptions of Care, and Student Learning. The only frequencies that could be examined for instructor and student demographics were for gender (see Table 5).

Social presence. The total overall mean for instructors in social presence was 3.66; for students, it was 3.37. This means that instructors rated themselves higher in this area than students did (+.29).

Perceptions of care. Instructors' overall mean in their perceptions of care was 3.59, slightly under students' overall mean of 3.60 (-.01). This denotes alignment of instructor and student perceptions.

Student learning. For student learning, the overall mean for how instructors perceived the quality of learning was 3.29, while students rated their learning higher (+.29) with a mean of 3.58. While 27/46 students felt that a caring instructor made a difference in their success in the course, 8/8 instructors felt it made a positive difference with student success.

Communication media use. The online faculty rated email as the most universally used communication medium, followed by the Announcements section, the Discussion Board, and then the phone. However, students reported that the top communication media used by their instructors were the Announcements section, followed by email, the Assignment Feedback section of the Gradebook, and then the Discussion Board. The researcher found in the course shell that the most common communication method used by instructors was Assignment Feedback in the Gradebook (30), followed by Announcements (28) and the Discussion Board (4). There was no evidence of instructor discussion in the Discussion Board other than a teaching assistant who posted (7) comments to students participating in the study.

Qualitative Analysis

This section compares student and instructor responses for caring language, non-caring language, and caring strategies.

Caring language. Students shared 33 specific responses for caring language and strategies. Responses formed two themes: (a) specific feedback/praise and (b) understanding of/concern for students' personal situations.

Instructors shared 14 specific responses for caring language and strategies. Responses formed two themes: (a) understanding of/concern for students' personal situations and (b) specific feedback and praise.

Non-caring language. Students reported fourteen responses for specific non-caring language and strategies. Responses formed three themes: (a) prompt feedback/availability, (b) understanding of/concern for students' personal situations, and (c) the use of caring language/tone.

Instructors reported only two specific language responses. No themes emerged.

Caring strategies. The research indicated that online graduate students wanted their instructors to use the following caring strategies: (a) be prompt with feedback and be available, (b) show understanding of and concern for students' personal situations as non-traditional students with busy lives, (c) use caring language and tone in all communication media, (d) provide specific and constructive feedback on assignments and include the use of praise generously, (e) join the Discussion Board and participate in discussions with the students, and (f) use video conferencing software to help build the instructor-student relationship.

The research showed that instructors believe the three primary online instructor caring strategies to be (a) showing understanding of and concern for graduate students' personal situations as non-traditional students with busy lives, (b) being prompt with feedback and available to students, and (c) using caring language and tone in all communication media.

Summary

The document review, as limited as it was, still substantiated the students' desire for specific and constructive feedback because there was evidence of limited specific feedback from instructors in the Assignment Feedback section of the gradebook, and 41 instances where grades

on written assignments were the only feedback to the student. The document review also substantiated the students' desire for instructor participation in the discussion board; there was no evidence of instructor participation in the discussion board other than posting the discussion prompts. However, one course did show postings of a graduate teaching assistant. The document review also supported the instructors' quantitative responses in perceptions of care and the qualitative findings where instructors believed caring language to be important in that 19 of 30 responses in the Assignment Feedback section of the gradebook were perceived as positive by the researcher. Most significantly, students' perceptions of care included the Discussion Board and Video Conferencing, and these were not evident in the instructors' perceptions of care. Again, the researcher is hesitant to put much weight in the document review triangulation due to limitations of the available data at the time of the review.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter presents implications and conclusions derived from the findings. It begins with a review of the research problem and care theory. The findings constructed by studying the data through the lens of care theory are then aligned with the literature, and implications are shared. The discussion concludes with limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies.

Research Problem Reviewed

Online education is now expected to expand sharply in the next decade as evidence of its value continues to increase (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Ten years later, the growth of online course enrollment exceeded the growth of *face-to-face* courses with more than one in four college students taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Online learning is showing no signs of slowing with the number of online students nearly quadrupling between 2002 and 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010) For all types of courses offered, student enrollment in higher education increased at an annual rate of 1.2% (Allen & Seaman, 2010), far less than the 17% increase in enrollment for online courses.

The USDE (2010) found that students in online education, on average, ranked in the 59th percentile in tested performance, as opposed to students in the traditional classroom who ranked in the 50th percentile. Although this is not a huge divide, this variance remains statistically meaningful. Also, with the entrance of video conferencing software, Web 2.0 collaborative tools, social networking technology, and instant messaging, online learning is poised to make even more dramatic inroads in how students communicate with their colleagues in learning communities and how students and instructors communicate together.

However, with the explosion of online courses, there exists an absence of understanding

about what type of relationships instructors and students are developing in the online learning environment. It is generally assumed that higher education instructors who teach online courses have a harder time establishing a positive and caring instructor-student relationship than instructors in on-campus courses (Burnett, 2001; Frankola, 2001; Holley & Oliver, 2010; K. Moore, et al., 2002; Seidman, 2005; Willging & Johnson, 2009). The lack of personal, face-to-face interaction has been a criticism of online education since its inception, but there are several possible reasons that could explain why this criticism exists: (a) instructors may never meet their students face-to-face; (b) instructors may not write with voice or take the time to type timely or detailed feedback to students, thus appearing uncaring; (c) instructors may not use positive presuppositions with students and assume negative intent on the part of the student; or (d) instructors may not understand the language or strategies students feel convey caring in online instructor-student relationships.

Care Theory Revisited

This study addressed the research problem through Noddings' (1984) theory of care because care theory is such an important component of successful instructor and student relationships. However, Noddings' work from the '80s and '90s involved face-to-face instruction, and it is not known how this theory applies to the virtual setting. Noddings theorizes caring as a universal social process made up of three distinct phases: (a) engrossment or mental attentiveness (being fully present), (b) affective engagement or empathy, and (c) reciprocity.

Mental Attentiveness/Engrossment

The first of her phases indicates that the instructor must be attentive to the students' needs and be fully present for them as much as possible. This study found that students called this "being there" for them, and being readily available. In fact, students ranked immediate

feedback and instructor availability as the number one caring strategy they wanted from their instructors. The instructors also recognized this as a caring strategy, but they did not see this as the most important caring strategy; rather, they rated it second highest. In the quantitative analysis, all students across gender, age, and location wanted high levels of social presence from the faculty. Some instructors were rated higher in social presence than others. The oldest age group of students (40+) scored highest of all three age groups in their perceptions of the importance of social presence by the instructor. This could be attributable to the older age group being less technology savvy than the younger group, and therefore needing more immediate feedback and nurturing from the instructor. Another could be that the relationships and the way people treat others in caring ways are more valued with age. One student gave guidance to instructors wishing to be more caring in online instruction:

> Make sure if a student contacts you that a response is promptly made.
> Even an acknowledgement that you received the communication and
> will get back in a timely manner if you can't attend to it right away.
> Just knowing that the information was received and acknowledged
> is a big step.

Another student said, "I think that when an online instructor answers emails promptly, grades homework quickly, and handles questions when they are asked the instructor conveys a sense of caring." This study also supported one of two learner uncontrolled drop-out factors: *institutional (Liu, et al, 2007)*. Among other things, this factor included the promptness of the instructor feedback, which was the most common theme in the student survey responses. Also, students who felt socially connected at the course level as well as at the institutional level were more likely to complete the course (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2009).

The literature has repeatedly associated an instructor's verbal immediacy with increased

motivation, satisfaction, and learning (Anderson & Carta-Falso, 2002; Gorham, 1988).

Affective Engagement/Empathy/Affirmation

Noddings' care theory (1988) also asserts that when a student is affirmed by an

instructor, he or she has been assisted in visualizing a better self-identity and encouraged in the

development of this identity. Noddings also stresses that instructors should invest time in

developing trust in their relationships with students, talking with them "about problems that are

central to their lives, and guiding them toward greater sensitivity and competence across all

domains of care" (p. 5). This study found in the quantitative analysis high mean scores for

Perceptions of Care for both students and instructors, indicating how important the notion of

caring is to both students and instructors in online courses. In the qualitative analysis, the three

highest caring strategies were the same for both instructors and students, just in a different

priority order. The top three caring strategies not only consisted of the already mentioned Prompt

Feedback and Availability, but also included Understanding/Concern for Students' Personal

Situations, and Caring Language and Tone.

The students rated Understanding/Concern for Students' Personal Situations as their

second highest caring strategy, while the instructors rated this area the highest. This not only

supports Noddings' care theory, but also is supported by the Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007) study of

the characteristics of the most effective instructors, which showed the top strategy was *student

centeredness* or the instructor responsiveness to students' needs, caring, compassionate, and

willingness to listen to students and differentiate instruction. One faculty member said that caring

instructors show they care for students "not just as students, but personally," and another said

that "If students email me with concerns, they know I am there for them—whether it be personal

or academic." An instructor offered this guidance for others who want to be more caring: "Don't put yourself on a pedestal; put your students' needs ahead of your own; flexibility is important. I want to treat my students how I would want to be treated." Finally, one instructor summed up the pervasive faculty thoughts: "Caring is paying attention to the needs of your students and understanding their specific situations."

Caring Language and Tone was the other caring strategy in the top three for both instructors and students and rated third highest for both groups. The researcher first studied what language students said did not convey caring. Students shared ways that they felt instructor communication with students lacked a caring tone. In the online environment, a non-caring tone equated to "Short, terse replies to questions" or "all caps to emphasize a group reprimand for turning in late work." Others described this lack of caring tone in instructor communication as a "Lack of positive, and rarely personal" language or communication wherein "the words have all been read and the environment is somewhat 'sterile.'"

Whereas students reported non-caring language more in terms of the tone the language conveyed, instructors comments were more related to feedback on an assignment, or lack of feedback. Only two of the instructors thought of something they had said that could be construed by the students as non-caring: One instructor reported saying, "Your response does not meet the expectations of the attached scoring guide," and another instructor told students that "the majority of you completely missed the boat on this one." Another instructor felt that an "Absence of words may indicate lack of caring - sometimes it takes me longer than I want to get back with students."

Students gave many language examples of their instructors' caring language; one student remembered her instructor said, "'I understand that." The student went on to explain that this

phrase "shows they have been there, they know we are busy professionals who are doing our best to juggle life." Other comments students remembered as caring were phrases like "Please don't hesitate to ask," "Please keep me informed," and "If there is anything I can do…" However, the statement students mentioned several times in the data was "I'm here for you." These comments all related back to the category of Understanding and Concern for Students' Personal Situations and how important this is to students.

In contrast, the examples of what faculty considered caring language were more related to Specific and Constructive Comments/Praise, "I enjoy reading your work," "Good post" (referring to a discussion board post), and frequently "I liked how you ...." Another instructor said, "I compliment the students on their comments to each other specifically – e.g., 'I like how you suggested to [student] that essential questions would be stronger if they were worded so that a 'yes/no' answer is not possible.'"

However, students considered Specific and Constructive Feedback/Praise as important caring strategies, whereas it was not present in the instructors' comments. What the students want supports Noddings' position that instructor communication with students must be predicated on positive intent; instructors must believe that the student is capable and has positive intentions. The use of positive presuppositions is a powerful teaching strategy to build social presence and instructor-student relationships and is used extensively in the field of leadership coaching (Bloom, et al., 2005).

Other research also supports the notion of affective caring. For example, two of four learner controlled drop out factors were supported by this study (Liu, 2007) The first was *psychological*, which included among other things (a) the student's motivation, "I'm working full time and taking a full load of masters courses - if the professor were uncaring, there are times

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when I would have not felt supported when I was struggling with the load, and may not have been as successful in the classes"; (b) efficacy, "Yes, the presence of caring does give me confidence that this mode, which takes me out of my comfort zone, can be very beneficial to my success", and (c) satisfaction, "It does make the class more enjoyable if I feel that they [the instructors] care.". The second learner-controlled dropout factor that was supported by this study was *social*, or the student's ability to interrelate in the course, "If you define success as learning instead of just grades, it certainly helps to have a caring professor! When a professor helps you and is more interactive, it helps you get more out of the content and what you learn."

Social expressions in the online environment were studied by Rourke & Anderson (2002), and seven types of social expressions by the instructor were found to build the instructor-student online relationship: (a) addressing others by name, (b) complimenting, (c) expressing appreciation, (d) using the reply feature to post messages, (e) expressing emotions, (f) using humor, and (g) using salutations. Many of the VSU instructors used social expressions that supported the work of Rourke and Anderson.

Reciprocity

However, Noddings (1984) contends that an instructor cannot be called "*caring*" unless there is some type of recognition on the part of the person being cared for that there has been an act of caring. Higher education online instructors and their students generally develop receptive attention through a text-based modality. Yet instructors' use of other technologies, such as video conferencing, can give students more visual recognition that caring has occurred, making the probability of a connection more likely and allowing for reciprocity on the part of the student (Liu, et al., 2007). This strategy has surfaced as one of the top six caring strategies that students

wanted from their instructors: video conferencing for building the instructor-student relationship and reciprocity of caring.

The question was asked in the instructor interviews and the student surveys about how instructors communicated with the students. The communication media is the vehicle for student-instructor reciprocity of care in online instruction. The students rated their instructor communication quantitatively with the highest media use first: (a) Announcements, (b) email, (c) Assignment Feedback, and then (d) Discussion Board, followed by other media. However, Announcements and Assignment Feedback are usually one way communication from the instructor and do not encourage reciprocity. Marzano and colleagues (2001) found that general feedback to an entire class was effective, but not as effective as individualized feedback. Email may encourage reciprocity, but the researcher was not able to observe email and cannot say how it was used in this study. The Discussion Board, usually considered a good way to achieve reciprocity between the instructor and the student, was not used in a way to encourage reciprocity according to the students. One student said, "Another way [to show caring] is to discuss on the Discussion Boards with them instead of letting the students do it all" one student said. Another said that to show caring, "The instructor can respond to posts/discussions with genuine comments—more than just 'good job.' The instructor can engage in dialogue." Research was abundant that discussion board interactions can have positive effects on student satisfaction and student achievement (LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2004). Marzano and Marzano (2003) also found that when instructors demonstrated enthusiasm for the content and encouraged friendly controversy or lively debates, students were more engaged.

Another way to achieve reciprocity in online communication media is by use of video conferencing (e.g., Skype, Flash Meeting, etc.). According to both instructors and students, none

of these media were used often in the online courses. One instructor expressed reservations, saying "The only difference between Skype and the phone is that you can see the person and in my experience, Skype does not work that well all the time." One student shared that she would "like to see pictures of [the instructor] on Blackboard, for [the instructor] to podcast, Skype, Adobe Connect, Flash Meeting, something other than just email." Another student argued that he or she "would be able to read the body language and gain a sense of understanding of the personality of the instructor so that I knew where I stood with the Instructor."

Instructors' use of other technologies, such as video conferencing, can give students more visual recognition that caring has occurred, making the probability of a connection more likely and allowing for reciprocity on the part of the student (Liu, et al., 2007). The notion also supports what other research showed about the high rate of online dropouts (Liu, et al, 2007). One of those was the learner controlled drop out factor of *social*, which included the student's ability to interrelate in the course with peers and the instructor, his or her online participation, his or her teamwork, and the environment of the learning community.

The study found that this third element of Nodding's theory (1984), reciprocity, was rated by the student in the top six caring strategies for online instructors, but was not being addressed by the online instructors at the level of the students' desires or expectations.

Implications

There were many implications that surfaced from the analysis of the study data. This section discusses the primary four implications.

Focus on Prompt Feedback and Instructor Immediacy

In research questions one and two, students shared that they rated prompt feedback and instructor availability the highest when describing caring online instructors. They wanted to have

more timely feedback from the online instructor in the form of "being there" for students: answering email questions, providing quick turnaround on grading, being available by phone, etc. Although instructors also rated this second highest in their perceived student caring strategies, VSU may still want to consider having instructors share their strategies and ideas for instructor immediacy in collaborative meetings with their departments, making a concerted individual and departmental effort to respond to students within 24 hours or less. In the Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007) study, students perceived being *responsive* as one of the top nine characteristics of great instructors. This is instructor immediacy, meaning that students want timely, frequent, and also meaningful feedback from their online instructors. Students described responsive instructors as being understandable and informative and noted their quick turnaround with feedback. As one student said, "Even an acknowledgement that you received the communication and will get back in a timely manner if you can't attend to it right away. Just knowing that the information was received and acknowledged is a big step." This is not a costly endeavor and would require no training, simply more emphasis on building instructor immediacy.

Participation in Discussion Board

Students were clear in research questions one and two that they would like to see the instructor participate in discussions on the Discussion Board. Other researchers have noted that "This interaction is one component that is critical in stimulating discussion and providing the needed motivation to students who often feel isolated from the rest of the class" (McIsaac, et al., 1999, p. 122). Another study (Chang & Smith, 2008) suggests that instructor interaction with students over the Internet has a significant impact on students' satisfaction ratings of their online courses. The preponderance of this research centers around student-instructor and student-

student interaction in online discussion groups; these interactions can have positive effects on student satisfaction and student achievement (LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2004). Marzano and Marzano (2003) found that when instructors demonstrated enthusiasm for the content and encouraged friendly controversy or lively debates, students were more engaged.

Consequently, it is recommended that instructors do more than post the discussion prompts: they may want to begin by posting at least one thread in each discussion and weighing in on the discussion topic to allow students to feel their social presence and know "they are there." Again, this is not a costly endeavor and would require no training, simply more emphasis on instructor engagement, social presence, and reciprocity in the online community.

Social Presence and Video Conferencing Professional Development

In research questions one and two, students shared their desire to have more video conferencing to help build student content understanding as well as to build social presence and reciprocity in the instructor-student relationship. To form caring instructor-student relationships, higher education online instructors and their students generally develop receptive attention through a text-based modality. McIsaac (1999) suggests that using video conferencing (such as Skype) with students before major learning assignments will set the tone and initiate dialogue, affording students all the visual and verbal cues they would receive in face-to-face instruction. Positive dialogue can develop immediate social presence, lead to instructor immediacy, and improve the students' motivation for the rest of the course (Woods, 2002).

For students to feel successful in online learning, they need to have a high level of social presence to feel connected to the instructor (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Therefore, it may be wise for institutions to address social presence in student orientations, and instructors might design grading rubrics and discussion topics to help students understand the importance of social

presence and how to increase their own social presence in the virtual community (Swan, 2001).

It might also be advantageous for full-time instructors and part-time adjunct faculty to receive

training on social presence.

Coaching Competency Professional Development

In research questions one and two, students shared that they desired caring language and

tone, specific and constructive feedback, and praise from their instructors. Therefore, it is

recommended that faculty look into possibilities for acquiring professional coaching training

from an accredited coaching organization such as the International Coaching Federation

("International Coaching Federation," 2011). The components of caring language that the

students discussed are included in coaching competency training but are termed "reflective

feedback" and "positive presuppositions."

Research (Cotton & Wilson, 2006) indicates that positive student interaction with their

instructors is associated with greater course satisfaction; beyond that, this increased satisfaction

also correlates to increased satisfaction with the college and the institution. Also, one of the

factors in students' decisions to drop out of a course is the interaction students have with their

instructor (Liu, et al., 2007).

Moore (1989) found that interaction between the instructor and the student includes such

components as dialogue, feedback, and motivation. Another study noted that "This interaction is

one component that is critical in stimulating discussion and providing the needed motivation to

students who often feel isolated from the rest of the class" (McIsaac, et al., 1999, p. 122).

Instructors used different forms of communication with different students and for varying

purposes, but how the instructor communicated was just as important as what they

communicated. Research on feedback is clear: personalized feedback improves student course

satisfaction and student achievement (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Marzano, et al., 2001).

Perhaps leadership coaching training for faculty with an emphasis on powerful questioning, reflective feedback, and positive presuppositions could prove highly valuable ,not only to the instructors and students, but ultimately, to the university in retention rates. The primary benefit to students would be that they would receive richer and more intentional reflective feedback from instructors. This training might also transform the taxonomy of the feedback to a higher level with more powerful questions that could increase students' motivation and efficacy. For example, the document review showed that instructors gave feedback to students using statements, such as, "Your Case Study Reflection falls short of expectations….", "You needed to include a discussion…", and "You needed to make stronger statements…" Coaching competency training teaches that "need" denotes a deficit model: "I'm ok—you are not ok." Instructors could learn how to use positive presupposition statements like "As you are thinking about ways to improve the quality of your writing on the next assignment, what are some ways you might make stronger statements…?" This kind of statement assumes the student's positive intent and that he or she is already thinking about ways to improve his or her writing, which is confirmation or affirmation. When a student is confirmed, a better self is identified and encouraged to develop. To do this, instructors recognize something admirable, or at least acceptable, struggling to emerge in each student they encounter (Nodding, 1998).

Study Limitations

Because the focus of this single-site case study was based on one college's online program with a rather small number of faculty members involved (eight out of ten) and a relatively low number of student survey completers (46 of 222, or 21%), the generalizability of

the results of this study may be limited. However, the addition of qualitative data to this study makes the results much stronger.

The researcher was not able to interact directly with student survey respondents. There were constraints from the university's IRB on follow-up with the instructors, and there was a decision not to give instructors incentives.

There were low numbers of students in the document review because a few instructors had already deleted students from the gradebook when the review occurred, and the Ning site was also limiting in that it did not have many of the components such as gradebook, etc. In hindsight, the review should probably occur before the end of the course, rather than at the course end.

The researcher was limited by not having the capacity to view other forms of instructor communication with students: email, Skype, phone, etc. The researcher was also not able to view any prior announcements to students that instructors may have already deleted when the review occurred.

The student survey instrument had several limitations: (a) it did not specifically ask for caring strategies, (b) it was dependent upon what the students said being true, (c) it was administered online and perhaps mailing it may have returned a greater number of responses, and (d) the required two pages of IRB information in the consent may also have been too much for busy students to read, and therefore students may have chosen not to take the survey.

It is also important to note that these instructors carry four online courses in their course load, whereas many universities consider three courses a full load.

Future Study Considerations

The impact of a caring or non-caring instructor on incidences of online course dropout was not discussed in the empirical and theory-based studies of post-secondary student retention between 1978 to the present. Therefore, a study might add to existing literature if students were asked about their history of online course dropout and if caring on the part of the instructor was a factor in their decision to drop out.

It would be beneficial to compare the results of a similar study with undergraduate students to look for differences between their perceptions of online caring strategies and graduate students' perceptions of online caring.

Because recent literature shows that 67% of all college courses are currently being taught by adjunct faculty (Gappa, et al., 2007), it would be advantageous to compare the results of a similar study using all adjunct or part-time faculty as participants in order to examine differences in their beliefs of online caring compared to the beliefs of full-time faculty.

It is recommended that a controlled study be conducted in which one group of graduate online instructors receive training in coaching competency strategies (reflective feedback, positive presuppositions, and powerful questioning) and the control group not receive the professional development. This would allow the researcher to examine the differences in students' perceptions of these instructors' caring language and strategies.

In order to increase generalizability, it would be helpful to conduct a similar study with a metropolitan university and a major urban research university for comparability of findings with the rural university findings.

Finally, a study with more specific correlation to Noddings' (1984) care theory is recommended. Noddings' care theory has only addressed face-to-face learning to date, and there

is a need for a more relevant version of 'virtual care theory.' This study has provided initial

support for such an added dimension to her theory.

Conclusion

In the last decade the increase in online learning has nearly quadrupled. In addition, the

majority of online students are older, non-traditional student. The boundaries have expanded

with online learning, which can now be not only interstate, but also international. One problem

with online learning is that there exists a high dropout rate and there seems to be a lack of

understanding of the nature of the relationship between instructor and student in a virtual

environment. Noddings' (1984) care theory offers one means of addressing this problem. She

indicates that there are three elements important to building the instructor-student relationship:

mental attentiveness or engrossment, affective engagement/empathy, and reciprocity. The bulk

of the literature, although not using caring language, supports Noddings' notion of the need for

immediate feedback, caring language, and reciprocal interaction for learner success in online

courses.

This study utilized Noddings' theory at one Midwestern university, examining instructor

and student perceptions of care in online graduate education. The findings indicated that students

want: (a) a focus on prompt feedback and instructor immediacy, (b) active instructor

participation in the discussion board, (c) more use of video conferencing, and (d) more specific

and constructive feedback and praise with caring language. The findings of this study may lead

to actions by instructors that could convey more caring and increase student engagement,

satisfaction, and achievement, thereby assisting colleges and universities in their retention

efforts. Most importantly, the findings may add to the existing literature of what a caring

graduate instructor-student relationship encompasses in online education

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INSTRUCTOR CONSENT FORM

PURPOSE: You are invited to participate in a study of student and instructor perceptions of online graduate education. Specifically, the research will address instructor-student interaction.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION: Two hundred-ninety participants are sought to participate in online structured interviews or online surveys. You were selected because you are one of the VSU full-time graduate faculty members who teach at least 2 courses online or a graduate student enrolled the instructor's course.

EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES: If you are a faculty member, your participation will consist of one individual online interview via Skype chat that will take no more than 25 minutes, posting an Announcement in Blackboard about the student survey, and assigning the researcher viewer rights to a course at the conclusion of the course. With your permission, the researcher will use the transcript from Skype and may use some language from instructor-student interaction for the fall semester 2010 in one course shell. If you are a graduate student, your participation will consist of an online survey that will take no more than 15 minutes. With your permission, the researcher will review your interaction with the instructor in the Blackboard course shell for the entire fall 2010 semester and may use some of your language in the study. The grade center will not be accessed. No names will be used in the study.

DISCOMFORT/RISKS: During data collection, participants will be encouraged to be open in their responses with the researcher. The researcher will keep all responses confidential. There are no anticipated risks to the participants. All participation will be voluntary, and participants will be apprised of the research purpose and their rights as research subjects.

BENEFITS: As a participant in this study you may benefit from a deeper understanding of what research shows are effective interaction strategies in online. All participants may benefit from having an opportunity to be heard regarding their views on instructor-student interaction. So that others might benefit from what we learn in the study, we plan to disseminate the results at VSU in the spring of 2011, and through presentations at state and national conferences and publication in scholarly journals. There will be a drawing for students who participate to win an IPod Shuffle or one of five $15 ITunes gift cards as an incentive.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Any information obtained in this study in which you can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your consent.

REFUSAL/WITHDRAWAL: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Virtual State University or Wichita

State University. If you agree to participate in this study, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Dr. Linda Bakken, Educational Leadership Department, Wichita State University, Wichita 67260-0142 or linda.bakken@wichita.edu. If you have any questions pertaining to your rights as a research subject, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260-0007, and telephone 316.978.3285.

I agree to participate in this study_____   No thank you, I prefer not to_____

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Typing your name here denotes your electronic signature, and indicates you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate. Please print a copy of this consent form to keep.

_____

Date form completed (MM/DD/YYYY)

_____

Dr. Linda Bakken, Principal Researcher........Date: 08/01/2010

Gina Marx, Co-Researcher...........................Date: 08/01/2010

Thank you so much for your consideration to participate!

APPENDIX B: FACULTY STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS & QUESTIONS

Protocol

Hi, _____.This is Gina Marx and I really appreciate your taking time to interview with me for my study! This unique collaboration between VSU and WSU will enhance our understanding of students' and instructors' perceptions of online learning, and specifically, instructor-student perceptions of care in graduate online education.

You were selected because of your involvement in teaching online graduate courses for VSU. Please keep in mind that I am interested in your perceptions about instructor caring in online instructor-student interaction.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few protocols for our conversation. Although we will be on a first name basis, no names will be used when I use the results of this session. I will be extracting your comments from Skype in order to keep a transcript of our conversation. The transcript will only be used for the study of student-instructor interactions. This session will last approximately 20-25 minutes. You have previously submitted a consent form to participate in the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Demographics
Great! I have chosen your course _____for this study. Do you still have approximately _____ students in this class?

There are six sections to the interview. We'll get started with some of the demographic information. First of all....

What is your name?

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your ethnicity?

Approximately how many total online courses have you taught including courses this semester?

What is your title at VSU?

How many years have you worked at VSU?

How many hours per week do you spend in synchronous communication with this class (approximately)?

How many hours per week do you spend in asynchronous communication with this class (approximately)?

Communication Media Use
Please choose your answer from the following Likert-type scale that BEST fits your opinion:
Frequently, Sometimes, Seldom or Never
___I communicate with online students using Announcements.
___I communicate with online students using Assignments Tab Feedback.
___I communicate with online students using the Discussion Board.
___I communicate with online students using Email.
___I communicate with online students using Skype.
___I communicate with online students using the phone.
___I communicate with online students using Flash Meeting.
___I communicate with online students using Other media.

What other media do you use to communicate with your students online?

Social Presence
Your responses to the following questions should reflect your experience OVERALL in online instruction. Please choose your answer from the following Likert-type scale that BEST fits your opinion: Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree or Disagree.
(You are free to make additional comments after each multiple choice question)
___Online education is an excellent medium for social interaction.
___I feel comfortable conversing through this medium.
___The introductions in my courses enable me to form a sense of relationship with the students.
___As the instructor, I create a feeling of an online community in my courses.
___As the instructor, I facilitate discussions in the course.
___I feel comfortable interacting with the students.
___I feel I acknowledge the students' point of view.
___Students are able to form a distinct individual impression of me as their instructor.

Perceptions of Care
Please choose your answer from the following Likert-type scale that BEST fits your opinion:
Agree, Somewhat, Agree, Somewhat, Disagree or Disagree.
___Overall, I feel the students care about me as an instructor.
___Overall, I feel the students care about me as a person.
___For caring to have occurred, it must be reciprocal. My students receive the caring I show to them, and they are reciprocal by expressing they care to me.
___When my students and I converse, I am fully present with them.

QUALITATIVE OPEN-ENDED
The following 5 questions ask your perceptions. Please answer with as much accuracy and detail as possible.

1. Is it possible for an instructor to convey a sense of caring in an online classroom setting? If so, please define or describe caring in an online instructor-student relationship. If it is not possible for an online instructor to convey caring, why not? Probes: Why do you feel that way? Tell me more...

2. Does presence or absence of caring on the part of the online instructor influence the students' success in the class? If no, why not? If yes, in what way?

3. What specific words or language have you used with students this semester that you perceive have affected them positively and conveyed "caring" to them? (Specific quotes that stick out for you and how you think your language made them feel).

4. What specific words or language have you used this semester that you perceive have affected students negatively or did not convey "caring" to them? (Specific quotes that stick out for you and how your language made them feel).

5. What guidance would you offer to instructors who wish to convey a sense of caring to online students?

Student Learning
Please choose your answer from the following Likert-type scale that BEST fits your opinion: Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree or Disagree.
___My level of teaching in this course has been of the highest quality.
___Overall, this course has met my students' learning expectations.
___As the instructor for this course, I have met my students' expectations.

We are officially done unless there is anything else you would like to share with me before we end?

Thank you so much for participating! The results of the study will be shared with the department in the Spring of 2011. I'll be emailing soon with the script to put in an Announcement in one of your classes in order to open the student survey November 1st-14th. Thank you so much!

APPENDIX C: STUDENT CONSENT AND SURVEY

Dear Students,

My name is Gina Marx and I will be conducting my doctoral dissertation study in the fall of 2010 at VSU and you are invited to participate in this study.

PURPOSE: The study is entitled, "Student and Instructor Perceptions of Care in Online Graduate Education: A Mixed-Methods Case Study". We hope to learn what language and strategies instructors use to convey caring in online instruction. We are also interested in learning how students describe caring in a virtual world.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION: Ten AEP online courses have been chosen for this study. You are invited because you are a student enrolled in a participating instructor's course.

EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES: Your participation will consist of an online survey that will take no more than 15 minutes. With your permission, the researcher will review your interaction with the instructor in the Blackboard Discussion Board and Assignment Feedback area, as well as class Announcements for the entire 2010 fall semester and may use some of your language in the study. No names will be used in the study.

DISCOMFORT/RISKS: During data collection, participants will be encouraged to be open in their responses with the researcher. The researcher will keep all responses confidential. There are no anticipated risks to the participant, however, technology has some risks because electronic transmission of information is not always secure. You will be notified promptly if illegal access of data are gained. All participation will be voluntary, and participants will be apprised of the research purpose and their rights as research subjects.

BENEFITS: As a participant in this study you may benefit from a deeper understanding of what research shows are components of caring. All participants may benefit from having an opportunity to be heard regarding their views on instructor caring. So that others might benefit from what we learn in the study, we plan to disseminate the results at VSU in the spring of 2011, and through presentations at state and national conferences and publications in scholarly journals. You may email the researcher at gina.marx@gmail.com if you would like to attend the presentation or if you would like the preliminary findings emailed to you. There will be a drawing for students who participate to win an IPod Shuffle or one of five $15 ITunes gift cards as an incentive.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Any information obtained in this study in which you can be identified will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your consent. The instructor's names and Virtual State University's name will also not be identified.

REFUSAL/WITHDRAWAL: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Virtual State University or Wichita State University. If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this research, you man contact Dr. Linda Bakken, Educational Leadership Department, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260, or email linda.bakken@wichita.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, KS 67260 or call 316.978.3285.

 IMPORTANT NOTE: If you are enrolled in more than one participating instructor's courses, your name will be entered into the drawing for each survey you complete!
You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Clicking here to participate denotes you have read the information provided above and have voluntarily decided to participate. Please print a copy of this consent form to keep.

I agree to participate in this survey and also consent for the researcher to view dialogue between myself and the instructor in the Blackboard course document review.
_____Yes, count me in! _____No, thank you, I prefer not to at this time.

Dr. Linda Bakken.......Date: 11/01/2010
Gina Marx.................Date: 11/01/2010
Thank you so much for your consideration to participate!

Demographics

My name & best phone number to reach me
(Answer only if you want to be entered into the drawing to win one of five $15 ITunes gift cards or an iPod Shuffle upon completing the survey).

I reside in the following geographic location: ___Kansas ___Other U.S. State ___Non-U.S.

My age is: ____

My gender is: ___Male ___Female

My online course experience
 ___This is my first course ___I've taken more than one course online

Experiences with this instructor (mark all that apply)
___I have met this instructor in person
___I have taken a prior online course with this instructor
___I have taken a face-to-face course with this instructor
___I have met this instructor via video conferencing
___None of these

7. Name of graduate degree I am seeking (skip question if not seeking a degree)
_____

Social Presence

Your responses to the following two questions should reflect your online experience OVERALL in online learning. Please click the answer which BEST reflects your opinion.
Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree (Optional Comment)
___Online education is an excellent medium for social interaction.
___I feel comfortable conversing through this medium.
___The introductions in this course enabled me to form a sense of relationship with the instructor.
___The instructor creates a feeling of an online community.
___The instructor facilitates discussions in the course.
___I feel comfortable interacting with the instructor.
___I feel my point of view is acknowledged by the instructor.
___I am able to form a distinct individual impression of the instructor.

QUALITATIVE OPEN-ENDED

The following questions ask your perceptions. Please answer with as much accuracy and detail as possible.

1. Is it possible for an instructor to convey a sense of caring in an online classroom setting? If so, please define this caring in an online instructor-student relationship. If it is

not possible for an online instructor to convey caring, why not?

2. Does presence or absence of caring on the part of the online instructor influence your success in the class? If no, why not? If yes, in what way?
3. What specific words or language did this instructor use that affected you positively and conveyed "caring" to you? (Specific quotes that stick out for you and how the instructor's language made you feel).

4. What specific words or language did this instructor use that affected you negatively or did not convey "caring" to you? (Specific quotes that stick out for you and how the instructor's language made you feel).

5. What guidance would you offer to instructors who wish to convey a sense of caring to online students?

Perceptions of Care
The following questions reflect your experiences in THIS particular online course.
Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree (Optional comment)
___I feel the instructor cares about me as a student.
___I feel the instructor cares about me as a person.
___For caring to have occurred, it must be reciprocal. I receive the caring my instructor shows to me, and I am reciprocal by expressing I care to the instructor.
___When my instructor and I converse, I feel the instructor is fully present with me.

Communication Media Use
This instructor communicates with me through the following media:
Frequently, Sometimes, Seldom, Never
___Announcements
___Assignments Tab Feedback
___Discussion Board
___Email
___Skype
___Phone
___Flash Meeting
___Other

Student Learning
___My level of learning in this course is of the highest quality.
___Overall, this course has met my learning expectations.
___Overall, the instructor for this course has met my expectations.

Thank you so much for participating!

APPENDIX D: SCRIPT FOR STUDENT SURVEY

Opportunity to Take Online Survey November 1st-14th

Each of you is cordially invited to participate in 10 to 15 minute online survey that is part

of a dissertation research study conducted by Gina Marx, a Wichita State University doctoral

student and VSU Adjunct Instructor. The study pertains to instructor-student perceptions of

caring in online graduate instruction, and findings will be shared with students, faculty and

administrators of VSU in the spring of 2011. The researcher is providing participants an

incentive drawing for ITunes gift cards and an IPod Shuffle if you choose to participate, and only

222 students are being invited to take this study. For more detailed information, the consent

form & survey, go to: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ZM8L6GD

The survey is only open November 1st-November 14th!