SOCIAL LEARNING STRATEGIES:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SELF-REGULATED LEARNING

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined low achieving online learners' uses of social self-regulated learning strategies. Research has shown that low achieving online learners lack strategies for self-regulated learning, which directly relates to their lack of achievement. Social self-regulated learning strategies examined in this study included help seeking, social comparison and social interactions. As learners constructed meaning and struggled with content, interactions between learners and peers, the instructor/instructor's assistant, technical support, and materials facilitated the process. Low achieving online learners resisted utilizing social self-regulated learning strategies. However, according to the research, little data was collected from low achieving online learners directly. This study asked low achieving online learners to describe their experiences, through semi-structured interviews. Barriers to social self-regulated learning strategies included poor attitudes, internet addiction, and exterior blame, according to the research. Self-regulated learning, in general, is linked to higher achievement. This study found that low achieving online learners lacked the use of social self-regulated learning strategies. Additionally, participants lacked help seeking behaviors, experienced social isolation, and held negative views of their classmates and instructor. The findings in this study may assist instructional designers to increase opportunities for social self-regulated learning in online courses, which may, in turn, increase achievement.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Mara Brasser: my best friend, domestic partner, and future wife. Our journey has been arduous but has shaped our present. I look forward to the many dreams we share.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank all of the teachers and professors that I encountered over my lifetime. These individuals provided inspiration and encouragement. Most importantly, they identified different perspectives on life and ways of living. They recognized my ability to do better and be better. They provided advice and guidance and helped me in ways that my family simply could not.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

This study examined the experiences of low achieving online undergraduate learners in the western United States as they attempted to utilize social strategies for self-regulated learning (help seeking, comparing one's work to others, and interacting socially) (Wan, Compeau, & Haggerty, 2012). Low achieving online learners often lacked self-regulated learning strategies, resulting in decreased knowledge acquisition (Kostons, van Gog, & Pas, 2012). Wan et al. (2012) categorized self-regulated learning strategies into two categories: personal and social. Personal strategies were activities which did not involve others (Wan et al., 2012). Social strategies included interactions with others, and fit into three categories: "seeking social assistance (from peers, instructors, managers, and IT professionals), social comparison, and social interaction" (Abraham, as cited in Wan et al., 2012, p. 312, italics removed).

Low achieving online learners lacked strategies for self-regulated learning, which directly related to their lack of achievement (Bail, Zhang, & Tachiyama, 2008; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2005; Kauffman, Zhao, & Yang, 2011; Radovan, 2011; Tsai & Shen, 2009; Wang & Lin, 2007). Wan et al. (2012) found that social learning strategies were important; learners who interacted with their peers and the instructor were able to receive feedback to guide their learning, "…ultimately resulting in better learning outcomes" (Wan et al., 2012, p. 333). Studying interventions for self-regulated learning led to conclusions by researchers (Bail, Zhang, & Tachiyama, 2008; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2005; Zimmerman, 2002) that these strategies could be learned. Further, many online learners often struggled, as low achieving online learners frequently lacked focus,

participation, and discipline. In other words, low achieving online learners were often passive in their learning, making their struggle greater (Tsai & Shen, 2009). The following section explores research about low achieving online learners.

Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework

Background

While studies (Bednall & Kehoe, 2011; Kauffman et al., 2011; Kostons et al., 2012; Radovan, 2011; Wan et al., 2012) have been completed to identify faculty perspectives on low achieving online learners' difficulties with self-regulation, low achieving online learners still struggled and failed to achieve academic success. These researchers may have expected learners to have difficulty articulating their experiences and needs, or researchers expected faculty to have greater insights into learners' experiences. However, according to So and Brush (2008), learner perceptions may vary greatly from instructor perceptions. Understanding learner experiences could lead to more effective interventions with regards to strategies for self-regulated learning, which could, in turn, increase learning (Dickhäuser, Buch, & Dickhäuser, 2011; Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009; Kostons et al., 2012; So & Brush, 2008; Wan et al., 2012). Therefore, the next logical place to seek information to inform instructional design decisions was the learners themselves. This study added knowledge to past research about social strategies for self regulated learning, which focused primarily on faculty perspectives (Bednall & Kehoe, 2011; Kauffman et al., 2011; Kostons et al., 2012; Radovan, 2011; Wan et al., 2012).

Context

Low achieving online learners differed from high achieving learners; they had less focus, discipline, and participation than their successful counterparts (Wang & Lin, 2007). Researchers (Dickhäuser et al., 2011; Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009; Langley & Bart, 2008; So & Brush, 2008) found that low achieving online learners' perceptions affect their performance. Low achieving online learners were less confident than their peers, shifted blame to outside forces, and lacked dedication to their studies (Langley & Bart, 2008). Kitsantas and Zimmerman (2009) also found that low achieving online learners shifted responsibility away from them, and instead believed that luck was responsible for their success or failure. Further, Dickhäuser et al. (2001) found that these learners were susceptible to negative thoughts and plagued by the desire to avoid failure, leaving them frozen and unable to act. Instead of help seeking, creating dialogue with the instructor or classmates, or simply submitting work with errors, these learners failed to participate (Dickhäuser et al., 2001).

To compound the problem, low achieving online learners used less social self-regulated learning strategies (Al-Alwan, 2008; Kostons et al., 2012; Radovan, 2011; VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999). These learners were less likely to interact with their instructor, classmates, and technical support when they needed assistance. However, studies (Bail et al., 2008; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2005; Kauffman et al., 2011) have shown that self-regulated learning strategies can be learned. It follows, then, that there may be a method to increase the use of social self-regulated learning strategies in low achieving online learners.

Self-regulated learning strategies can be split into two categories: personal and social (Wan et al., 2012). Personal self-regulated learning strategies included goal setting, time management, self-reflection, choice of study setting, goal setting, and making changes in these areas as needed (Zimmerman, 2002). This study focused on social self-regulated learning strategies (Wan et al., 2012). Social strategies involved others, such as help seeking, comparing one's learning to others, and interacting with others (Wan et al., 2012). In order to obtain information about low achieving online learners, the study followed the recommendation of Wan et al. (2012), who argued that qualitative research studies be utilized to "…provide richer and more immediate descriptions of learners' [self-regulated learning] SRL learning processes …" (p. 333).

Indeed, social self-regulated learning strategies are of great benefit to learning. Wan et al., (2012) argued that learning frequently happens in various sizes of groups, particularly in online learning. Social self-regulated learning strategies have been identified as positively influencing achievement for online learners (Wan et al., 2012). Specifically, online learners who excel at social self-regulated learning strategies can use those strategies to combat problems with online learning, such as social isolation (Wan et al., 2012). Wan et al. also argued that online learners who utilized social self-regulated learning strategies learned more successfully than learners who utilized personal self-regulated learning strategies. Personal self-regulated learning strategies did not involve social isolation, but instead included time management, self reflection, organization, setting goals, researching, and traditional study skills (Zimmerman & Pons, 1986; Zimmerman, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework utilized for this study was Moore's (2007) theory of transactional distance. Moore theorized that in distance education, a transaction might occur between the learner and instructor, the learner and peers, the learner and instructional materials, and the learner and the online platform. In fact, by its very nature, Moore (2013) argued, "the transaction in distance education is the interplay of teachers and learners in environments that have the special characteristic of their being spatially separate from one another" (p. 68). In each transaction, the learners' perceptions shaped their experiences (So & Brush, 2008). A learner with a high transactional distance likely felt very disconnected from the course, and experienced a greater rate of failure (Moore, 2007).

In particular, Moore's (2007) first and third variables applied to this study. The first variable, dialogue, related to this study, which asked learners to describe their social experiences as they learned online. Learners may dialogue with their peers, instructor, or even with instructional materials as they made meaning from the content (Moore, 2007). Moore described dialogue as "constructive" because it was built during exchanges between individuals participating in a course, including the instructor (p. 92). In addition, dialogue, unlike interaction, was described by Moore (2013) as "helping, constructive, and positive exchanges" (p. 68).

Dialogue existed separately from a course's design, and was influenced by those participating in a course, such as instructors and learners. Dialogue occurred during the course, unrelated to the structure, or design of the course (Moore, 2007). However, the media utilized for the course did have an effect on dialogue (Moore, 2013). For example,

a course delivered via the Internet had a higher level of dialogue than a correspondence course through the postal service. Low achieving online learners were dependent on a great deal of dialogue, whereas high achieving online learners were able to adapt to multiple levels of dialogue (Moore, 2007). However, though low achieving online learners needed a greater amount of dialogue, these learners had to participate in dialogue in order for it to be achieved (Moore, 2013). Therefore, dialogue depended not only on the skills of the instructor, but also on the ability of learners to participate (Moore, 2013).

The third variable related to the autonomy of the learner. Learner autonomy related to the varying abilities for learners to "develop a personal learning plan, to find resources for study in their work or community environments, and to evaluate for themselves when progress was satisfactory." (Moore, 2013, p. 72). Moore (2007) cautioned that his research did not suggest that a fully autonomous learner existed, nor that learners who were very autonomous did not need instructors. Low achieving online learners, who lacked autonomy, needed more than simply instruction from their teachers—they needed "more emotional support" (p. 95). Therefore, in a course with greater transactional distance, which has little dialogue and/or structure, learners must exercise autonomy (Moore, 2007). Low achieving online learners who found themselves in a course that demanded greater autonomy were at risk for failure, as they were required to self-regulate decisions related to learning (Moore, 2007). In a course with high transactional distance, learners received less direct instruction from their teacher, but interactions with classmates could fill that gap. Therefore, learner autonomy could be increased by increasing social interactions between learners and others related to the course (Moore, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

The problem being researched was that low achieving online learners had reduced achievement based on their lack of social strategies for self-regulated learning (Kostons et al., 2012; Wan et al., 2012). Researchers (Al-Alwan, 2008; Kostons et al., 2012; VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston 1999; Wan et al., 2012) concluded that self-regulated learning strategies were directly related to achievement. The research was not clear about why low achieving online learners lacked social strategies for self-regulated learning. Current research did not identify restrictions or boundaries of the problem based upon specific demographics nor course subject matter, thus indirectly suggesting that it might have applied to all low achieving learners irrespective of the courses being taken or personal demographics. Low achieving online learners could continue to struggle without improvement, should this problem be ignored. Specifically, this study examined social strategies for self-regulated learning among low achieving online undergraduate learners. There have been many studies about high achieving learners, with few studies about low achieving learners.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of low achieving online undergraduate learners in the western United States with social strategies for self-regulated learning, in order to understand how their achievement could be increased. The study attempted to describe the experiences of low achieving online learners with social self-regulated learning strategies.

Research Questions

The primary research question was: What are the experiences of low achieving online learners with regard to social strategies for self-regulated learning (including help seeking, comparisons between the learners' work and peers, and interacting socially)? This question was utilized to seek an understanding of low achieving online learners and their experiences with social strategies for self-regulated learning directly from the participants.

Primary Question: What were the experiences of low achieving online learners with regard to social strategies for self-regulated learning (Including help seeking, comparisons between the learners' work and peers, and interacting socially)?

Subquestions:

1. How do low achieving learners describe the social isolation they may experience, if they do experience such isolation in the online setting?
2. What do low achieving online learners experience when going to others for assistance (peers, instructors, instructional assistants, technical support)?
3. When low achieving online learners examine other learners' work (through collaborative activities, discussion boards, or other online methods such as wikis or blogs), what criteria do they utilize, if any, as they measure their work against the work of their peers?
4. What do low achieving online learners experience when interacting with their peers or the instructor in an asynchronous environment?
5. What problems do low achieving online learners describe while utilizing social self-regulated learning strategies?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance

Rationale

Previous research (Al-Alwan, 2008; Kostons et al., 2012; VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999; Zimmerman, 2002) demonstrated that learners who utilized learning strategies performed better than those who did not. Wan et al. (2012) argued that social learning strategies were as important to learning as personal strategies. According to Wan et al., when learners perceived a connection with peers, they felt more satisfied with online learning, increasing the possibility of seeking social strategies for self-regulated learning in the future. However, low achieving online learners were not using these strategies and their academic success suffered for it. While researchers studied faculty perceptions of learner experiences, there seemed to be a dearth of information collected directly from the learners themselves (Yuen, Fox, Sun, & Deng, 2009). So and Brush (2008) found that learner experiences may have varied greatly from instructor experiences, and learner viewpoints had been overlooked. Therefore, a study that collects data from low achieving learners directly is warranted.

Relevance

The field of instructional design is focused on learning (Richey & Klein, 2007). Instructional designers create instruction with the intention to increase learning (Richey & Klein, 2007). The area of instructional design that best fit this proposed research was "learners and how they learn" (Richey & Klein, 2007, p. 3). This study provided information needed to better inform instructional design decisions regarding low achieving online learners' experiences with social strategies for self-regulated learning. Better understanding of these learners and their experiences may lead to instructional

design constructs that cause more effective use of social strategies for self-regulated learning.

Low achieving online learners and their lack of social self-regulated learning strategies directly related to their lack of achievement (Bail et al., 2008; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2005; Kauffman et al., 2011; Radovan, 2011; Tsai & Shen, 2009; Wang & Lin, 2007). Wan et al. (2012) found that social self-regulated learning strategies were important, and that these strategies, specifically, increased achievement. Social-self regulated learning strategies could be integrated into learning activities by instructional designers, which could result in these strategies being utilized by low achieving online learners independently in their future courses.

Significance

According to So and Brush (2008), past research focused on high achieving learners, or on instructor perceptions. Yuen et al. (2009) also argued that there was a gap in the knowledge gleaned from low achieving learners. This study worked to add knowledge about low achieving online learners and their lack of social self-regulated learning strategies. Low achieving online learners were interviewed directly.

Low achieving online learners lacked social strategies for self-regulated learning, which resulted in reduced achievement (Kostons et al., 2012; Wan et al., 2012). Self-regulated learning strategies were directly related to achievement (Al-Alwan, 2008; Kostons et al., 2012; VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999; Wan et al., 2012). However, it was not clear why low achieving online learners lacked social strategies for self-regulated learning. Additionally, it was not clear whether the problem applied to all low achieving learners irrespective of the courses being taken or personal demographics.

Nature of the Study

The qualitative methodology and research model proposed was a basic qualitative study, as defined by Merriam (2009). According to Merriam, a basic qualitative study examined how participants perceived experiences, what frameworks they used to make sense of the world, and what understandings they drew from their experiences. A basic qualitative study differed from other qualitative research in its quest to discover and translate the understandings of participants (Merriam, 2009). A basic qualitative design was applicable for this research study because it sought to describe low achieving online learners' experiences with social strategies for self-regulated learning.

Zimmerman and Pons (1986) suggested qualitative measures, including "…an interview procedure could provide reliable evidence concerning learners' self-regulation reports" (p. 625). Additionally, Núñez et al. (2011) asserted that "[m]ost of the aspects that take place during the self-regulation process are not observable so the use of on-line and qualitative measures would be indicated in future studies" (p. 279). Wan et al. (2012) described qualitative research as providing more depth to our understanding of learners' methods while learning. Wan et al. (2012) recommended qualitative research studies be utilized to "…provide richer and more immediate descriptions of learners' SRL learning processes …" (p. 333). Because low achieving online learners, who lacked social self-regulated learning strategies, were not likely to respond to a lengthy online survey or take time to ponder questions, an interview was ideal. Low achieving online learners might have found speaking about their experiences preferable to writing about them.

Definition of Terms

Hybrid Course

A hybrid course was one in which learners met traditionally, in a face to face setting, as well as online (Gagne, Wager, Golas, & Keller, 2004). A hybrid course could have synchronous or asynchronous online meetings.

Low Achieving Learners

For the purposes of this study, low achieving learners were defined as earning one standard deviation below the mean GPA of the college student body. This definition was also utilized by Van-Zile and Livingston (1999).

Onground

Onground courses were those courses that met in person. These courses were also called traditional courses (Gagne, Wager, Golas, & Keller, 2004).

Online Learner

For the purposes of this study, online learners were learners who were currently attending online classes at the chosen institution, but could have also enrolled in traditional onground courses at the same college.

Online Learning

Online learning was also been called distance learning or distance education, and referred to learners at dissimilar locations taking a course asynchronously (Gagne, Wager, Golas, & Keller, 2004).

Social Learning Strategies

Social strategies, as suggested by Wan et al. (2012), involved social interactions with other individuals tied to a course. These strategies included help seeking,

comparing one's learning (and coursework) to others, and interaction with others. Help seeking and general interactions might have included interacting with the instructor, teaching assistants, peers, and/or technical support.

Triangulation

Triangulation "adds thoroughness, richness, and depth of understanding to the study" (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010, p. 35). In this study, triangulation referred to the fact that participants came from a variety of courses, ethnicities, and ages, and allowed the researcher to pull from many perspectives which provided patterns within the data.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

As an online instructor, the researcher expected that low achieving online learners would be difficult to contact. It was also expected that low achieving online learners were reticent to approach peers. The researcher surmised that low achieving online learners may have shared attitudes or experiences that might explain their lack of social learning strategy use. Finally, it was also assumed that low achieving learners would be more forthcoming with their thoughts in an interview format; a questionnaire may not be fully completed by learners who frequently did not complete their online coursework.

A limitation of this study was the sample size, which was dependent on the 12 learners willing to speak about their experiences, the time allowed for this research project, and the research budget. The research plan called for 10 – 25 learners, and 12 learners were interviewed. Another limitation of this study was the regional disposition of these learners, who were from a single college in the western United States. The

experiences of these learners may have differed from those at other colleges or in other parts of the world.

Participants in this study were referred to as online learners. However, these learners may also be enrolled in traditional, in-person courses as well. The number of fully online learners at the institution studied was infinitesimal. Almost all learners took a mixture of online and onground courses. A requirement by the Institutional Review Board at the participating institution was that interviews were completed remotely. This requirement protected the participating institution from any potential claims of physical contact between the researcher and participants. As the researcher was employed by the participating institution, this was a potential liability. Completing interviews remotely, as well as recording interviews, also gave the researcher protection against any accusations of impropriety. Additionally, because the learners were located in states that differed from the researcher, remote interviews were convenient and allowed the researcher to interview a much wider geographic range of students.

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

The chapters were organized in the following manner: Chapter 2 is a literature review examining social self-regulated learning strategies, as well as the theoretical framework for the study. Chapter 3 will cover the qualitative methodology and design of the study, as well as answers to the research questions. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the data. Chapter 5 examines the findings of the study, including conclusions drawn from the collected data, the significance to the instructional design community, the relation between the study's findings to scholarly literature, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to the Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of low achieving online undergraduate learners in the United States with social strategies for self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning strategies have been studied for decades. However, research mostly focused on average to high achieving learners. High achieving learners were better at self-regulated learning strategies and used these strategies more than lower achieving learners (Kauffman et al., 2011; Langley & Bart, 2008; Zimmerman, 2002). What remained unknown was why low achieving learners used less self-regulated learning strategies.

Moore's (2007) theory of transactional distance is utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory focused on the transactions that occurred between the learner and others related to the course (such as the instructor, peers, and technical support) as well as the learner and content materials. Moore argued that learners who interacted with others experienced a low level of transactional distance, and were consequently higher achievers. Social self-regulated learning strategies related to the same transactions found within the theory of transactional distance. Help seeking, social comparison, and interacting socially related to student-student, student-instructor, and student-content transactions. The following section details the variables that comprise Moore's theory of transactional distance.

Theoretical Framework

Moore's (2007) theory of transactional distance was relevant as a conceptual framework for this research about social self-regulated learning strategies. Learners who utilized social self-regulated learning strategies may have interacted with, sought help from, or compared their work to the work of their peers, the instructor, and other individuals. During these interactions, a transaction took place between the learner and another entity that effected the learner's perception of distance. In fact, by its very nature, Moore (2013) argued, "the transaction in distance education is the interplay of teachers and learners in environments that have the special characteristic of their being spatially separate from one another" (p. 68). According to So and Brush (2008), when learners interacted socially, their perceptions of transactional distance decreased.

Moore (2007), a prominent researcher in the field of interaction, developed the theory of transactional distance. This theory applied to distance education, which Moore cautioned must not be referred to as distance learning, as the word education encompassed both teaching and learning. Transactional distance referred to three variables: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy (Moore, 2007). Dialogue could occur between an instructor and a learner, or even between a learner and content, as learners talked to themselves while learning (Moore, 2007). Dialogue, Moore (2013) argued, had the characteristics of being "helping, constructive, and positive" (p. 68).

Dialogue related to social self-regulated learning strategies because the very nature of dialogue was social. Moore (2007) described dialogue as "constructive" because it was built during exchanges between individuals participating in a course, including the instructor (p. 92). Low achieving online learners were dependent on a great

deal of dialogue, unlike their high achieving counterparts, who were able to adapt to multiple levels of dialogue (Moore, 2007). The lack of dialogue in a course, which resulted in a high level of transactional distance, was difficult for low achieving online learners to overcome, as they could not compensate by interacting with classmates or the materials (Moore, 2007). However, though low achieving online learners needed a greater amount of dialogue, these learners had to participate in dialogue in order for it to be achieved (Moore, 2013). Therefore, dialogue depended not only on the skills of the instructor, but also on the ability of learners to participate (Moore, 2013).

Technology improved the fluidity of dialogue within distance education, and dialogue continued to improve as video conferencing and other virtual communication methods became increasingly available (Moore, 2007). Therefore, the media utilized for the course did have an effect on dialogue (Moore, 2013). For example, a course delivered via the Internet had a higher level of dialogue than a correspondence course through the postal service. Low achieving online learners might perform better in an Internet based class with greater dialogue than a correspondence course with little dialogue.

The second variable, structure, referred to the level of rigidity of the instructional materials and pacing (Moore, 2007). A course that was rigidly planned and did not allow for deviation in case of learner confusion was labeled by Moore as high in transactional distance. This second variable was not relevant to this research, as it was controlled not by the learner, but the designer of the course.

The third variable pertained to learner behavior or "learner autonomy" (Moore, 2007, p. 31). Learner autonomy related to the varying abilities for learners to "develop a

personal learning plan, to find resources for study in their work or community environments, and to evaluate for themselves when progress was satisfactory." (Moore, 2013, p. 72). Learners had varying levels of motivation, which were affected by their confidence, support by others, and self-regulated learning strategies. According to Moore (2007) confident learners were more successful academically. They experienced less paralysis due to fear or self-doubt, and wasted less time worrying. For example, learners who received support from family, friends, or peers in the workplace might have been more successful because they did not have to waste time defending their decisions or avoiding barriers erected by those who wished for them to fail. This third variable related to social self-regulated learning strategies because learners who utilized such strategies may have alleviated fears by reaching out to peers, only to discover that their peers were experiencing similar challenges. Additionally, such peer interactions might have revealed better understandings of the course content, or offered solutions to challenges, both personally and academically.

Low achieving online learners had less autonomy, as they lacked the ability to self-regulate while learning (Al-Alwan, 2008; Moore, 2007). According to Moore (2007), learners who lacked autonomy needed more than simply instruction from their teachers—they needed "more emotional support" (p. 95). Therefore, in a course with greater transactional distance, which had little dialogue and/or structure, learners had to exercise autonomy in order to succeed (Moore, 2007). Low achieving online learners who found themselves in a course that demanded greater autonomy were at risk for failure, as they were required to self-regulate decisions related to learning (Moore, 2007). In a course with high transactional distance, learners received less direct instruction from

their teacher, but interactions with classmates could fill that gap. Therefore, learner autonomy could be increased by increasing social interactions between learners and others related to the course (Moore, 2007).

Review of the Research Literature and Methodological Literature

Review of Research Regarding Self-Regulated Learning

The topic of self-regulated learning strategies was vast. Zimmerman (2002) listed these categories of skills that related to self-regulated learning:

> (a) setting specific proximal goals for oneself, (b) adopting powerful strategies for attaining the goals, (c) monitoring one's performance selectively for signs of progress, (d) restructuring one's physical and social context to make it compatible with one's goals, (e) managing one's time use efficiently, (f) self-evaluating one's methods, (g) attributing causation to results, and (h) adapting future methods. (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 66)

To create a more manageable topic for this study, Wan et al.'s (2012) social learning strategy concept was utilized.

Low achieving learners use fewer self-regulated learning strategies. VanZile-Tamsen and Livingston (1999) found that low achieving learners struggled with determining main ideas, were unorganized, did not utilize peers or teachers for assistance, poorly managed their time, and had a difficult time remembering what was studied. According to VanZile-Tamsen and Livingston (1999), low achieving learners would have more success if they simply utilized some self-regulating learning strategies, and that strategies should be suggested by faculty. Strategies such as logging study hours each

week, seeking help from the instructor or Internet, and reflecting on the content could assist learners to increase achievement.

Al-Alwan (2008) concluded that low achieving learners had difficulty distinguishing between activities that would adequately prepare them for achievement and those that did not. Al-Alwan (2008) also found that low achieving learners managed their time poorly and were less confident than high achieving learners.

Kostons et al. (2012) started learners at a custom difficulty level appropriate for their experience with the content. Kostons et al. theorized that this individualized level of difficulty, coupled with the ability to proceed at the learner's speed, could increase both motivation and achievement of objectives. However, learners' ability to self-regulate their learning activities and accurately assess whether they were ready to move on to the next difficulty level was essential to learners' academic success (Kostons et al., 2012). Therefore, even when a course was self-paced, low achieving learners were not able to discern whether they understood the content enough to proceed.

Self-regulated learning strategies could be learned. Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2005) studied the use of web based tools to assist low achieving online learners with self-regulated learning. These researchers suggested that online instructors be interviewed about their use of web based tools to scaffold learners' strategies for self-regulated learning. In the study by Dabbagh and Kitsantas, it was discovered that learners described teamwork and communication tools as helpful in the support of self-regulated learning, particularly for the management of time and assistance with learning tasks. However, this study did not determine whether "administrative and assessment tools were useful in supporting the completion of course assignments" (Dabbagh &

Kitsantas, 2005, p. 535). This study suggested that low achieving online learners were more prone to complete work as a result of their relationships with people rather than because of due dates or other administrative factors.

Bail et al. (2008) examined low achieving learners enrolled in a course specifically designed to teach self-regulated learning strategies. Learners studied such metacognitive skills as monitoring thought processes while studying, creating learning goals, self-monitoring, and retooling their methods as needed. The course was a blended learning course, with both online and onground interactions. In order to allow learners to transfer their learning to other courses, they were required to practice self-regulated learning strategies in other courses and report their findings during small group interactions. This long-term study found that self-regulated learning strategy training had a significant influence on academic achievement in low achieving learners (Bail et al, 2008).

Kauffman et al. (2011) divided learning strategies into two categories: cognitive and metacognitive. Kauffman et al. (2011) paired both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, in the form of note taking and prompts for self-monitoring, to find that learners who utilized both learning strategies performed better than those who did not. The study by Kauffman et al. (2011) provided learners with strategies, including computerized assistance that built note taking matrices, but the researchers questioned whether or not learners could be taught how to utilize these strategies independently.

Núñez et al. (2011) developed an online training program in Spain to increase low achieving online learners' self-regulated strategies. The training program was in the form of a narrative presented to the learners as a series of letters written by a fictional character

who "…reflects about some of his experiences in the university, emphasizing the role of strategies and processes of self-regulation while learning" (Núñez et al., 2011, p. 276). This training program was created as an answer to the challenge to create a tool that increased self-regulated learning while the latest technology was utilized. Núñez et al. concluded that because of the training, learners increased the depth of their approach to learning, which caused achievement to increase.

Online learners often struggled. Online learning was flexible, but often low achieving online learners were unfocused, non-participatory, and undisciplined. Wang and Lin (2007) found specific traits associated with learners who were successful online, including a high intrinsic motivation, which sparked anxiety within as learners completed their tasks. They concluded that the use of higher-order thinking strategies within learning tasks, as well as requiring peer reviews from other learners, stimulated achievement. Radovan (2011) noted that low achieving learners may have been ignorant of self-regulated learning strategies, and that developing short self-regulated learning trainings would be beneficial.

Low achieving online learners, according to Chen & Tien (2005), lacked a positive attitude towards learning (as cited in Tsai & Lee, 2012). Additionally, low achieving online learners struggled with Internet addiction (Tsai & Lee, 2012). Therefore, the very tool that provided their instruction—the Internet—tempted these learners with online games, shopping, and sites like Facebook.

Review of Research Regarding Social Learning Strategies

Social vs. personal learning strategies. Wan et al. (2012) suggested a method for organizing self-regulated learning strategies into two categories: personal or social.

Personal strategies were independent strategies utilized by the learner, such as metacognitive or planning strategies (Wan et al., 2012). Social strategies involved others, such as help seeking, comparing one's learning to others, and interacting with others.

Wan et al. (2012) found that social learning strategies were important. Learners who interacted with their peers and the instructor were able to receive feedback to guide their learning, "…ultimately resulting in better learning outcomes" (Wan et al., 2012, p. 333). Most learners utilized self-regulated learning to some extent, but it was imperative that learners utilized the appropriate learning strategies in a manner that assisted their needs of the moment (Wan et al., 2012). Learners may have benefitted from suggestions either built into the course or directly suggested by their instructor (Wan et al., 2012).

Perceptions affect performance. Langley and Bart (2008) found that low achieving learners lacked confidence in their ability to achieve, believed that their schedule and studying periods were not under their control, and were less devoted to strenuous preparations or studying. Overall, "…these learners had acquired learned helplessness and believed that no matter how much effort-regulation they exerted, their efforts towards success would not result in the desired outcome" (Langley & Bart, 2008, p. 20). Learned helplessness affects low achieving online learners, as they were less likely to improve their learning by seeking help, comparing their work to the work of peers, or by interacting with their peers or the instructor.

Kitsantas and Zimmerman (2009) examined undergraduate learners' perceptions and the distribution of responsibility these learners allocated to themselves for their learning. Kitsantas and Zimmerman noted that although past research focused on the attribution of luck, for example, as a responsibility for academic achievement, little

research has examined the responsibility attributed to the instructor's influence on learning. A difficulty of examining the influence of instructors was that "…highly self-regulated students seek help from teachers and classmates more frequently than poorly self-regulated students…[and] are also distinguished by the adaptive quality of their help seeking" (Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 98). High achieving learners had greater self-efficacy, and therefore believed in their academic abilities, resulting in a sense of responsibility once academic achievement was accomplished (Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009). Conversely, low achieving learners tended to place responsibility away from them, not accepting responsibility for their lack of achievement.

Dickhäuser et al. (2011) examined low achieving learners and their perception of competence. Low achieving learners were often plagued by the desire to avoid failure (Dickhäuser et al., 2011). In contrast, high achieving learners sought to confront and conquer failure (Dickhäuser et al., 2011). Learners, particularly at the novice stage, made mistakes as they learned new concepts. Unfortunately, learners who experienced the desire to avoid failure were often susceptible to thoughts that were detrimental to their learning (Dickhäuser et al., 2011).

Review of Methodological Issues

Zimmerman and Pons (1986) suggested qualitative measures, including "…an interview procedure could provide reliable evidence concerning learners' self-regulation reports" (p. 625). Additionally, Núñez et al. (2011) asserted that "[m]ost of the aspects that take place during the self-regulation process are not observable so the use of on-line and qualitative measures would be indicated in future studies" (p. 279). Wan et al. (2012) described qualitative research as providing more depth to our understanding of

learners' methods while learning. Wan et al. (2012) recommended qualitative research studies be utilized to "…provide richer and more immediate descriptions of learners' SRL learning processes …" (p. 333). Because low achieving online learners, who lacked social self-regulated learning strategies, were not likely to respond to a lengthy online survey or take time to ponder questions, an interview was ideal. Low achieving online learners might have found speaking about their experiences preferable to writing about them.

Synthesis of Research Findings

Previous research (Al-Alwan, 2008; Kostons et al., 2012; VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999; Zimmerman, 2002) argued that learners who utilized learning strategies performed better than those who did not. Self-regulated learning strategies could be learned, according to researchers (Bail et al, 2008; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2005; Kauffman et al., 2011; Núñez et al., 2011). Wan et al. (2012) argued that social learning strategies were as important to learning as personal strategies. According to Wan et al., when learners perceived a connection with peers, they felt more satisfied with online learning, increasing the possibility of seeking social strategies for self-regulated learning in the future. However, low achieving online learners were not using these strategies and their academic success suffered for it.

It was found by researchers (Wang & Lin, 2007; Radovan, 2011) that online learners often struggled. Chen and Tien (2005) argued that attitudes, as well as Internet addiction, played a role in this struggle. Langley and Bart (2008) also found poor attitudes held by low achieving online learners, including a lack of confidence and a belief that outside forces were to blame for learner performance. Kitsantas and

Zimmerman (2009) found that low achieving online learners attributed their success or failure to luck. Dickhäuser et al., (2011) discovered a deep-seated fear of failure in low achieving online learners.

Critique of Previous Research

Past studies of low achieving learners often did not use low level learners per se, but instead exposed learners to failure (Dickhäuser et al., 2011; Kostons et al., 2012). Other studies utilized underprepared learners (Langley & Bart, 2008). Tsai & Lee (2012) utilized learners who were one or more grade levels behind. The most straightforward determination of low achieving learners was used by Van-Zile and Livingston (1999), who utilized learners who earned a GPA of one standard deviation below the mean GPA of the student body.

In many studies, learner perspectives were not consulted, particularly the perspectives of low achieving learners. According to Yuen et al., (2009), the experiences of low achieving learners was unknown due to researchers focusing on high achieving learners and instructors. To compound the problem, So and Brush (2008) argued that there was a disconnect between instructor perceptions and actual learner experiences. Learner experiences might have varied greatly from instructor experiences, and learner viewpoints were overlooked (So & Brush, 2008).

Chapter 2 Summary

Moore's (2007) theory of transactional distance related to learners as they interacted with others in the classroom. Learners experienced transactions with their materials, the instructor, their peers, and the online platform. Low achieving learners experienced less self-regulation than those who were high achieving, and did not utilize

peers or teachers for assistance (VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999). Online learning, in particular, exacerbated problems for low achieving learners, who struggled with Internet addiction and poor attitudes (Chen & Tien, 2005; Dickhäuser et al., 2011; Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2009; Langley & Bart, 2008; Tsai & Lee, 2012).

Social self-regulated learning strategies, as defined by Wan et al. (2012) were utilized less by low achieving online learners. These low achieving learners experienced learned helplessness, causing learners to avoid help seeking or interactions with peers or their instructor (Langley & Bart, 2008). The experiences of low achieving learners was largely unknown, however, as research focused on high achieving learners and instructor perspectives (Yuen et al., 2009). Learner perspectives were overlooked (So & Brush, 2008). Collecting and analyzing data from low achieving online learners provided guidance for researchers and instructional designers who sought to increase social self-regulated learning strategy use among this demographic.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction to Chapter 3

Low achieving online learners often lacked self-regulated learning strategies in general, resulting in decreased knowledge acquisition (Kostons et al., 2012). A lack of self-regulated learning strategies had a direct effect on learners' achievement (Bail et al., 2008; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2005; Kauffman, Zhao, & Yang, 2011; Radovan, 2011; Tsai & Shen, 2009; Wang & Lin, 2007). Studies (Bednall & Kehoe, 2011; Kauffman et al., 2011; Kostons et al., 2012; Radovan, 2011; Wan et al., 2012) were completed to identify faculty perspectives on low achieving online learners' difficulties with self-regulation, but according to So and Brush (2008), learner perceptions varied greatly from instructor perceptions. Therefore, the next logical place to look for information that could be used to inform instructional design decisions was the learners themselves. This study added knowledge to research about social strategies for self regulated learning, which focused primarily on faculty perspectives (Bednall & Kehoe, 2011; Kauffman et al., 2011; Kostons et al., 2012; Radovan, 2011; Wan et al., 2012).

The literature review presented in this study was comprehensive, and examined current scholarly research about the topic of social self-regulated learning strategies. The theme of self-regulated learning itself uncovered research that revealed that low achieving learners used fewer self-regulated learning strategies, self-regulated learning strategies could be learned, and online learners often struggled. Then, review of research about social self-regulated learning strategies exposed the difference between social

versus personal learning strategies, and examined the ability of learners' perceptions to affect their performance. The literature also validated the use of a qualitative methodology, including interviews for data collection.

Purpose of the Proposed Study

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of low achieving online undergraduate learners in the United States with social strategies for self-regulated learning, in order to understand how their achievement could be increased. The study asked low achieving online learners directly to describe their experiences with social self-regulated learning strategies.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Central research question. What are the experiences of low achieving online learners with regard to social strategies for self-regulated learning (i.e., help seeking, comparisons between the learners' work and peers, and interacting socially)?

Subquestion 1. How do low achieving learners describe the social isolation they may experience, if they do experience such isolation in the online setting?

Subquestion 2. What do low achieving online learners experience when going to others for assistance (peers, instructors, instructional assistants, technical support)?

Subquestion 3. When low achieving online learners examine other learners' work (through collaborative activities, discussion boards, or other online methods such as wikis or blogs), what criteria do they utilize, if any, as they measure their work against the work of their peers?

Subquestion 4. What do low achieving online learners experience when interacting with their peers or the instructor in an asynchronous environment?

Subquestion 5. What problems do low achieving online learners describe while utilizing social self-regulated learning strategies?

Research Design

The qualitative methodology that was used was basic qualitative research. The defining characteristic of basic qualitative research was that "…individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds" (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). Additionally, a basic qualitative study examined how participants described their experiences, what frameworks they used to make sense of the world, and what understandings they drew from their experiences (Merriam, 2009). The researcher sought to discover how participants made meaning through their experiences with social strategies for self-regulated learning. Each individual saw the world from a different lens, therefore a variety of experiences were collected (Merriam, 2009). Merriam's (2009) basic qualitative study was used as a model.

Low achieving online learners had reduced achievement based on their lack of social strategies for self-regulated learning (Kostons et al, 2012; Wan et al, 2012). Researchers (Al-Alwan , 2008; Kostons et al, 2012; VanZile-Tamsen and Livingston 1999; Wan et al, 2012) concluded that self-regulated learning strategies were directly related to achievement. The problem of low achieving online learners lacking strategies that may have increased their achievement was aligned with the purpose in order to discover the reason behind this lack of strategy use. Finally, the choice of research design (basic qualitative research) supported the collection of descriptive data from low achieving online learners.

Target Population, Sampling Method, and Related Procedures

Target Population

Participants were low achieving, online undergraduate learners from a large proprietary college in the western United States. These participants had taken at least one online course, and were currently enrolled in one online course. A range of course subjects were taken by participants, but all online courses were at the Associate degree level. Therefore, all courses were at 100 and 200 levels. Participants all had experience with both online and traditional, in-person courses. However, for the purposes of this study, only data about online courses was collected. A variety of ethnicities, age, and genders were represented.

Sampling Method

This study had a target range of 10-25 participants, with 12 participants interviewed. The type of sampling that was utilized was purposive sampling, specifically, convenience sampling (Merriam, 2009). Accessibility was a factor that affected the sampling choice. The sample was drawn from online learners that were accessible by this researcher. As an employee of the participating institution, the researcher was familiar with other online instructors. The researcher contacted other online instructors at the participating institution, who provided lists of potential participants. After receiving each list, the researcher removed names of potential participants who were known to the researcher, or who were current or past students of the researcher.

Sample Size

A qualitative researcher should interview participants until the data reached saturation (Mason, 2010). Payne and Williams (2005) explained that numbers of participants in qualitative studies varied greatly, often including between eight and 60 participants. Gall et al. (2005) related that researchers might select any number of participants but used fewer participants in the actual research due to the nature of the information collected from participants. One of the main factors that influenced sample size was the skill of the interviewer and the richness of the data collected from each participant (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Mason, 2010). For example, some participants were more forthcoming, particularly knowledgeable or were able to relate their experiences through the interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Gall et al., 2005).

Initially, 122 learners from a single institution were invited to participate in the study via email. These learners had failed a course taught by another instructor at the institution during the past year. From the first email invitation, a single learner responded. This learner continued to dialogue with the researcher over a period of several weeks, responding to emails after a week or more lapsed. The researcher realized, based on the response from this first email invitation, that not only were more potential participants needed to increase the rate of response, but that email may not be the best method for communicating with these learners. As an employee of the participating institution, the researcher was familiar with other online instructors. The researcher increased the list of potential participants to 422 by reaching out to additional instructors, who supplied lists of learners and emails.

Subsequently, a mail delivery program called MailChimp was utilized to contact potential participants. Email invitations then included the researcher's telephone number with an invitation to text message, call, or email if interested. The availability of text messaging and calling as a potential participant's response increased the response rate to invitation emails, which were scheduled three times a week at alternating times. The researcher noted that often learners initiated contact immediately after receiving the email. Therefore, the researcher scheduled emails at a time when her schedule allowed time to speak with participants, who often heard about the study, completed their consent form, and then used Skype to complete the interview in a single session. Participants were recruited until a total of 12 participants were interviewed. All potential participants who were willing to participate in the study were interviewed. Ultimately, this study had a sample size of 12 participants, with 422 individuals invited.

Setting

Participants attended a college in the western United States, so they were located in a variety of states, including: California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington. Phone contact was utilized in order to meet with potential participants in order to explain the study. Permission, if granted, was given via the Institutional Review Board approved consent form, which was signed, scanned, and emailed by participants. Learners met with the researcher via Skype, an online videoconferencing technology, for all interviews. The researcher utilized a computer in a private room, with headphones to ensure privacy.

Recruitment

Recommendations for participants were received from online instructors at the institution utilized for this study. Several hundred participants who failed one course in

the past year were invited to participate in the study. These potential participants were individually contacted through email and invited to speak with the researcher. During that first discussion, the purpose of the research was explained to the individual, as well as the rights of the individual, if s/he decided to participate. Individuals who decided to participate were asked to digitally sign a consent form, acknowledging that they understood their rights and could discontinue participation at any time. Some participants chose not to speak with the researcher, or not to participate in the research. All participants completed and signed a consent form before interviews were completed.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher was the instrument, making the researcher's bias an issue. According to Merriam (2009), "[r]ather than trying to eliminate these biases or 'subjectivities,' it was important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of the data" (p. 15). This researcher perceived low achieving online learners as passive about their learning. In other words, these learners often were not proactive about their learning, and waited for consequences before taking action about their own progress. Continuous monitoring of the researcher's spoken and unspoken cues, as well as reminders (such as Post It notes in one's work station) assisted this researcher to set aside this bias.

Additionally, the researcher utilized bracketing. Bracketing allowed the researcher to record and analyze thoughts that may have led to bias. These thoughts were recorded on paper during the interview, in brackets during transcription within a word processing program, and in the researcher's electronic journal. As the study unfolded, bracketing allowed the researcher to reflect on perceptions. For example, as interviews

were transcribed, the researcher noted that references to instructors and classmates seemed overwhelmingly negative. However, upon analyzing the data, the researcher found that low achieving online learners were more often neutral when speaking about their instructors and peers.

Data Collection

Data was collected from semi structured interviews with participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Although the researcher had an interview protocol, which acted as a guide throughout the interview, the interview was not highly structured. (See Appendix B for the interview guide.) This allowed the participant to talk freely and led to the sharing of experiences related to social strategies for self-regulated learning that were not anticipated by the researcher. Each interview took under one hour.

Several methods were utilized to protect participants' identity. Any printed information was kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office and only the researcher was able to access and review this information. During interviews and when transcribing, headphones were utilized. Any time the researcher was away from the computer, any files containing private information were closed, and the computer was locked with a password.

Participants were identified in an Excel file that included their name and their assigned letter (for example, Student A) for the study. This file was secured with a password, and the computer was password protected as well. Any reference to participants' activities did not include their name, age, or any other distinctive personal

information. In any written reports or publications, participants were not identifiable. Therefore, participants' privacy was protected throughout the study.

Interviews

Merriam (2009) suggested that semi structured interviews are useful when the researcher wished to allow the interview to be influenced by the experiences of the participant. Instead of following a structured set of questions, the interview could stray into a topic relevant to the research but unplanned by the researcher. According to Merriam (2009), when an interview was semi structured, participants might have more freely expressed their thoughts, "so that fresh insights and new information can emerge" (p. 91). An interview guide was utilized by the researcher. (See Appendix B for the interview guide.)

Transcription

The researcher transcribed each interview personally, allowing the researcher to ruminate over each participant's answers. According to Merriam (2009) a researcher could use each interview to inform the next. Reviewing transcripts before interviewing more participants also allowed the researcher to ensure that the research questions were providing data that answered the overarching research question. Additionally, reviewing and analyzing transcripts between interviews enabled the researcher to begin to identify themes and patterns within the data. Merriam (2009) argued that this practice of reviewing data in between interviews protected the researcher from missing salient points from an interview. Subsequent interviews might not touch upon these relevant patterns or themes, should the researcher continue unaware. Instead, an informed researcher

would ask questions that led the participant to describe experiences relevant to potential patterns or themes within the research.

Merriam (2009) recommended that researchers transcribe their own interviews in order to become more intimate with the data. Transcribing the interview allowed the researcher to begin the analysis process as the data were input (Merriam, 2009). Transcripts were created with a word processing program utilizing a numbered line system for ease of note taking by the researcher during analysis.

According to Creswell and Miller (2000), member checking allowed "participants [to] add credibility to the qualitative study by having a chance to react to both the data and the final narrative" (p. 127). Member checking was utilized once interviews were transcribed. Transcripts were completed and reviewed within one week of each interview. Each participant was invited to examine the transcript from his or her interview to verify that the data were accurate. Discrepancies in the transcript were verified by listening to the recording. However, if participants wished to change the wording within an answer, their request was honored. This final interaction with participants also garnered additional data, in the form of notes, by the researcher. The researcher took notes directly after each meeting and recorded actual comments by the participant as well as any other relevant information.

Confidentiality

Participants were interviewed individually by the researcher through Skype, a videoconferencing technology. The interviews were recorded using a Sony ICD-PX312 digital recorder and backed up with a laptop computer. During all interviews and playback of recordings, the researcher utilized headphones to ensure each participant's

privacy. All paper copies of data, including the data recorder, were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's private office. Participants were identified in an Excel file that included their name and their assigned letter (for example, Student A) for the study. Finally, any time the computer was not in use, it was locked with a passcode.

Field Test

A field test was performed and three expert reviewers examined the interview questions. All three reviewers were experts in the field of online learning. One of the reviewers held a PhD, the second reviewer was ABD, and the third held a M.A.. The PhD was active in the field of research, and had presented her own research at many conferences. These experienced online instructors made suggestions for changes in the interview questions which allowed for more opened ended questions, and resulted in a greater variety of answers from participants. Additionally, one reviewer also eliminated terms that could potentially bias participant answers. These terms could have steered a participant answer to the positive or negative.

Data Analysis Procedures

Organization was extremely important as data were collected. Transcripts were printed and digitally backed up in order to ensure data were not lost. Additionally, atlas.ti, a computer software program for qualitative research, was utilized to organize and code the data. As the data were coded, categories were created that corresponded to the codes. Then, the data were sorted by codes to compare similarities between multiple participants. This program allowed patterns to be marked with distinct colors, and the researcher easily saw similar themes between multiple participants' transcripts.

The advantage of this software was that it organized qualitative data, it kept that data in a digital form, it allowed for ease of searching for certain codes, and it allowed for reorganization of coded data in many ways with a few simple clicks. Qualitative data were cumbersome in written form and difficult to organize. Some qualitative researchers cut and pasted data with scissors and glue. Data were organized with ease, linking areas of text with similar codes, and even renaming all codes in the project, as the researcher required. Having data in digital form was an advantage because it did not take up any actual space in the researcher's office, and it was portable—it was utilized anywhere with a laptop. Finally, organizing data by similar codes, or reorganizing by participant was easily completed, unlike traditional paper methods.

Merriam (2009) suggested that researchers take notes about any data "…that strike you as interesting, potentially relevant, or important to your study" (p. 178). These notes sometimes developed into codes that categorized the data and were aligned with the original research question. When developing codes, Janesick (2011) explained that researchers examining data and "[l]ooking for what does not make sense in a study, what does not quite fit, and what exposes points of conflict often yields amazing information and insight" (p. 187). In essence, codes were themes that developed in the research, which also included points that did not make sense or seemed to contradict one another.

Merriam (2009) suggested that qualitative researchers were to analyze data after the first interview. By beginning to analyze early, the researcher used each interview to inform the next, ensuring that subsequent interviews continued to align with the original research question (Merriam, 2009). After analyzing interview transcripts, the researcher to made new insights and revised interview questions for future participants.

There were levels of analyzing data, according to Merriam (2009). At the onset of a study, collecting and organizing data provided descriptions of participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009). Next, analysis allowed the researcher to conceptualize the data, including the creation of categories (Merriam, 2009). These categories, often called codes, were easily tracked with atlas.ti. Finally, the researcher interpreted the data, bringing one's own conclusions about the experiences of participants (Merriam, 2009). The researcher needed to be open to what the data exposed and allow the research to develop around issues that the study uncovered.

Notes were taken by the researcher and utilized throughout the data analysis process. Insights and ideas were sometimes made while directly reviewing transcribed data, and also made at the most inopportune time. At times, the researcher noted insights, thought of patterns, and made connections between ideas at unexpected moments. Therefore, notes often occurred by placing these thoughts into an electronic journal, which was also protected with a passcode.

Limitations of the Research Design

The limitations of this study included the sample size, the single institution represented, the regions inhabited by the participants, and the software utilized. The sample size was dependent on the amount of learners willing to speak about their experiences, the time allowed for this research project, and the research budget. The research plan called for 10 – 25 learners, and 12 learners were interviewed. Another limitation of this study was the regional disposition of these learners, who were from a single college in the western United States. The experiences of these learners may have differed from those at other colleges or in other parts of the world.

The researcher was employed at the participants' institution. This potential conflict of interest was mitigated by utilizing participants that were not currently or formerly enrolled in the researcher's courses. Ethical issues included the protection of FERPA related data, as well as the identity of the participants. Any information participants provided in this study that could identify them such as their name, age, or other personal information was kept confidential.

The disadvantages of the software utilized was that, like any software, it only did what the company programmed it to do. Another disadvantage of using digital media was that it could be lost or corrupted. The researcher was careful to backup data by utilizing a mini drive as well as hard copies of printed data, and both were easily locked in a file cabinet in the researcher's office to ensure privacy. A final disadvantage to the software was that it had to be learned.

Credibility

Credibility, according to Merriam (2009) was less concrete in qualitative research, with readers of research seeking for findings to "ring true" (p. 210). Additionally, credibility was attempted through a transparent rendition of the actions taken by the researcher as this study unfolded. The goal in qualitative research was to translate multiple individuals' world views accurately (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation was achieved by collecting multiple perspectives about the same experience (Merriam, 2009).

Triangulation "adds thoroughness, richness, and depth of understanding to the study" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 35). In this study, triangulation referred to the fact that participants came from a variety of courses, ethnicities, and ages, and allowed the researcher to pull from many perspectives which provided patterns within the data. By

utilizing triangulation, the researcher was able to identify trends within the data that were not attributed to similar characteristics of the participants.

Bracketing was utilized to control bias. The researcher made notes throughout the planning, data collection, and analysis process. These notes were made in an electronic journal and related to any private thoughts about the research, including participants. Such notes were regularly reviewed by the researcher in order to continually be aware of bias. This method aligned with Merriam's (2009) assertion that researchers should identify and observe biases, in order to objectively understand how such biases might have influenced the collection and analysis of the data.

This researcher completed several research courses, including a course specifically about qualitative research. Through course work, this researcher created research questions, participated in practice interviews, and coded data. Additionally, this researcher informally interviewed individuals in the past about sensitive topics, such as religion.

Transferability

Transferability referred to the ability to transfer findings from this study to different situations. In this case, a sample of low achieving online learners from one college was selected. Thus, a deep understanding of a few individuals' experiences was sought through the thick descriptions of participants (Merriam, 2009). These low achieving online learners, interviewed until data reaches saturation, provided insight about their experiences with social strategies for self-regulated learning. The research from this study could be transferred and applied to a different situation, such as low achieving learners in a high school setting.

Dependability was achieved through the creation of an audit trail. An audit trail was an ongoing collection of notes by the researcher, explaining the process that unfolded (Merriam, 2009). An audit trail "…describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry" (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). As the researcher thought through data analysis, an audit trail was utilized to record one's thoughts. According to Merriam, an audit trail could be utilized to replicate or expand a study.

Expected Findings

The researcher expected to find that participants, being low achieving online learners, utilized few social self-regulated learning strategies. However, participants interviewed were likely able to describe their experiences, which could illuminate their reasoning for avoiding such strategies. The researcher also expected participants to be difficult to contact and unreliable with regard to meetings.

The researcher, as an online instructor, interacted with low achieving online learners. Thus, the researcher had biases about such learners. Through memoing and bracketing, the researcher was able to identify potential biases. The act of reflecting on bias allowed the researcher to identify any bias in order to allow as little influence as possible on the study. Merriam (2009) argued that researchers should identify and observe biases, in order to objectively understand how such biases might have influenced the collection and analysis of the data. In this way, participants' viewpoints were conveyed as directly as possible.

Ethical Issues

Researcher's Position Statement

Conflict of interest assessment. The researcher was employed by the institution utilized in this study. In order to avoid conflict of interest, participants were not current or past students of the researcher. Students who were previously taught by the researcher might be influenced to provide answers participants supposed were desired by the researcher, or might have chosen to participate out of concern for their academic welfare. Potential coercion in recruitment was managed by utilizing other instructors and administrators for recruitment. Participants received a full explanation that their participation was voluntary, and that they could discontinue participation at any time. Additionally, all participants completed and signed a consent form before proceeding with any interview.

Position statement. The researcher was an online instructor, and interacted with low achieving online learners. There was no relationship between the researcher and any participants, although the researcher was employed by the institution in this study. The researcher, while analyzing her own low achieving online learners, puzzled about their activities, which were not visible in the online environment. Low achieving online undergraduate learners seemed genuinely unaware of the root cause of failure, viewing it as an illness that may strike at any time, rather than a consequence following a series of poor choices. These learners' study habits, social interactions, and views were not known, and little was found in scholarly literature.

The researcher utilized bracketing to avoid tainting the study and interpretation of data with bias. Throughout the study, including the writing of the research plan, the

recruitment of participants, and the collection and analysis of data, the researcher wrote personal reflections. These reflections were examined regularly for bias.

Ethical Issues in the Study

The risk to participants was that they may have felt coercion to participate. Additionally, participants' confidentially could have been breached through communication between the researcher and other employees at the institution. It was imperative that the participants understood the informed consent form before signing, and that the researcher maintained confidentiality of participants. All participants were of the age of consent, and were not from a vulnerable population.

All participants were offered a ten dollar gift card. According to Mduluza, Midzi, Duruza, and Ndebele (2013) providing an incentive was helpful to those with less resources (i.e., college learners) as it "...is replacement of what could have been lost or what could have been gained during the time the participant is involved in the research activities" (p. 8). Therefore, the incentive was appropriate, as it provided participants with some compensation for their lost time.

The researcher maintained confidentiality by limiting communication with other instructors and administrators during the study. All communication was via email, which allowed the researcher to self monitor all that was disclosed. No information was shared about participants, or about information shared by participants, with any individual other than the researcher's mentor. Participants' confidentiality was also maintained by utilizing headphones during all audio/visual communication, password protecting any devices (computer) that contained data, and physically locking papers and recording devices that contained data.

A risk to participants in this research study was the possibility of discovery that the study was about low achieving learners. Participants could experience lower self-esteem as a result. During the study, learners were referred to as 'struggling' and not 'low achieving.'

Chapter 3 Summary

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of low achieving online undergraduate learners in the United States with social strategies for self-regulated learning, in order to understand how their achievement could be increased. The study asked low achieving online learners directly to describe their experiences with social self-regulated learning strategies. A basic qualitative methodology was utilized, as the researcher sought to discover how participants described social self-regulated learning strategies from their individual lens.

The primary research question—What are the experiences of low achieving online learners with regard to social strategies for self-regulated learning (Including help seeking, comparisons between the learners' work and peers, and interacting socially)?—was best answered by interviewing low achieving online learners, themselves. During interviews, participants also shared their experiences with social isolation, help seeking, social comparison, interactions with others related to the online courses, and problems utilizing social self-regulated learning strategies. Chapter 4 will provide specific data that relates to this primary research question.

CHAPTER 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter provides the explanation for how data were analyzed, as well as the results from that data. This chapter also provides the data that will be interpreted in Chapter 5. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of low achieving online undergraduate learners in the United States with social strategies for self-regulated learning, in order to understand how their achievement could be increased. The study asked low achieving online learners directly to describe their experiences with social self-regulated learning strategies. Basic qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to collect data that demonstrated how participants described their experiences, what frameworks they used to make sense of the world, and what understandings they drew from their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Merriam's (2009) approach to analyzing data were utilized by the researcher while coding and determining themes and subthemes. Atlas.ti 7 was utilized to code, identify themes and patterns, sort the data, and keep related notes made by the researcher. Creswell's (2012) system of noting ideas and themes in the margin as a researcher examined data were utilized.

Initially, the researcher utilized the codes student (S), instructor (I), technical support (T) and materials (M) based on Moore's (2007) theory of transactional distance. Learners interact with each other, with instructors, and with their materials. Coding was

then changed as the researcher realized that although some participants spoke often of their classmates, for example, sometimes the references were overwhelmingly negative. As the researcher began counting instances of codes, for example, references to the instructor, the researcher realized that simple counting of codes was not useful. Instead, utilizing sub codes related to positive, negative, and neutral references to materials, the instructor, learners, and technical support gave a better understanding of the learner's overall disposition. These new codes were counted and compiled.

Although this study is qualitative, there was relevant quantitative data. Maxwell (2010) argued that quantitative data may be relative in qualitative studies, and that qualitative research that utilized numbers is not necessarily mixed-method research. Numeric displays and counting were utilized to identify patterns, which Sandelowski (2001) argued could provide clarity for researchers. Further, Sandelowski explained that using numbers allowed researchers to "focus on the qualitative nature of these responses in the main body of the text" (2001, p. 237). This was certainly the case in this study, in which counting and displays allowed the researcher to more easily identify and explain patterns within the data. Finally, Hannah and Lautsch (2011) cautioned that counting or use of numbers must be utilized for assistance, and not just for the sake of utilizing numeric data. Numeric data was utilized in this study with specific intent, as it was needed, not purely to seek validation.

The chapter is organized with a description of the sample, followed by the results sample, sorted by themes. This sorting method allowed the researcher to demonstrate how themes and patterns were uncovered as interviews proceeded. A detailed analysis of

the data were also provided, which demonstrated aggregate results. These results allowed the researcher to view patterns within the data.

Description of the Sample

The sample in this study consisted of 12 low achieving, online undergraduate learners from a large proprietary college in the western United States. A range of courses were taken by participants, including business, English, information technology, math, and science. All online courses taken by the participants were at the Associate's degree level, ranked at 100 and 200 levels. Participants were both male and female, from a variety of ethnicities, and ranged in age from 20 to 38 years. Triangulation was attempted by utilizing participants who enrolled in a variety of courses, and were made up of a variety of ethnicities, gender, and age. This allowed the researcher to draw from many perspectives, and provided patterns within the data. By utilizing triangulation, the researcher identified trends within the data that were not attributed to similar characteristics of the participants. In order to provide transparency to future researchers, demographic data was reported in Table 1.

The mean GPA of the college was 2.469 with a standard deviation of 1.199. Participants had a GPA of one standard deviation or lower. Therefore, all participants had a GPA of 1.27 or lower. Participants were interviewed about their online classes, and participants completed a range of two to eight courses online. Table 1 displays the participant demographics of the sample.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Program	GPA	Online Classes
Student A	24	Male	Hispanic	Business	0.67	3
Student B	38	Female	Hispanic	Undecided	0.89	4
Student C	32	Female	Hispanic	Undecided	1.02	2
Student D	27	Female	African American	Technology	1.02	2
Student E	36	Female	Caucasian	Business	0.91	3
Student F	25	Male	Caucasian	Business	0.69	3
Student G	33	Female	Caucasian	Legal	1.26	4
Student H	20	Male	Caucasian	Technology	0.72	3
Student I	22	Male	Hispanic	Technology	0.90	5
Student J	26	Female	Caucasian	Legal	1.19	2
Student K	24	Male	Hispanic	Undecided	1.15	5
Student L	30	Female	Hispanic	Health Care	1.22	8

Summary of the Results

During interviews, transcription, and analysis, themes were noted as they emerged. These themes were words and/or phrases that occurred several times within the data. Once a similar word or phrase was noted three or more times in the data, the researcher noted it as a potential theme. Some themes were later discarded if they did not align with the research questions. Once all interviews were transcribed and analyzed, the researcher created a document sorted by themes, with salient points from the participants. All themes in this dissertation related to the primary research question.

Seven themes emerged during this study that related to the primary research question: social isolation, negative viewpoints, a focus on materials and instructor, external blame, positive social interactions, a lack of help seeking behavior, and anonymity. The primary research question was: What are the experiences of low achieving online learners with regard to social strategies for self-regulated learning (Including help seeking, comparisons between the learners' work and peers, and interacting socially)? Social isolation was experienced by seven participants, and related to the primary research question, as social isolation may have been experienced by learners who did not utilize social strategies for self-regulated learning. Negative viewpoints prevented participants from participating in social strategies for self-regulated learning; participants who viewed their instructor or classmates in a negative view avoided contact. A focus on traditional means of teaching and learning (materials and instructor) related to the research question, as a learner who was traditionally focused may not have recognized social strategies for self-regulated learning as beneficial to learning. The theme of external blame, like negative viewpoints, also prevented learners from interacting with others. As blame was shifted to the instructor, in particular, low achieving online learners were able to avoid responsibility for their own achievement. Positive social interactions related to the primary research question by demonstrating that low achieving online learners were able to describe positive experiences with social self-regulated learning. A lack of help seeking behaviors, in general, prevented low achieving online learners from more experiences with social self-regulated learning. Finally, feelings of anonymity also prevented low achieving online learners from utilizing social self-regulated learning.

One theme that was discarded during the analysis process was that online classes were considered easier. Four participants related a belief that online classes were easier than traditional classes. Because of the number of times this theme emerged, it was noted by the researcher. However, upon analysis, this theme was not found to relate to any of the research questions, and was subsequently discarded.

The subquestions related to specific themes. This list of themes was matched against the research subquestions. Table 2 shows the relationship between the themes and subquestions.

Table 2. *Relationship between Themes and Subquestions*

Theme	SQ 1	SQ 2	SQ 3	SQ 4	SQ 5
Social Isolation	X				
Negative Viewpoints		X		X	X
Materials and Instructor Focused		X		X	
External Blame		X			X
Positive Social Interaction		X	X	X	
Lacked Help Seeking Behavior					X
Anonymity					X

Detailed Analysis of Themes

The first theme, *social isolation,* addressed the participants' feelings of transactional distance, as addressed by Moore (2007). As the interviews from participants with lower GPAs were transcribed and analyzed, *negative viewpoints* was identified as a recurring theme. *Negative viewpoints* were mostly expressed towards instructors or classmates, with only two participants making negative comments about their materials, and one participant referring to technical support in a negative manner. A theme surprising to the researcher, and appearing early in data collection with Student A was a traditional focus on materials and the instructor, or, *materials and instructor focused.* Creswell (2012) noted that both ordinary and unexpected themes were important in a qualitative study. The theme of *external blame* was identified later in the study, with Student F being the third to directly place blame outside of himself. *Positive social interactions* were noted throughout the study as participants related experiences with their classmates. Participants also *lacked help seeking behavior,* which was an expected, but nonetheless important, theme. *Anonymity* was the final theme, which appeared towards the middle of the study, beginning with Student E and noted officially with Student F. Following is a detailed analysis of these themes.

Theme 1: Social Isolation

Seven participants (58%) reported feeling social isolation. However, only one of those seven participants who reported feelings of social isolation sought a remedy. Only two participants who reported feelings of social isolation approached their peers. Six participants who reported feelings of social isolation approached their instructor.

The problem was described most succinctly by Student D, who said, "It's just you, in a room, with a computer, by yourself." Student G revealed, "I felt like I had no one to reach out to ask. I probably could have asked my instructor or students, but the thought just never even occurred to me." Student K, after realizing that others were experiencing similar problems, stated that, "To know that, you know, I wasn't alone in my panic, you know, to get my work in, somebody is experiencing the same thing [technical problems]." (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Conversely, Student L reported a lack of social isolation, and expressed, "I'm not one of those learners who needs to have a classroom. Like some people really like the social setting of the classroom, and I'm not one of those people." Going even further, Student F explained the benefits of social isolation by stating, "I don't have to deal with, you know, people in general within the classes." When asked to elaborate about 'dealing with' others, Student F explained that being asked to lend notes to others to copy or being asked questions in general was an annoyance. (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Theme 2: Negative Viewpoints

Participants' references to their instructors were tallied for positive, negative, and neutral dispositions. Participants were often neutral when speaking about their online instructors. However, participants with lower GPAs had higher instances of negative comments, and fewer instances of positive comments, about their instructors than participants with higher GPAs. This data were compiled in Table 3.

Student F made quite a few negative comments about the instructor, including, "I kind of fall back a little bit because there's not enough involvement from the professor

from an online class." Student I also complained about a lack of interaction from instructors. Student F went into more detail when asked to elaborate, and stated, "The teacher didn't send out any sort of reminders to be like, 'Hey, this test is now available for you to take.'" These learners were looking to their instructors for reminders to complete work, as well as interactions through the discussion forums. (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Table 3. *Viewpoints of Instructors by GPA*

Participant	GPA	Percentage of Positive Comments	Percentage of Negative Comments	Percentage of Neutral Comments
Student A	0.67	20%	0%	83%
Student F	0.69	6%	61%	33%
Student H	0.72	0%	50%	50%
Student B	0.89	0%	50%	50%
Student I	0.90	0%	60%	40%
Student E	0.91	14%	21%	64%
Student C	1.02	46%	38%	15%
Student D	1.02	0%	0%	100%
Student K	1.15	17%	17%	67%

Table 3. *Viewpoints of Instructors by GPA*

Student J	1.19	36%	14%	50%
Student L	1.22	9%	27%	64%
Student G	1.26	11%	0%	89%

When speaking about classmates, complaints mostly focused on peers' lack of commitment, patience, and respect. This data showed up early in the interviews, with Student B stating, "I think that other people are just going through the paces in the requirements, but not really communicating with each other." As for a lack of patience, Student E related that this was evident within the discussion posts. Additionally, participants had a high view of themselves. Student E stated that any improvement in the work had nothing to do with peers. Going even further, Student H boasted, "In viewing what other people's done in these forums, I've pretty much learned what not to do." (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.).

Participants' references to their classmates were tallied for positive, negative, and neutral dispositions. Participants were often neutral when speaking about their online classmates. However, participants with lower GPAs sometimes had higher instances of negative comments about their classmates than participants with higher GPAs. There was no pattern detected with regard to positive comments about classmates. This data were compiled in Table 4.

Table 4. *Viewpoints of Classmates by GPA*

Participant	GPA	Percentage of Positive Comments	Percentage of Negative Comments	Percentage of Neutral Comments
Student A	0.67	29%	0%	71%
Student F	0.69	28.5%	28.5%	43%
Student H	0.72	21%	64%	14%
Student B	0.89	0%	33%	67%
Student I	0.90	6%	83%	11%
Student E	0.91	1%	61%	38%
Student C	1.02	45%	0%	55%
Student D	1.02	0%	60%	40%
Student K	1.15	22%	17%	61%
Student J	1.19	26%	16%	58%
Student L	1.22	23.5%	23.5%	53%
Student G	1.26	40%	0%	60%

Theme 3: Materials and Instructor Focused

Participants were focused on traditional ideas of teaching and learning: their materials, time management, audio/visual concerns, and contact with their instructor. Social learning strategies were not a concern for low achieving learners' plans in future courses. When asked what they would change about future online experiences, three participants mentioned spending more time with materials, such as reading their book. Three participants spoke about their audio/visual needs for future classes, specifically mentioning podcasts created by instructors or enrolling in hybrid courses. Increased instructor contact was a factor for three participants. Many participants focused on time management in future courses, with four participants mentioning increasing their time spent on coursework. (One participant mentioned both increased time with materials and time management, resulting in the 13 responses mentioned, above.)

From the very first interview, and continuing throughout the data collection, this focus on traditional learning (i.e., instructor lecture, book reading) was evident. Student A stated a desire to have more contact with instructors in future classes, and admitted, "I probably could have concentrated more on the materials and the actual work." Student I expressed a desire to receive feedback primarily from the instructor, and reasoned, "I don't often care what they [classmates] think. You know, I didn't come to really learn from them as much." Student J was also focused on time management, and explained, "I just got a new job so I'm hoping I'll have a more specific schedule where I can sit down X amount of time and read more for school." (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.) Many comments about instructors were negative, or involved blame, and are covered in the next theme, *external blame.*

Theme 4: External Blame

Less than half of participants blamed others for their lack of achievement, with five participants directly blaming others during their interviews. Those learners (C, E, F, H, and I) tended to have more negative comments about either their instructor or classmates. See Tables 3 and 4 for data.

Much of this external blame was instructor focused. Student E openly blamed the instructor for technical problems, and stated explicitly, "It wasn't anything I did." Student F complained that the instructor put in less effort than the learners. Participants were not shy about blaming their instructors for their lack of learning or achievement. Student H lamented, "I really could have learned more about it if the professor had gone a little further explaining things." Student I openly blamed his instructor for his grade, "So I get a lower grade because they [instructors] didn't put as much effort." (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Theme 5: Positive Social Interaction

Half of participants indicated that interacting with classmates helped them learn. When asked if interacting with classmates changed how they work, five participants responded positively. However, only three participants reported seeking help directly from classmates. None of the participants indicated that they would increase their interactions with classmates in future online courses.

Several participants noted that social interactions with classmates allowed them to see other viewpoints. In particular, Student E noted that new topics were made interesting by peers. Student E stated, "I really enjoyed it [discussion forum] because I could see other people's point of views, at my own pace, and maybe a topic I never thought was

interesting or considered previously, and this would introduce me to that in a nonthreatening way." Student K remarked, "it [discussion forum] was a little bit different, you know, seeing what they saw for a brief moment. I guess it helped be a little more open minded in things." (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Several participants explained that they utilized social interactions to get ideas. Student C explained, "There were a few postings where I was kinda confused and had writer's block. Kind of like, well, where do I start with this. And reviewing the postings gave me a head start. It was helpful to see the others' opinions and views." Student G related that developing responses was easier when viewing others' work, as their thoughts and arguments were able to be viewed prior to posting. Student C remarked that classmates' posts cause feelings of competition, and explained, "I always want to step it up after seeing someone else's post." (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Help seeking was sometimes seen as a positive social interaction. In particular, Student G related an experience, stating, "I asked them [classmates] if they had any resources where they were looking it [answers] up. They actually gave me a really good website that I ended up using." Getting feedback from peers was seen as helpful to Student J, as well, who explained that papers were revised as a result of classmates' feedback. (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Barriers

Several participants had conflicting thoughts that prevented them from seeking the assistance that they needed. For example, Student I saw interaction as important, yet was dismissive of classmates. Student I stated, "There's no … there's no lasting

impression there. And I think that also greatly impacts the education part of things because a large part of your learning in a classroom environment is that interaction you have with other people." Conversely, Student I demonstrated conflicted thoughts by stating, "I don't often care what they [classmates] think. You know, I didn't come to really learn from them as much." The very same interaction that is needed is rejected because it does not come from the instructor. Student E was also hesitant to credit classmates' with increased achievement, stating, "I feel like my work improved, but I don't think it had anything to do with the other students." (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Theme 6: Help Seeking. Participants lacked a variety of help seeking behaviors. Overall, eight participants did seek help during their online courses. In the sample, two participants contacted technical support, three participants contacted their classmates, three participants contacted their instructor, and four participants did not attempt contact. In the group that experienced social isolation, two participants approached their classmates, and three approached their instructor.

Most participants explained that they either didn't need assistance, or did not consider asking for it. For example, Student L stated, "I'm more of an individual learner." Student G shared insights about not seeking help, including, "I didn't realize how many students were in the same boat as me, not understanding something, or having issues." This participant continued, stating, "I've never called a single number for an online class. I've always just figured it out on my own, because I thought that's what I had to do." (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.) Participants were unaware that others had similar difficulties, and that resources were at their disposal.

Theme 7: Anonymity. Six of the participants reported feelings of anonymity with regard to classmates. Participants frequently related that they were unaware of others' names – even in their current classes. Student I explained that online learning is "dehumanizing" and causes students to avoid communicating with the instructor because "the teacher seems less likely to either reach out to the student or really go out of their way to try and fix it." Most telling was a comment made by Student K about classmates, "They [classmates] wear a mask." Participants felt disconnected from both their classmates and instructors. Student E shared the perspective that classmates do not care what problems other learners are having. (See Appendix C for a summary of student responses.)

Chapter 4 Summary

More than half, or a total of seven participants, reported feeling social isolation, and those who reported this experience were focused on their instructor rather than their classmates. Negative viewpoints of classmates and their instructors were mostly more prevalent in participants with lower GPAs. When low achieving online learners examined classmates' work, they utilized it for formatting and overcoming writer's block. Although six participants reported that interacting with classmates helped them learn, all participants focused on time management, instructor interactions, audio/visual needs, and their materials when discussing their future online courses. A minority of participants blamed others for their lack of achievement, and did not seek help during their online course. Six participants experienced the barrier of anonymity when describing their interactions with classmates. Next, Chapter 5 will provide conclusions and discussion surrounding this data.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of low achieving online undergraduate learners in the United States with social strategies for self-regulated learning, in order to understand how their achievement could be increased. The study asked low achieving online learners directly to describe their experiences with social self-regulated learning strategies. Basic qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to collect data that demonstrated how participants described their experiences, what frameworks they used to make sense of the world, and what understandings they drew from their experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Chapter 5 summarizes and interprets the findings, relates those findings to the literature and theoretical framework for the study, and addresses the limitations of the study. Additionally, Chapter 5 provides an implication of the findings for practitioners, and makes recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Findings

The following sections are tied to each research question, including the subquestions. A summary of findings that related to each research question was created. Participants lacked use of social self-regulated learning strategies. More than half, or seven, participants experienced social isolation, yet only one of those participants sought a remedy. All participants lacked a variety of help seeking behaviors. Participants spoke about examining the work of peers, but did not describe criteria utilized for that

comparison. Positive social interactions described by participants illuminated a disconnection between learner perceptions and reality. Problems described by participants included social isolation and negative views of others. Participants lacked help seeking behavior, in general, particularly from classmates.

Social Strategies and Low Achieving Online Learners

The primary research question was: What are the experiences of low achieving online learners with regard to social strategies for self-regulated learning (Including help seeking, comparisons between the learners' work and peers, and interacting socially)? Through semi-structured interviews, participants' experiences were described. Participants described a lack of help seeking behaviors with regard to their classmates, with only three participants interacting with classmates to get assistance. Some participants described making comparisons between classmates' work and their own. Participants utilized classmates' work in order to compare formatting and gather ideas for their own work. One participant noted that competitive behavior caused her to increase her effort after viewing others' work. Half of participants indicated that interacting with classmates helped them learn.

Social Isolation

Subquestion 1 was: How do low achieving learners describe the social isolation they may experience, if they do experience such isolation in the online setting? Most low achieving learners described feeling social isolation as being alone with simply their materials. This question was answered with seven participants reported feeling social isolation. However, only one participant who reported feelings of social isolation sought a remedy. Only three participants who reported feelings of social isolation approached

their peers. Three participants who reported feelings of social isolation approached their instructor.

Help Seeking

Subquestion 2 was: What do low achieving online learners experience when going to others for assistance (peers, instructors, instructional assistance, technical support)? Participants lacked a variety of help seeking behaviors. However, learners that did seek out assistance described instructors who were not always able to help beyond recommended reading. Also, learners that sought assistance from classmates often described those peers as not caring or impersonal. These low achieving online learners experienced a high level of transactional distance.

Overall, eight participants did seek help during their online courses. In the sample, two participants contacted technical support, three participants contacted their classmates, three participants contacted their instructor, and four did not attempt contact. In the group of seven participants that experienced social isolation, two participants approached their classmates, and three participants approached their instructor.

Social Comparison

Subquestion 3 was: When low achieving online learners examine other learners' work (through collaborative activities, discussion boards or other online methods such as wikis or blogs), what criteria did they utilize, if any, as they measure their work against the work of their peers? Participants spoke about examining the work of peers, but did not describe criteria utilized for that comparison. Participants utilized classmates' work in order to compare formatting and gather ideas for their own work. One participant

noted that competitive behavior caused her to increase her effort after viewing others' work.

Social Interactions

Subquestion 4 was: What do low achieving online learners experience when interacting with their peers or the instructor in an asynchronous environment? Although 10 participants held negative viewpoints about their instructors and/or classmates, six participants described social interactions with classmates that increased learning. Therefore, there was a disconnect between participants' perceptions and reality.

Problems

Subquestion 5 was: What problems do low achieving online learners describe while utilizing social self-regulated learning strategies? Aside from social isolation, which was addressed in subquestion one, learners also described negative views of others, mostly attributed to instructors and classmates. Negative comments about either instructors or classmates were made by 10 participants. Nine participants made negative comments about instructors, and nine participants made negative comments about classmates. Two participants did not make negative comments about either instructors or classmates. Five participants placed blame for their own lack of achievement on others—mostly instructors, but also classmates.

Participants lacked help seeking behavior, in general, particularly from classmates. Only two of the seven participants who experienced social isolation approached classmates, and four participants who experienced social isolation did not seek help at all. Participants also placed blame outwardly, not accepting responsibility for their own academic achievement. Five participants demonstrated external blame.

Finally, six participants described feelings of anonymity between themselves and classmates, which indicated a great transactional distance.

Discussion of the Findings

Six participants indicated that social learning strategies increased learning. However, participants were not consciously utilizing classmates to improve achievement. Participants allowed their negative thoughts and lack of proactive help seeking to prevent achievement. Low achieving online learners needed assistance in order to begin utilizing social self-regulated strategies independently. Scaffolding is recommended for design of future courses in order to provide low achieving online learners with social self-regulated learning strategy experiences. Following is a discussion about barriers to social self-regulated strategy use.

Barriers to utilizing social learning strategies were social isolation, a lack of help seeking, negative viewpoints of instructors and classmates, and displaced blame for the participants' own lack of achievement. Seven participants described feeling social isolation within the online courses. However, only two of the seven participants who described feeling social isolation sought out peers for assistance, whereas three of the seven participants who felt social isolation sought out the instructor. Participants were often fixated on the instructor and classmates, describing negative thoughts about others and even placing blame on instructors, in particular. Five participants placed blame on others during the interviews. Following is a discussion of the findings by theme, in relation to the literature.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature

Social Isolation

Social isolation was noted as a problem by participants. Wan et al. (2012) argued that interaction with classmates combated social isolation and also increased achievement. A lack of dialogue resulted in a high level of transactional distance (Moore, 2007). Participants described a lack of communication, and therefore a lack of relationship, with their instructors and classmates. This finding aligned with the research of Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2005), who found that low achieving online learners were more apt to complete assignments as a result of their relationships with people, rather than because of due dates or other factors. This finding also related to Moore's (2007) theory of transactional distance, which posited that low achieving online learners were dependent on a great deal of dialogue, and unable to adjust for a course with less dialogue.

Negative Viewpoints

Tsai and Lee (2012) found that low achieving online learners lacked a positive attitude towards learning, which was congruent with this study's findings. Further, Langley and Bart (2008) as well as Kitsantas and Zimmerman (2009) found that learners' perceptions directly affected their performance. Participants' negative viewpoints were primarily directed towards their instructors and classmates.

Materials and Instructor Focused

Data collection indicated that participants were focused on the traditional model of learning, with primary learning tools being the instructor and materials. 46% of participants indicated that they would increase either instructor contact or time spent with

materials for future courses. No participants indicated that they planned to increase social learning strategies in future courses, although half of participants indicated that social interaction increased learning. Kitsantas and Zimmerman (2009) argued that little research examined the responsibility attributed to the instructor's influence on learning. Participants' focus on their instructors might indicate that instructors could influence learners to change their work habits, increasing social learning strategy use.

Participants' indicated that they planned to seek out audio/visual materials, or increase time spent with materials, time spent in the course itself, or instructor contact. This finding conflicted with Langley and Bart's (2008) argument that learners believed that no amount of effort on their part would result in increased achievement. Instead, participants seemed to believe that they were, in fact, in control of their destiny. This also conflicted with Kitsantas and Zimmerman's (2009) argument that low achieving learners tended to believe in luck over effort.

External Blame

Kitsantas and Zimmerman (2009) examined undergraduate learners' perceptions and the distribution of responsibility these learners allocated to themselves for their learning. The low achieving learners in this study demonstrated a tendency to place responsibility away from them, not accepting responsibility for their lack of achievement. According to Kirschenbaum and Karoly (1977), "…individuals performing at less than adequate levels on difficult tasks do not simply self-criticize and calmly go back and try again" (p. 1124). This conclusion explained why adult learners deflected blame for their own failure.

Mortimore and Wall (2009) utilized attribution theory to explain that when learners identified an external cause for an unwanted result, they were less likely to experience a decrease in self-concept. Conversely, learners who identified causes within themselves were more likely to experience low self-concept. The risk of negative criticism directed towards the learner can cause a lack of achievement through disengagement. Dickhäuser et al., (2011) found that low achieving learners were often plagued by the desire to avoid failure, which made them susceptible to thoughts that were detrimental to their learning.

Positive Social Interaction

Although half of participants indicated that social interaction helped them learn, there was an undercurrent of adversity towards collaborative activities in general. Seven participants mentioned difficulties with collaborative work. This finding directly contradicted the work by Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2005), who found that learners responded well to collaborative work. One participant did indicate that although group work could be problematic because of control issues with other classmates, less could be completed by the individual, which was desirable. This adversity towards collaborative activities related to Moore (2007) who argued that low achieving online learners were less autonomous than higher achievers.

Help Seeking

Participants lacked help seeking behaviors. This finding aligned with the research of Wang and Lin (2007), who found that low achieving online learners are unfocused, non-participatory, and undisciplined. Langley and Bart (2008) noted that low achieving learners were affected by learned helplessness, which caused them to be less likely to

improve their learning by seeking help. Additionally, this lack of help seeking related to a lack of autonomy. Moore (2007) found that low achieving online learners needed more empathetic attention from instructors.

Answers Found through Research

Through this study, all research questions were answered. However, an in depth look at barriers to social learning strategies was warranted. Problems described by participants, such as social isolation, a lack of help seeking, negative viewpoints of instructors and classmates, transactional distance, and displaced blame should be more deeply examined.

Relationship of Findings to Theoretical Framework

Moore's (2007) theory of transactional distance was utilized as the theoretical framework for this study. Transactional distance referred to the level of disconnects felt by learners when interacting with others, their materials, and the course. Learners who experienced transactions with their instructor, classmates, materials, and course that were fluid and increased their understanding of the content felt less transactional distance (Moore, 2007).

The first and third variables, in particular, related to social learning strategies. Dialogue was the first variable (Moore, 2007). Moore argued that technology improved the fluidity of dialogue within distance education, and continued to improve as newer tools were put to use. However, participants noted that their instructors did not use tools for interaction other than email and discussion forums. This lack of communication strategies created a greater transactional distance for participants, who as low achieving learners with less autonomy, needed greater dialogue (Moore, 2007).

Moore (2007) distinguished between dialogue and interaction, arguing that dialogue was more apt to allow learners to construct meaning. In particular, during dialogue "each party in the exchange builds upon comments of the other" (Moore, 2007, p. 92). Newer technologies, including video conferencing, allowed learners not just to interact with instructors, but dialogue with them, reducing the transactional distance. If newer technologies were not available, instructors could influence dialogue through their personal approach to education (Moore, 2007).

Learner autonomy was the third variable (Moore, 2007). Moore (2007) argued that less autonomous learners needed more "emotional support" from their instructors (p. 95). Low achieving online learners have less autonomy, as they lacked the ability to self-regulate while learning (Al-Alwan, 2008; Moore, 2007). A course with a greater transactional distance, which had little guidance from the instructor, caused low achieving online learners "find their own information and make decisions for themselves about what to study, when, where, how, and to what extent" (Moore, 2007, p. 95). For a low achieving online learner, a course with greater transactional distance was a recipe for failure. These learners were not able to determine which learning activities would prepare them for achievement, or even whether they were ready to move forward to more challenging content (Al-Alwan, 2008; Kostons et al., 2012).

Participants in the study indicated a need for guidance from their instructors. However, Moore (2007) argued that learners who lacked autonomy needed greater social interactions, in general, not necessarily just interactions from the instructor. These social interactions could be supplemented with dialogue with classmates. Participants revealed that interactions with classmates allowed them to alleviate fears, as they discovered that

their classmates were experiencing similar challenges. Additionally, participants reported that interactions with classmates allowed them to better understand the course content or find resources that provided information needed.

Relationship of Findings and the Literature

There was often alignment between the findings and the literature. Participants utilized fewer social learning strategies and were less autonomous. These learners appeared to have interest in increasing achievement, which motivated them and indicated that social learning strategies could be learned. Participants struggled with negative attitudes towards learning. These negative attitudes affected participants' performance academically. A lack of help seeking was evident, and often participants did not utilize resources, specifically classmates, to increase their learning. Blame was shifted externally, allowing participants to avoid decreasing their self-concept.

One difference found in this study was the negative attitudes of participants towards collaborative work. In this study, 78% of participants mentioned an aversion to collaboration. Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2005) found that learners responded well to collaborative work. This difference warranted further examination. The reasoning behind low achieving online learners' propensity towards collaborative work was of interest.

Another difference was Langley and Bart's (2008) argument that learners believed that no amount of effort on their part would result in increased achievement. Instead, learners in this study expressed a desire to increase their achievement. However, participants did not focus on social learning strategies to increase such achievement,

instead focusing on traditional methods: time spent on materials, time management in general, audio/visual needs, and increased instructor contact.

Limitations

At the start of this study, expected limitations were the sample size, the time allowed, and the budget, as well as the regional disposition of the learners. The planned sample size range was 10 – 25 participants. Although the researcher expected that low achieving online learners would be difficult to contact, the researcher did not expect the level of difficulty. Potential participants were not communicative, and often took days or even weeks to respond to emails. The researcher moved to mobile texting as a communication strategy, which increased communication but was still haphazard.

The researcher set appointments with potential participants, and found that learners did not remember their appointments or simply did not make themselves available at the set appointment time. In response, the researcher felt compelled to yield to the participants' schedule, and begin the process of explaining the study, gathering informed consent forms, and interviewing all during a single session. Participants also struggled with technology. The researcher spent time troubleshooting not only the Skype system, but also how to digitize signed consent forms. Participants were frequently not aware of free applications that operated as a mobile scanner, and did not consider their phone's camera feature as a tool for returning forms digitally.

Finally, at times participants demonstrated an inability to express themselves. The researcher asked for clarification a number of times during interviews. Participants often lacked focus and the vocabulary to accurately describe their experiences. This lack

of focus and unorganized thinking related to the work of VanZile-Tamsen and Livingston (1999) as well as the work of Wang and Lin (2007).

Implication of the Findings for Practice

Recommendations for change include more dialogue from instructors and scaffolding of social learning strategies. Increased dialogue, which is easiest achieved through newer technology methods, would lessen the transactional distance for these less autonomous learners. Scaffolding of social learning strategies will allow learners to increase their social learning strategies gradually, thereby increasing achievement.

Pintrich and De Groot's (1990) research into learners' perceptions was congruent with Zimmerman, (2002) who noted that asking learners merely to consider a metacognitive strategy coupled with self monitoring—logging study hours each day—increased learner achievement. Therefore, instructors might influence low achieving online learners to increase social learning strategy use merely by suggestion, particularly because participants were instructor focused.

Scaffolding would allow instructors to introduce a new concept or activity in small steps. Smit, van Eerde, and Bakker (2013) described scaffolding as "a teacher's temporary support that helps pupils to perform a task they cannot complete by themselves and that is intended to bring pupils gradually to a state of competence in which they can complete a similar task independently" (p. 817). Smit et al. cautioned that success related to scaffolding was cumulative, and that learners achieved skills over a period of time. Social learning strategies could be introduced in this manner. Building social learning strategies into courses by scaffolding them into assignments and activities might assist learners, but designers should be aware that multiple social self-regulated learning

activities would be needed in order for learners to internalize these methods (Smit et al, 2013).

Radovan (2011) noted that low achieving learners may be ignorant of self-regulated learning strategies, and that developing short self-regulated learning trainings would be beneficial. Kauffman et al. (2011) provided learners with strategies, in a structured environment, in order to examine whether participants could learn and apply such strategies. This related to the research of Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2005) which indicated that learners' use of social learning strategies could be increased through scaffolding.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research is recommended in order to better understand low achieving online learners. Each theme that emerged from this study merits further examination. Additionally, recruitment methods warrant further investigation. Low achieving online learners were reticent to answer emails. The reasoning behind this lack of response is not known. Finally, interview methods should be examined. Skype was a cumbersome tool that provided more hurdles than benefits. The difference in attitudes among low achieving online learners and interview methods (in person, telephone, and teleconference) should be surveyed.

Seven participants (58%) described social isolation, as well as a lack of communication, with their classmates and instructor. Based on the research of Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2005), who found that relationships were more important to low achieving learners, means for relationship building should be examined. Because of the aversion to so-called group work, researchers should examine the use of smaller groups that are

utilized for support, not necessarily for completing assignments. An examination of the intense instructor focus and the effects of increasing dialogue with low achieving online learners is also needed.

The majority of the participants (83%) made negative comments about their classmates, instructor, or both. A means for controlling negative thoughts should be examined. Research might examine the result of positive affirmations on low achieving online learners. Additionally, the methods that high achieving online learners utilize to maintain positive attitudes is warranted.

Low achieving online learners are materials and instructor focused, with six participants indicating that they would increase either instructor contact or time spent with materials in their future courses. Research should examine the introduction of social self-regulated learning strategies to low achieving online learners, in order to examine how best to integrate such strategy use in the online classroom. Social self-regulated learning strategies, when appropriately scaffolded into a course, may result in increased social self-regulated learning strategy use in future learning settings.

Low achieving online learners are plagued by the desire to avoid failure, and experience paralysis rather than complete work with errors (Dickhäuser et al., 2011). Research should examine how low achieving online learners might decrease their fear of mistakes. Learners may be paired with higher achieving learners as they share drafts of work, allowing low achieving online learners to examine less perfected versions of the work of their peers.

Increased positive social interactions of low achieving online learners also need further study. Although seven participants mentioned difficulties with collaborative

work, half of participants indicated that social interaction helped them learn. Building social self-regulated strategy use into a course could increase learners' social interactions and allow them to see the benefit of interacting with their peers.

Participants lacked help seeking behaviors. Some participants noted that they had no idea that help was available, or that classmates were also struggling. Research should examine the effect of learners' exposure to resources available via the institution or in general. For example, researchers could examine the concept of requiring that learners complete tutorials that guide students through the resources available to them. Or, learners could be required to use a specific resource as they complete an assignment—such as a plagiarism checker or paper reviewing service.

Conclusion

The findings from this study added to the scientific knowledge about social self-regulated learning strategy use among low achieving online learners. A need for increased social self-regulated strategy use is indicated by the findings. In order to increase social self-regulated learning strategies among low achieving online learners, such learners need assistance with reducing their social isolation, negative viewpoints, dependency on traditional learning tools (materials and instructor), external blame, and resistance to social interaction and help seeking.

There is a clear disconnect between perceptions and reality of low achieving online learners' experiences with social self-regulated strategy use. Many of these learners experienced social isolation, yet most did not seek a remedy. Most participants had negative viewpoints towards their classmates, instructor, or both, which exacerbated participants' isolation and lack of achievement. Half of participants indicated that social

interactions helped them learn, yet none of the participants indicated that they would focus on social self-regulated learning strategies in the future. Participants blamed external forces, yet often did not take proactive actions to increase their own learning. Eight participants stated that they reached out for assistance, yet only three of those eight participants reached out to their peers.

A qualitative methodology was utilized in order to describe the experiences of low achieving online learners with social strategies for self-regulated learning. As discussed in Chapter 2, learner perspectives, particularly the perspectives of low achieving learners, were not consulted in many past studies. This study collected and analyzed data from low achieving online learners, directly, which added to the body of knowledge in this subject. The findings from this study can be utilized by researchers and instructional designers in order to increase achievement of low achieving online learners in the future.

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APPENDIX A. STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL WORK
Academic Honesty Policy

Capella University's Academic Honesty Policy (3.01.01) holds learners accountable for the integrity of work they submit, which includes but is not limited to discussion postings, assignments, comprehensive exams, and the dissertation or capstone project.

Established in the Policy are the expectations for original work, rationale for the policy, definition of terms that pertain to academic honesty and original work, and disciplinary consequences of academic dishonesty. Also stated in the Policy is the expectation that learners will follow APA rules for citing another person's ideas or works.

The following standards for original work and definition of *plagiarism* are discussed in the Policy:

> Learners are expected to be the sole authors of their work and to acknowledge the authorship of others' work through proper citation and reference. Use of another person's ideas, including another learner's, without proper reference or citation constitutes plagiarism and academic dishonesty and is prohibited conduct. (p. 1)
>
> Plagiarism is one example of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is presenting someone else's ideas or work as your own. Plagiarism also includes copying verbatim or rephrasing ideas without properly acknowledging the source by author, date, and publication medium. (p. 2)

Capella University's Research Misconduct Policy (3.03.06) holds learners accountable for research integrity. What constitutes research misconduct is discussed in the Policy:

> Research misconduct includes but is not limited to falsification, fabrication, plagiarism, misappropriation, or other practices that seriously deviate from those that are commonly accepted within the academic community for proposing, conducting, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results. (p. 1)

Learners failing to abide by these policies are subject to consequences, including but not limited to dismissal or revocation of the degree.

Statement of Original Work and Signature

I have read, understood, and abided by Capella University's Academic Honesty Policy (3.01.01) and Research Misconduct Policy (3.03.06), including the Policy Statements, Rationale, and Definitions.

I attest that this dissertation or capstone project is my own work. Where I have used the ideas or words of others, I have paraphrased, summarized, or used direct quotes following the guidelines set forth in the APA *Publication Manual*.

Learner name and date	Angela L. Brasser February 1, 2015
Mentor name and school	Dr. Barbara Lewis School of Education

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Settling in: (used to help the interviewee relax and be prepared for the interview)

1. Are you comfortable?
2. Do you know that I will be asking you questions about your experiences in taking online classes?
3. Do you know that your identity will not be revealed in the report of this study?

Starting Questions: (used to set the stage and to get the interviewee thinking about the experience of online classes)

1. What online classes have you taken with this school?
2. What online classes have you taken with any other school?
3. What was the experience like for you?
4. Describe a time, during your online classes, when you felt that you learned as much as you wanted.
5. Describe a time, during your online classes, when you felt that you could have learned more.
6. What are your thoughts about taking more online classes?
    a. If you take more online classes, what will you change during your next online experience?

For this study you will be asked about a variety of aspects that have been found to have an effect on the experiences of learners in online classes. Is that Ok with you?

Getting to the details: (these questions are the ones designed to get the answers that inform the study)

1. Please tell me about any moments during which you felt isolated socially while taking an online class.
2. What do you do in order to avoid feeling social isolation while taking an online class?
3. During any of your online classes, how were you required to interact with your classmates?
4. What challenges did you experience when interacting with classmates?
5. While taking a class online, please describe a time in which you had to edit or review the work of your classmates?
    a. How did that experience change how you approached the work or help you understand the material better?
    b. As a result of your interactions with classmates, how would you describe any relationships that developed with others?
    c. Please tell me about a time when you sought help from classmates.
    d. Please tell me about any times when interacting with others helped you learn.
    e. Please tell me about a time when you felt that others learned from you during interactions with your classmates.
6. Tell me, in detail, about your interactions with online instructors.
    a. What challenges did you experience when interacting with instructors?
7. Tell me, in detail, about your interactions with technical support.

a. What challenges did you experience when interacting with technical support?

Summing things up. (Having the interviewee reflect on the overall experience and assessing if any value was perceived)

1. What kinds of improvements have you made in your own work as a result of seeing others' work? (Through discussion posts, peer review, etc.)

APPENDIX C. SUMMARY OF STUDENT DATA BY THEME

Theme 1: Social Isolation

Participant	Summary
Student A	Student A did not report feeling socially isolated while taking an online course. This student did utilize the campus for traditional courses, as well, and reported having "general friendship" and attending classes with similar students from quarter to quarter.
Student B	Student B reported feeling socially isolated when classmates did not respond to her postings in the discussion forums. However, she did not take any steps to remedy the situation.
Student C	Student C expressed some feelings of social isolation, particularly if her instructor was in a different time zone. Student C reported working late at night and not wanting to be a "nuisance."
Student D	Student D reported having feelings of social isolation, and expressed them poignantly, stating, "It's just you, in a room, with a computer, by yourself." However, she did not take action about these feelings, and instead said that she merely complained about it.

Student E

Student E experienced social isolation, and expressed a disconnect between herself, the instructor, and classmates. She related that at times it was difficult to contact the instructor, who would only utilize her school email. When talking about classmates, she said, "Like, you could tell on discussion posts that they had no patience for people who didn't know what was happening, and I have never felt so lost in an online class in my life." Student E did explain that hobbies and her family, especially her children, was a help when she experienced social isolation.

Student F

Student F explained that he enjoyed social isolation. "one thing I do enjoy about online classes is that I kinda have the ability to socially isolate myself. I'm not much of a people person, so I do enjoy the fact that I don't have to be with anybody, other than the instructor, scarce as that may be." Student F went even further to explain, "I don't have to deal with, you know, people in general within the classes. You know, the trivial stuff, like 'Oh, let me copy your paper. What was the homework for—you know, I missed the class.' That sort of thing. So, I kind of enjoy, um, the, uh, you being an individual within the class, and you're not having to deal with anybody."

Student G

Student G expressed feelings of social isolation. "I felt like I had no one to reach out to ask. I probably could have asked my instructor or students, but the thought just never even occurred to me."

Student H	Student H did not describe any feelings of social isolation.
Student I	Student I expressed feelings of social isolation. However, his attention was focused on instructor interactions. No mention of being isolated from others was made. He stated, "There's almost no interaction from the teacher at all."
Student J	Student J did not express difficulty with social isolation.
Student K	Student K spoke about social isolation. "I mean, the only time you would ever have to communicate with your professor is if you were having problems with one unit or one of the assignments." Later he stated, "And I kinda felt like I was the only one in the class." Student K used the campus to combat his feelings of social isolation.
Student L	Student L did not report feelings of social isolation. "I'm not one of those learners who needs to have a classroom. Like some people really like the social setting of the classroom, and I'm not one of those people."

Theme 2: Negative Views

Participant	Summary
Student A	Student A was very positive when speaking about his classmates. He stated, "I felt as if they were giving me positive feedback on the comments that were provided and that they put on my assignments." Student A's comments were overwhelmingly neutral, with a few positive comments. When referring to the instructor, Student A was 20% positive and 83% neutral. Similarly, when making references to other classmates, Student A was 29% positive and 71% neutral.
Student B	Student B referred to classmates with negative references 33% of the time, and was neutral in her comments 67% of the time. Her negative versus neutral references to the instructor were 50/50. This student reported that working with classmates did not help how she approached the work or helped her understand better.
Student C	Student C's references to instructors was mostly positive (46%) followed by negative (38%) and neutral (15%). This student reported that she felt like a "customer that was trying to be fit in somebody's schedule and [she] was actually told from the instructor . . . to refer to the syllabus because he was running a business himself and he didn't have time to respond to [her] personally." However, Student C's negative references to students were nonexistent. She referred to classmates positively 45% of the time and

neutral 55% of the time. Student C reported being interest in others' opinions and found that it increased her awareness.

Student D — Student D did not have any negative comments about her instructor. Her comments were 100% neutral. Conversely, she did express negative comments about her classmates 60% of the time, with 40% of her comments tallied as neutral.

Student E — Student E expressed negative views of her instructor and classmates, as well as the materials. As mentioned above, she complained that contacting the instructor could be difficult. Additionally, she related experiences about her classmates' impatience, also mentioned above. "They [classmates] don't care what's happening," she said. Student E made positive comments about her instructors 14% of the time, with 21% of her comments rated as negative, and 64% tallied as neutral. Conversely, Student E was only positive about classmates 1% of the time, with 61% of her references to classmates listed as negative, and 38% rated as neutral.

Student F — Student F did not express learning from others, other than using their work as examples of formatting.

Student G — Student G expressed no negative views of either her instructor or classmates, and was only one of two students to do so. Student G described classmates as polite, and related her appreciation at being able

to share different points of view with her peers. Student G's comments regarding her instructors were 11% positive and 89% neutral. Comments about classmates were 40% positive and 60% neutral.

Student H

Student H made several references to classmates and his instructors in a negative manner. Speaking about classmates, he stated that viewing others' work "just pretty much showed me how little they understood it." Student H had a very high self concept, and said that he was sure others learned from him, as he "always brought up points that nobody really thought of." When asked what kinds of improvements he made as a result of seeing others' work, he stated that, "In just viewing what other people's done in these forums, I've pretty much learned what not to do." Student H had nothing positive to say about his instructor, and instead had comments split equally between negative and neutral. When referring to classmates, Student H was positive 21% of the time, negative 64% of the time, and neutral 14% of the time.

Student I

Student I expressed a lack of interest in his classmates. He explained, "you want critiques from your instructor, or your educator." As for classmates, he described his thoughts as, "I don't often care what they think. You know, I didn't come to really learn from them as much." Student I made no positive comments about his instructors, 60% negative comments, and 40% neutral comments. When referencing his classmates, he made 6% positive comments, 83% negative comments, and 11%

neutral comments.

Student J — Student J described controversial topics as causing arguments within the discussion forums. Her comments about instructors were 36% positive, 14% negative, and 50% neutral. Comments about classmates were 26% positive, 16% negative, and 58% neutral.

Student K — When commenting about instructors, Student K was 17% positive and negative, and 67% neutral. Comments about classmates were 22% positive, 17% negative, and 61% neutral. Student K spoke about his classmates, but not entirely in a negative manner. "They're not experienced expressing their emotions or thoughts in the form of message board and it was very formal."

Student L — Student L's comments about instructors were 9% negative, 27% positive, and 64% neutral. Student L did have some negative comments about her classmates, saying that "people aren't as invested in it [learning]." Student L's comments about classmates were 23.5% negative and positive, and 53% neutral.

Theme 3: Materials and Instructor Focused

Participant	Summary
Student A	Student A was very focused on the materials and instructor when asked about his experiences. For example, when responding to a question about when he could have learned more, he stated, "I probably could have concentrated more on the materials and the actual work." In response to a question about experiencing social isolation, he responded "I had my materials and went at my own pace." When asked about what he would change for future courses, he stated, "…I want to have more contact with online instructors."
Student B	Student B responded that in future online classes, she would "spend more time reading, or writing a little bit more."
Student C	Student C referred to her instructor and materials when directly asked, but was equally interested in speaking about her classmates.
Student D	Student D did mention her instructor often during the interview, even when asked general questions about the course. For example, when asked about a time when she could have learned more, she related an experience during which she was only involved with her book. She also stated, "I feel like I learn better when someone is speaking to me than when I'm reading what they're saying."

Student E When asked in general about her online experience, Student E focused on the instructor. Her positive descriptions of online courses related to the materials or topics covered in the course.

Student F Student F began speaking negatively about instructors before interview questions began. Even when not specifically asked about instructors and materials, Student F spoke at length about both. Student F was particularly incensed about instructors who rely on a book instead of instruction, and stated that "[t]here was no instruction. There was no teaching there was no—I could have done that. And so I can very easily say, oh, you want to get better at this? Here, read this book. And then go practice the book. I felt like I was being taught more by the book than I was my instructor."

Student G Student G spoke equally about her classmates, as well as the materials and instructors.

Student H When asked what he would change in future online classes, Student H said, "I would focus more on the materials. And don't assume that I know everything about a subject and just jump right into it."

Student I When asked about the online experience, in general, Student I focused on the instructor. He stated, "So if you have a problem, if a student has a problem, they're less likely To reach out to that teacher, and if a student

has a problem, the teacher seems less likely to either reach out to the student or really go out of their way to fix it." However, Student I did mention, "I've never taken an online class that didn't feel like I could just learn on my own with a book."

Student J — Student J described frustration when instructors would refer to other readings for her to examine. "But if I still don't really understand it, reading about something isn't really gonna help me. So, it really wasn't like a teaching aspect, it was just . . . do the assignments, or you won't get a good grade in the class." When asked what she would change in her next online course, Student J said, "I just got a new job so I'm hoping I'll have a more specific schedule where I can sit down X amount of time and read more for school."

Student K — Student K spoke about the lack of interactions with his instructor when asked about social isolation, so he did have a focus on his instructors. He spoke about being motivated when the instructor showed interest, stating that it really helped when he "knew that the professor was, uh, excited about what [he] planned to do with [his] paper."

Student L — When asked about the online experience in general, Student L focused on her instructors, stating "I remember the first one [instructor] taking a long time to get feedback." Student L also related that online classes are easier because, "I don't think the teachers are as critical. My guess is because

they’re not seeing you in person, and it’s a lot easier to let people slide more, I think, when it’s not as personal.” When asked when she could have learned more, she again focused on her instructors, stating that she did not learn as much when she did not receive personal feedback from the instructor.

Theme 4: External Blame

Participant	Summary
Student A	External blame was a theme identified after the interview with Student A. However, upon reviewing and analyzing the transcript, there is no evidence of external blame with regard to Student A.
Student B	External blame was not yet an identified theme when interviewing Student B, but upon later analyzing the data, there were references to classmates and instructors not being accountable. So although there was not blame associated with others, there was a focus outside of the student, herself. For example, when referring to her classmates, she said, "I think that other people are just going through the paces." With regard to instructors, she said, "we never really hear them [instructors], we never really talk to them, they just give comments on our grades and stuff like that."
Student C	Although external blame was not a theme when Student C was interviewed, she did direct her attention to the instructor when asked about a time when she could have learned more in the online setting. She reported that her instructor was continually directing her to search engines instead of providing a narrower place to search for information.
Student D	Student D was matter of fact when describing her online experiences, with no direct or indirect references to blame towards others.

Student E — Student E discussed a course in which she learned little, explaining that "the assignments that we were given and the discussion posts that we had to do every week, um, they were very simple and didn't cause any sort of in-depth thinking. And, I can honestly tell you I learned nothing from that whole class."

Student F — Student F stated, "So, I kind of fall back a little bit because there's not enough involvement from the professor from an online class." In particular, Student F wanted regular reminders from the instructor.

Student G — There were no instances of external blame within Student G's data.

Student H — Student H blamed his instructor. "I really could have learned more about it if the professor had gone a little further explaining things." He went even further, stating that "[i]f he [the instructor] would have focused more, I wouldn't have failed the course."

Student I — Student I blamed classmates' lack of participation for his failure in group work. He stated that once students stop participating, "you just fail on the project because there was nothing you could do." Student I also blamed the instructor. "It just seems like there's so little effort put in by the instructor." "So I get a lower grade because they [the instructor] didn't put as much effort."

Student J — Student J did not exhibit external blame.

Student K	Student K did not speak about blame.
Student L	Student L did not speak directly about blame towards others.

Theme 5: Positive Social Interaction

Participant	Summary
Student A	Student A had no negative comments about classmates. In fact, he stated, "I felt as if they [classmates] were giving me positive feedback on the comments that were provided."
Student B	Although Student A mentioned that she did not think that working with others helped her academically, she did relate that when she felt she learned as much as she wanted, it was through discussion forums with classmates. However, there were no direct examples of positive social interactions.
Student C	Student C stated that "[i]t was good to hear classmates' opinions and see their work and it allowed us to collaborate and sometimes we would disagree, or agree, and it was good to hear other views." She also related that viewing discussion forums and classmates' posts before beginning her own work was a good method to overcome hurdles. Student C also stated that viewing classmates' work made her "open up [her] mind and take in other people's opinions, even if [she] didn't like it." Finally, Student C was the only student to directly mention competitive feelings causing her to strive to improve her own discussion posts.
Student D	Student D was not able to describe a single positive social interaction during her online courses.

Student E

Student E explained that at times, viewing classmates' work introduced her to new content. She said, "I really enjoyed it, because I could see other people's point of views, at my own pace, and maybe a topic I never thought was interesting or considered previously, and this would introduce me to that in a nonthreatening way that I didn't feel forced to do it." However, Student E was also dismissive of classmates, saying that, "I feel like my work improved, but I don't think it had anything to do with the other students."

Student F

Student F did not relate any experiences about positive social interactions. He did speak about being curious about others' opinions within a particular discussion his class was having at that time. Student F made 6% positive comments towards instructors, 61% negative, and 33% neutral. His comments towards classmates were 28.5% for both positive and negative, and 43% for neutral.

Student G

In addition to sharing points of view with classmates, Student G also sought help from her classmates for resources. In addition, Student G shared her thoughts about discussion forums. "So, I not only got to see my example, but I got to see 15 or 20 other examples of the same exact post so it helped see things in a different way if I didn't understand it. Or, it helped develop my response because I was able to see how other students are viewing things."

Student H Student H did not describe any positive social interactions. Conversely, he had many negative comments for his classmates and instructors.

Student I Student I seemed to understand that social interaction was important to learning. He talked about the class he was enrolled in, "But, there's no social interaction. There's no . . . there's no lasting impression there. And I think that also greatly impacts the education part of things because a large part of your learning in a classroom environment is that interaction that you have with other people." However, Student I did not describe a single time in which he reached out or interacted with classmates online.

Student J Student J expressed that viewing classmates' work provided unique perspectives about the content. Additionally, she related that receiving feedback from classmates improved her work. "I could say if it [her writing] made sense to me, but somebody else read it and it didn't make sense to them, then I could figure out how to reword it. So that was nice."

Student K Being exposed to different views of classmates was mentioned by Student K. "it [discussion forums] was a little different, you know, seeing what they [classmates] saw for a brief moment. I guess it helped be a little more open minded in things." He also spoke about problem solving with his classmates, for example, if there was a problem with an assignment link, he and his classmates discussed it. "Yeah, that's always one of those things you always ponder with technology, you know, is this me? Is this

something wrong with my equipment? Is this something wrong on the school's end? Are they having issues? To know that, you know, I wasn't alone in my panic, you know, to get my work in, somebody is experiencing the same thing." Though Student K was helped by others, he did not think others were helped by him. "I really don't think I was able to help the ones I was actually in class with."

Student L Being exposed to classmates' opinions and viewpoints was also mentioned by Student L. Additionally, Student L described an experience during which she learned the importance of unbiased sources. "I was critiqued back that maybe if I had looked at some other sources I would have realized that the sources I had used, while they looked on the surface to be unbiased, they actually had a strong bias. And I kinda lost half the point of view of the argument that I was supposed to be looking at. And it made me be much more critical in the future of how I used sources for papers."

Theme 6: Lacked Help Seeking Behavior

Participant	Summary
Student A	Student A reported that he did not seek help from classmates, explaining that many of the students were from other regional areas.
Student B	A lack of help seeking behavior with regard to classmates was noted during data collection with Student B, and was noted as a potential theme. Student B reported that she did not seek help from classmates, but would email the instructor with questions.
Student C	Student C did not report seeking help from classmates, but she did speak about asking help from fellow employees at work.
Student D	Student D did not seek help from others, including her instructor. When speaking about her instructor, she said, "I really didn't even kinda know their name."
Student E	Although Student E did share that she approached her instructors for help, she did not seek help from classmates. Specifically, she stated "I never went and looked for contact with them [classmates], at all."
Student F	Although Student F did mention attempting to interact with instructors, he was very adamant about his distance from classmates. He stated, when referring to classmates, "There was never a time when I asked for it [help] or offered it."

Student G — Student G was clear that until recently, she did not understand how many resources were available to her. However, she did recently ask classmates if they had resources, and related that her classmates did assist her in finding a source that would help. Student G did not report seeking help with technical issues. Interestingly, she related, "I didn't realize how many students were in the same boat as me, not understanding something, or having issues." Regarding technical support, she said, "I've never called a single number for an online class. I've always just figured it out on my own, because I thought that's what I had to do."

Student H — Student H did not describe any help seeking behaviors, with classmates, instructors, or others.

Student I — Student I did not describe help seeking behaviors, except when he emailed an instructor about a technical problem. Instead, Student I relied on his own knowledge to troubleshoot.

Student J — Student J contacted instructors directly for assistance. Additionally, she also described utilizing discussion forums to ask questions or to read what classmates asked, as well as what instructors answered.

Student K — Student K spoke about help seeking with classmates as well as instructors.

Student L — Student L lacked help seeing behavior. "I'd be more apt to figure it out myself."

Theme 7: Anonymity

Participant	Summary
Student A	Anonymity was not mentioned by Student A.
Student B	Anonymity was not yet identified as a theme when collecting data from Student B. However, upon later analysis, there were no references to anonymity from Student B.
Student C	Anonymity was still not an identified theme at the time of data collection with Student C. Further, no mentions of anonymity were found in the data from Student C.
Student D	Student D was the first participant to mention not knowing names of others related to the online environment. It was later, during the interviews of Students E and F, that anonymity was recognized as a theme.
Student E	Student E was the first student to mention the word 'anonymous,' which was the inspiration for naming this theme. She stated, when asked about social isolation, that she did not want to share her phone number "out over the Internet to use to some random strangers." Likewise, she understood that others might not want to share their contact information, stating that "it's too much like anonymous behavior that you see on other websites."
Student F	Student F continued the theme of anonymity, and stated, "I can't recall a

	single name of anyone who is in my class right now." He specifically mentioned that he was "not a people person."
Student G	Student G did not express feelings about not knowing peers. On the contrary, she expressed instances of collaboration among classmates.
Student H	Student H made no reference to classmates' anonymous behavior.
Student I	Student I described the online experience as "dehumanizing." He related, "It's very easy to just dismiss people who have spoken online."
Student J	No anonymous behavior was described in relation to her classmates.
Student K	Student K specifically used the word anonymity during the interview. "You know, message boards, in my experience, online, uh, people tend to . . . they wear a mask and the level of anonymity just not having to be there, um, kind of effects what they say and how they say it." When asked to clarify, he stated, "Having that person, even if it is just on a computer screen, looking back at them, I think it really really changes how a person will communicate. And I think it makes it more effective."
Student L	Student L spoke of not being interested in social aspects of the traditional classroom. In addition, she related that classmates act differently on discussion boards because they were "not wanting to offend anybody."