BUILDING THE PERSONAL: INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVES OF RAPPORT IN
ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES

by

Meredith Suzanne Hahn Aquila
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Arts
Community College Education

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Date: _____   Fall Semester 2017
George Mason University
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ProQuest Number: 10640729

ProQuest 10640729

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my grandmother, Elaine G. Chucker, who believed in me as only a "Mema" can.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the wonderful faculty, staff, and students of George Mason University for making my doctoral experience so memorable and rewarding. I am especially grateful for the guidance and support of my dissertation committee, Dr. Jan. Arminio, Dr. Timothy Gibson, and Dr. Amy Swan. They taught me, by example, how to be a better writer, scholar, and educator. I am also grateful to my colleagues and friends at Northern Virginia Community College for their constant encouragement and good advice. They inspired a great deal of my research, and they continue to inspire me every single day with their wisdom and dedication.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to my family, who have listened to me drone on incessantly about my doctoral research for the last five years. My parents, Lynne and Dick Hahn, have stuck by me through every obstacle and milestone, cheering all the way. They were the ones who first instilled in me a love of learning, and this accomplishment is as much theirs as it is mine. I've also been lucky to have my in-laws, Dick and Marie Aquila, to help me keep my perspective and my sense of humor when things got overwhelming. They've shown me that even serious scholarship shouldn't be taken *too* seriously. My husband, Stephen deserves more thanks than I could possibly express. He took on extra chores so I could study, rearranged his schedule around my classes, ceded most of our dining room table to my textbooks, and saw me through every freak-out, meltdown, and minor crisis with unwavering patience and love. My family, friends and colleagues always believed that I could make it to graduation, but it was Stephen who made *me* believe it, too.

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ABSTRACT

BUILDING THE PERSONAL: INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVES OF RAPPORT IN ONLINE AND FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES

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This dissertation explores the ways that instructors at a community college perceive instructor-student rapport in online and face-to-face classes. While instructor-student rapport has been shown to play an important role in student retention and success (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005; Granitz, Koernig, & Harich, 2009; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012), it has only recently been examined in the context of online education, and generally only from the student's perspective and not from the point of view of faculty. This study utilized grounded theory methods to create a theory of online instructor rapport building to improve best practices in both online and face-to-face classrooms. Interviews with 22 instructors at a large community college indicated that online rapport-building is often more time-consuming and difficult than face-to-face rapport-building; with autonomy, media richness, and uncertainty reduction, all playing a role in establishing rapport between instructors and their students. Using the collected

data, I built on Joseph Walther's Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) by placing

it in the context of higher education, and created a Theory of Instructor-Student Rapport

Online (TISRO) to explain what makes rapport feel strong, weak, or non-existent, from

the perspective of instructors.

Keywords: online education, rapport, rapport-building, Social Information Processing

Theory, media richness, uncertainty reduction

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The study described herein aimed to examine the ways that instructors at a community college perceive teacher-student rapport and the rapport-building process in online and face-to-face (FtF) classes. The introductory chapter is broken into three parts. First, key background information is presented. Second, the proposed study, including research questions, is described. Third, the proposed study's scholarly significance and professional value are discussed.

Background

Computer-mediated interpersonal communication is a relatively new communication subfield with many theoretical and practical avenues for exploration. One of many relevant applications of the research is in the practice and scholarship of higher education. As the number of students taking online courses steadily increases (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Song, Kim, & Luo, 2015; Tichavsky, Hunt, Driscoll, & Jicha, 2015), research into online teaching and learning becomes increasingly valuable. Indeed, digital tools and their uses in education have become prolific topics among instructors and administrators as the demand for, and costs of, education rise (Cleveland-Innes, Garrison, & Kinsel, 2007; McHenry & Bozik, 1995; Yuan & Powell, 2013). As the need for college-educated workers grows nationwide, institutions are forced to develop more

accessible and cost-effective higher education pathways for potential students (Mars, 2013). Distance-learning is an attractive option which allows institutions to reduce utility, resource, and space costs, while increasing the number of students who are able to take advantage of course offerings (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Yuan & Powell, 2013).

However, critics of distance learning have noted several areas of concern in the online classroom: potentially poor return on investment (Burd, Smith, & Reisman, 2014), lack of student engagement, uneven participation, and student dissatisfaction (Clarke, 2011), as well as higher rates of attrition among nontraditional students, many of whom are already at a disadvantage in college because of external pressures such as care-taking roles, careers, and financial constraints (Stavredes & Herder 2015; Yasmin, 2013). These critics raise the question of whether or not computer-mediated courses can ever be as rich and meaningful, and the learning as lasting as traditional, face-to-face lessons. One of the key issues of concern is whether rapport is achieved.

The study of rapport is rooted in the fields of psychology and medicine, with recent applications in the field of higher education. Rapport has been shown to correlate strongly with student learning outcomes and retention (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005; Granitz, Koernig, & Harich, 2009; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). If online classes are found to be inherently less likely to foster rapport, then it therefore stands to reason that success rates among students in online classes may also be affected. Since the classroom plays a major, yet often over-looked, role in building a sense of community and a desire to persist among college students (Tinto, 2012), it becomes imperative to examine the rapport-building process in online classes as their numbers and enrollments

grow (Song, et al., 2015). Walther's Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) (Walther, 1992) seeks to explain some of the ways that an online context may influence the relationship-building process, and so it will be used as a theoretical foundation for this study. While Walther's studies do not consider an educational environment, he does examine work groups and trust-building online, and has established a well-respected theory which may apply, at least in part, to distance education. SIPT and its implications for rapport-building will be discussed in more detail in the literature review chapter.

Although instructors are not the only ones responsible for building a sense of belonging and community for students (in that residential programs, college staff, and specialty resources such as veterans' affairs offices and LGBTQ support services also play important roles), they are under-researched in light of their potential impact (Tinto, 2012), and thus worthy of deeper consideration. This study focused on college instructors and their role in building rapport with students for the purpose of encouraging a sense of community, persistence, and ultimately, academic success. Specifically, this study sought to understand college professors' perspectives on the rapport-building process in online and face-to-face classrooms, in order to develop a grounded theory of interpersonal communication and rapport in computer-mediated teacher-student interactions.

There are many factors that influence rapport building. These include what happens inside the classroom as well as decisions and policies made outside the classroom. Renn and Reason (2013) used "Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development [to illuminate] the ways that relationships among individual inputs [such as

environment and interpersonal interactions]…may result in observed outcomes, including learning…and behavior," (p. 123). The authors applied Bronfenbrenner's model and its components to college students, placing the student at the center of a series of concentric circles, or "nested layers" (p. 126), each of which influence the student and the student's outcomes. Bronfenbrenner used the terms: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems, and chronosystems to describe the various types of contexts that influence an individual's development. Renn and Reason (2013), in their higher education application of the model, used microsystem to describe "the location of direct interaction between the individual and the environment" (p. 126) such as classrooms, residence hall rooms, social groups, and workplaces. These locations invite and encourage direct interaction between the individual and the environment.

At the mesosystem level, microsystems combine and link together in ways that influence the individual's unique development. This could include the college environment and its effects on the student, or the student's social network (family, friends, and teachers) to whom the student looks for support and guidance. The exosystem is farther removed from the individual (student), but has indirect effects on the student. Examples include decisions made by administration and leadership; college, state, and federal policies; academic discipline rules and expectations; and socio-economic factors that impact the student's experiences and development.

In the next layer, or circle, is the macrosystem. This space contains the more abstract influences such as cultural expectations, social roles, and historic or political influences. In the case of the student, these might include society's expectations of what

it means to be an educated adult; a culture's prioritization of education in relation to other values; or trends in minority groups' access to educational resources and opportunities (Renn & Reason, 2013). Finally, the chronosystem refers to the temporal context of an individual's development. This can refer to the generational or historical period in which the individual develops, as well as a particular temporal point within an individual's developmental process such as moving from adolescence into adulthood, or the moment at which one becomes a college student or graduate.

Chronosystem

Macrosystem

Exosystem

Mesosystem
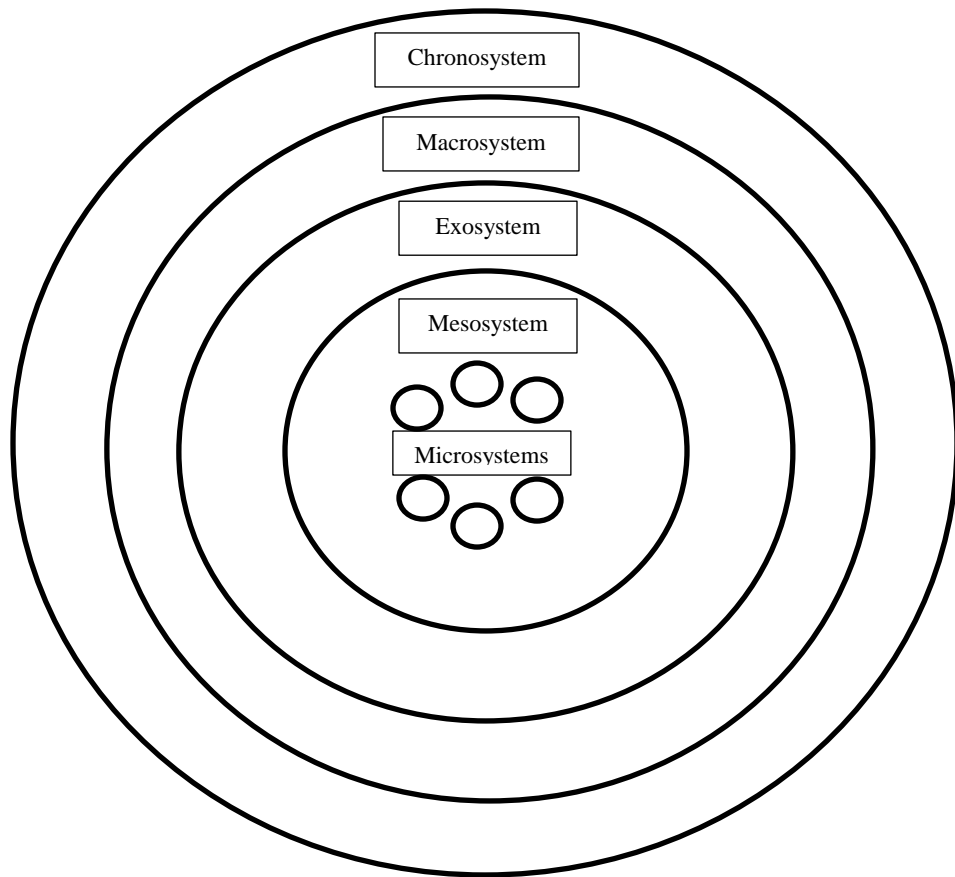
Microsystems

Figure 1. Brofenbrenner's Ecology Model of Human Development

This study focused on the student's most immediate influences: the microsystems of the classroom and the student-teacher relationship. Study findings do illustrate the influences of other ecological layers though the intent was to examine factors with direct, immediate impact – in this case, the student's classrooms and teachers. By integrating Bronfenbrenner's model of human ecology with the findings, educators and scholars can begin building a wider understanding of the elements which influence classroom rapport building.

Problem Overview

As the number of students taking web-based classes grows, it becomes increasingly urgent for educators to understand the implications of moving education online (Abedin, Daneshgar, & D'Ambra, 2010; Allen and Seaman, 2013; Glazier, 2016). For example, Delahunty, Verenikina, and Jones (2013) found that "[i]n terms of online pedagogy, rapidly changing technologies have outpaced research on how to appropriately address the intangible social space of the virtual classroom" (p. 244). Existing literature offers some understanding of the importance of teacher-student rapport in the classroom, the rapport-building process in online communication, and the student perspective of online education. However, the intersections of these areas—the instructor's perspective of rapport and the rapport-building process in the online classroom—has not yet coalesced in any definitive way. This study seeks to build some of these connections in order to develop a grounded theory of rapport-building in online education.

Problem Statement

Existing literature shows that instructors play a key role in building a sense of rapport in classrooms, and that rapport is an important component in student retention and academic achievement (Glazier, 2016; Wilson & Ryan, 2013). Without understanding classroom rapport from both the student and the instructor's perspectives, it is difficult to fully understand when and how rapport is built and which practices make rapport more likely (Keeley, Ismail, & Buskist; 2016; Major, 2010; Tao & Yeh 2008).

The literature offers some understanding of rapport-building, but it is mostly focused on students' perspectives of traditional, face-to-face classrooms. Distance education tends to require different communication strategies than face-to-face education, and these strategies may help or hinder rapport-building (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Holly, Legg, Mueller, & Adelman, 2008; Major, 2010). Walther's Social Information Processing Theory posits that online interactions have the potential to be just as rich and meaningful as the most intimate face-to-face communication, but additional time and self-disclosure are required (Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2008). The implications for this in the classroom are, as yet, unknown.

If Walther's theory holds true in an educational context, then instructors would be required to spend more time and more effort in order to self-disclose and build rapport with online students. If instructors are finding it necessary to adjust their strategies and time spent building rapport, then it stands to reason that they would notice a difference between their in-person and online rapport-building processes. By asking instructors to

articulate their experiences and observations regarding rapport-building, I aimed to present a clearer understanding of the instructor experience moving between in-person and online classes. It is essential to understand the implications of distance on teacher-student rapport-building in order to promote rapport and, in turn, to promote student success (Major, 2010). Further, by adding instructors' observations to the existing body of research, a richer perspective may be gained, and more complex, descriptive theories may be developed. Specific questions for inquiry are outlined below.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how the rapport-building process is undertaken and understood by instructors. Current research of online education tends to focus more on learner outcomes and logistics of teaching online (Keeley, et al., 2016; Major, 2011; Tao & Yeh, 2008), rather than on how faculty approach online classrooms or their attitudes and expectations for computer-mediated education. It is important to understand the perspectives of those who are on the "front line" of this education and communication phenomenon, both in order to understand the attitudes and expectations that may shape the virtual classrooms, and to gain firsthand knowledge of the challenges and strategies of online educators.

Glazier's recent study found that "there are no clear directives for how instructors can improve interaction with students," (2016, p. 4) but there is a pressing need for such guidance due to the important role that positive relationships play in student success. The

study discussed here aimed to better understand the perspectives of educators in the online teaching process. Specifically, it explored how community college professors perceive and work to establish rapport in an online (computer-mediated) classroom versus a face-to-face (FtF) classroom. Based on the work of Joseph Walther, which indicates that online communication requires more time and adjusted strategies in order to build trust and rapport, the study looked at the ways that faculty perceive their communication and rapport building with online students versus face-to-face students. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What theory describes how instructors perceive their rapport with online and face-to-face students?

2. What theory can describe similarities and differences in instructors' descriptions of their online rapport-building methods vs. their in-person rapport-building methods?

Data gathering methods used in this study will be discussed in later sections.

Definition of Terms

In order to build a clearer understanding of the issues surrounding higher education in the digital age, it is essential to first clarify a few key terms. The provided explanations are not meant to be treated as definitive. Indeed, considerable variation exists within academic discussions of the terms, and the literature review will explore in greater depth some of this variation. For the purposes of this study, however, it was

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necessary to establish some working definitions before moving forward in the investigation. These are provided below.

Rapport is "the positive relationship between teacher and student" (Wilson, Ryan, & Pugh, 2010, p. 257). Granitz, et al. (2009) argued that rapport has been achieved when three "antecedents" are present: "approach (being approachable, accessible, trustworthy, respectful, and supportive), personality (kindness, fairness, caring, and understanding), and homophily (sharing the same values, beliefs, behavioral expectations, and attitudes)" (p. 3). Rapport has been consistently linked to such outcomes as attendance, engagement, and enjoyment among students (Benson, et al., 2005; Glazier, 2016; Granitz, et al., 2009; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Rapport also correlates significantly with student success and program completion in college (Martin & Myers, 2006; Tinto, 1993; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Wilson & Ryan, 2013). Wilson, et. al. (2010) also found connections between rapport, student success, and immediacy.

Immediacy is defined as "psychological availability" (Wilson, et al., 2010, p. 246); the sense that someone is nearby and accessible. Immediacy studies are based heavily on the work of Albert Mehrabian (1967), who found that immediacy is established through verbal and nonverbal behaviors, including praise, swift feedback, the use of inclusive pronouns (we, us), appropriate eye contact, and reduced physical distance (Gorham, 1988; Mehrabian, 1967; Wilson, et al., 2010). In many online courses, nonverbal communication is largely or entirely lost, making immediacy, and consequently rapport, far more difficult to establish (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Rapport is not only about immediacy, however; it is actually a larger construct

(Wilson, et al., 2010). Whereas "immediacy" is used to describe instructor behaviors that may encourage positive feelings in students, "rapport" describes the feelings themselves. Immediacy is one of the building blocks of those feelings (rapport), and presence is another.

Presence is the impression that instructors are physically near and actively engaged with students in the virtual classroom; a sense of emotional closeness (Shea, Vickers, & Hayes, 2010). Gorsky and Blau found "highly significant relationships between levels of…presence and students' active and passive participation in the [online classroom] and their satisfaction with it" (2009, p. 17). They found that when students felt the instructor was emotionally attentive, the students were more likely to feel a sense of rapport and caring that correlated with better learning outcomes. The research of Wei, Chen, and Kinshuk (2012) also asserted that learners are more likely to experience isolation and alienation in online learning environments if they do not sense a social presence from their instructors. Kim, Kwon, and Cho (2011) found presence to be strongly tied to media integration in distance education. That is, when online faculty use more than text-based communication (such as adding audio and video recordings of lectures and feedback), students feel closer to their instructors and more satisfied with their experience. Many online courses rely heavily on text-based, asynchronous communication channels; this makes it very difficult for instructors to establish their virtual presence. As a result, rapport suffers and student attrition becomes a serious risk (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012).

Methodological Overview

This study drew on grounded theory methodology to inform the research design. Participants were recruited from a large, diverse community college in a metropolitan area, and those chosen had a minimum of two years of experience teaching both online and in-person classes. Snowball sampling was used to collect data from 22 participants for one-hour, in semi-structured interviews. Those interviews were transcribed for open coding, and later, axial coding, with the goal of building a grounded theory. As a theory began emerging, the participants were contacted a second time via email. In the message, preliminary findings were shown to participants for member checking before the final dissertation was completed. A more in-depth discussion of methods and methodology will be offered later in this document.

Study Significance and Value

With institutions offering more online courses, it is more important than ever to understand the foundational elements of quality distance education (Major, 2010; Sarapin & Morris, 2015). Cleveland-Innes, et al. (2007) found that "the move to online delivery in postsecondary education institutions has increased exponentially" (p. 1), making theory-building about the elements of online student success a pressing concern for scholars and educators. Because student-teacher relationships play a crucial role in long-term student success, developing a theory to describe the differences between face-to-face and online interactions promoting rapport may allow for improved understanding of virtual courses, as well as traditional, face to face courses. Improved understanding is

essential for increasing student success and persistence. Indeed, "[s]tudent persistence and degree attainment significantly impact the economic success for colleges and universities. Attrition (i.e., students who leave school before completing a degree) has far-reaching consequences not only for students who depart prior to degree attainment, but also for the institutions from which they depart" (Heisserer & Parette, 2002, p. 73). Furthermore, "[s]tates are increasingly allocating higher education funding based on performance indicators such as course completion and time to degree," (Glazier, 2016, p. 2) making every lost student a threat to an institution's financial bottom-line as well as its moral obligation.

In their literature review, Lee and Choi (2011) found that explanations for lower rates of completion in online classes generally fit into three common categories: student characteristics (i.e. lack of motivation or preparation); environmental factors such as access and conflicting priorities; and course/instructor features. Of these, only course and instructor features are ever within the control of the institution or instructor, making this category an urgent priority.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Current literature sources widely agree that students need to feel a sense of belonging, both socially and academically, in order to enjoy school and successfully complete their coursework and graduate (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Moffatt, 1991; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2012) and that instructors play a major role in building that sense of belonging (Song, et al., 2015; Tinto, 2012; Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005). When immediacy behaviors are limited and presence is not felt, rapport suffers and students are less likely to be successful (Morgan & Tam, 1999; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) described the professor's role in creating a feeling of belonging and rapport, emphasizing the need for: clear expectations, easily-accessible resources and support, welcome programs, early-warnings for struggling students, and mentoring; in short, the building of a nurturing academic community. The concept and importance of community appears again and again in higher education research, both in the study of online teaching and learning, and in the study of face-to-face teaching and learning. Rapport appears to be an essential building block of community, making it necessary to explore both concepts and their importance to student success.

The following sections will explore two common lines of discussion in current community building literature, showing the importance of community- and rapport-

building in online education. Later sections will discuss the challenges and importance of understanding rapport online, as well as the need for studying rapport from the instructor's perspective. Finally, this literature review will discuss the justification and implications for utilizing Walther's Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) as a theoretical framework for building a grounded theory of instructors' perspectives on rapport and rapport building.

Community

Online rapport-building is of great interest to scholars of distance education because of the role that rapport plays in community-building. Whereas "rapport" is typically used to describe a level of trust and emotional connection between two individuals, "community" describes that same kind of trust and connection among multiple individuals. In the context of education, rapport represents the ideal interpersonal relationship between teacher and student, or student and student; whereas "community" symbolizes the ideal classroom climate in which students and instructors interact successfully (Rovai, 2002). In short, building rapport is the first step toward building community (Frisby & Martin, 2010). If the former is prevented or lost, it seems to be very difficult or impossible to establish the latter. Before exploring the concept of rapport in any depth, it is necessary to look at the bigger picture of community, and its related concepts.

Delahunty et al. found that:

[i]n recent years… the boundaries of defining 'community' have shifted

dramatically, with ease of travel and communications technology making it

possible for communities to develop beyond time, space, or the physical

proximity of its members… Without the restrictions of physical or geographical

location, community becomes 'what people do together' rather than 'where or

through what means.' (2013)

Current research about online education repeatedly refers to two key concepts of virtual

classrooms: sense of community and community of inquiry (Delahunty, et al., 2013).

The two concepts are typically discussed when examining students' perspectives and

interactions within a digital course. Both reflect a desire for an online learning

environment in which students feel connected to, and can collaborate successfully with,

instructors and peers. More specifically, sense of community, or SOC, is a phrase used to

describe students' perception that the online classroom is "real" and that peers and

instructors are accessible, relatable, and committed to harmony and cooperation.

Community of inquiry, or COI, is used to describe a group of individuals who share

values and goals, and who work together successfully to build knowledge and

understanding. COI is often used to describe a classroom setting, but it can also describe

a work group or exploratory committee, among other groups. Sense of community may

also be applied to contexts other than online courses, such as in academic discussions of

inclusive, intercultural, face-to-face classrooms.

Sense of Community (SOC)

The importance of a sense of community in the educational context has been widely researched, and builds upon a larger body of literature which seeks to explore the concept. While "there is no universally accepted definition of the term sense of community" (Rovai, 2002, p. 321), there are some widely-used, somewhat similar definitions that can aid educators in understanding how the literature views this concept. In his examination of SOC, Sarason (1974) emphasized "a feeling that one is part of a larger, dependable and stable structure" (p. 157). McMillan and Chavis similarly described sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together," (1986, p. 9). While Unger and Wanddesman (1985) did not use the phrase "sense of community," they did describe community itself as a feeling. Specifically, their research defined "community" as "feelings of membership and belongingness and shared socio-economic ties" (p. 155). Graff applied the concept specifically to an educational context, describing "classroom community" as "the sense of trust and interaction between groups of learners," (2003, p. 203).

Rovai argued that in order to build such a feeling in a classroom, there must be a strong connection among students and between students and the instructor; a sense of immediacy among members; common goals and beliefs; and a certain level of trust and rapport (Rovai, 2002). Rovai created and tested the Classroom Community Scale (CCS) to measure students' sense of community and professors' effectiveness in promoting a

sense of immediacy, trust, and rapport. His and other scholars' studies which utilized the Likert-type questionnaire have consistently found sense of community to be significantly, positively correlated to student satisfaction and to student learning outcomes, as well as rapport (Dawson, 2006; Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

Community of Inquiry (COI)

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) created the Community of Inquiry (COI) model "specifically [for] the goal of supporting epistemic engagement," (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010, p. 1722). The framework addressed a faulty assumption of previous models, namely that interaction inherently builds efficacy and deeper thinking among groups of learners (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). Rather than emphasizing quantity, as previous scholars had, Garrison, et al. explored quality when assessing connections between communication behaviors and collaborative learning outcomes (2000; see also Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). They developed their model in the early days of online education, and used it to describe the educational experience as the intersection of teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence (Garrison, et al., 2010). The authors' conceptualizations of teaching, cognitive, and social presences have not changed much over the years, though these constructs have been applied in new ways as educational media and research questions have evolved (Garrison, et al., 2010).

Social presence involves self-disclosure of the instructor's personality (Ke, 2010), such as when the instructor opts for Skype rather than email to give instructions and feedback in a more personal, friendly way. Social presence may also be used in looking at the ways that instructors use social media to help themselves and their students to share more about themselves in order to form more cohesive relationship bonds. Social presence tends to require more effort and time, but has been positively correlated with improved learning outcomes for students (Tichavsky, et al., 2015). These findings regarding the extra time and care required to establish presence online help to justify the use of Walther's theoretical framework for online education scholarship. Further justification will be provided later in this literature review.

Teaching presence refers to the sense that students have of being in an educational environment with a knowledgeable, capable instructor (Ke, 2010). Establishing this kind of presence typically begins before a course has even started, as instructors determine curriculum, lesson plans, and assessments. The presence-building process continues throughout the course, through lesson delivery, activities, assessments, and feedback (Ke, 2010). Ke posited that teaching presence may play a larger role than cognitive or social presences in building a community of inquiry; her 2010 study found evidence that social and cognitive presence may be predicated on teaching presence. In his later research with a different team, Garrison also found support for placing teaching presence in a more central role in relation to community-building and engagement (Garrison, et al., 2010).

Shea and Bidjerano adjusted the original COI model's illustration of equally impactful presences, adding learning presence to the framework (2010). Learning

presence is closely related to cognitive presence, and describes a student's self-efficacy and the extent to which the learning environment and activities are tailored to the individual student's abilities and needs (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). Cognitive presence refers to the learners' ability to gain knowledge, build critical thinking skills, and synthesize and analyze concepts through communication and interaction with the instructor and with peers (Garrison, et al, 2010; Ke, 2010).

Like SOC scholarship, the social constructionist view of the community of inquiry, in which learners collaborate to find meaning, build skills, and form cohesive bonds (Ke, 2010) also emphasizes the importance of relationship-building (elsewhere described as "rapport") between teachers and students and among peers. The following section will explore the importance of community building, in order to explain the importance of studying its building block: rapport.

Community-Building and Rapport in Online Education

Integration into the academic and social communities of an institution are necessary for persistence (Greene & Mitcham, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Rovai (2002) postulated that a sense of community is not just important for emotional and social engagement, but for cognitive engagement and learning, as well. Garrison, et al., (2010) likewise saw community as essential to knowledge- and skill-building. In short, students must feel like they belong to a community in order to persist and complete their academic goals (Dawson, 2006; Garrison, et al., 2012; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Tinto, 1993, 2012). Delahunty et al.'s (2013) literature review of online

pedagogy scholarship confirmed these points of view to be commonly held among researchers (2013). The importance of community in education is potentially problematic for online learners because students in online classes seem more likely to experience a sense of alienation from their school and classmates, leaving them at higher risk of dropping out (Griffiths & Graham, 2010; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). With more and more students taking online classes, this concern becomes increasingly urgent.

Rubin and Fernandes (2013) found instructor behaviors to be crucial in building a sense of community; describing faculty as leaders of communities of inquiry, who set the standards of the online classroom by example. Thus, it is necessary to examine instructor behaviors in online classes in order to build a deeper understanding of the online experiences of students (Frisby, Berger, Burchett, Herovic, & Strawser, 2014; Kramer, Karacora, Lucas, Dehghani, Ruther, & Gratch, 2016). Estepp and Roberts (2015), for example, used Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory to explore the ways that environment (community), behaviors (positive interactions and rapport-building), and cognitive factors (cognitive presence and student engagement) intersect in the classroom. In addition, Wade, Cameron, Morgan, and Williams (2011) examined the interplay between interpersonal interactions (rapport) and online group projects (communities of inquiry) to better understand how the success of the former influences the outcomes of the latter. A great deal of evidence is mounting that suggests that rapport-building and community-building seem to be more difficult online. This increased difficulty and the potential implications for student success in online classes make a strong argument for the

importance of a deeper understanding of community-building (and therefore, rapport-building) a necessity for scholars of teaching and learning.

Rapport

By many accounts, rapport is a foundational requirement for community building and, by extension, for student success (Kim & Thayne, 2015; Shea, et al., 2010; Shea, et al., 2006; Song, et al., 2015). Frisby and Martin's 2010 study sought to explain the connection between rapport and community in a succinct way: "[students'] perceived rapport with instructors and classmates as related to perceptions of classroom connectedness" (2010, p. 146). Numerous studies have demonstrated that these feelings of connectedness and community have long-ranging implications for student learning outcomes.

Wilson and Ryan found that "rapport between teachers and students relates to valuable student outcomes, such as student enjoyment of the material, class attendance …time spent studying… [and] paying attention in class," (2013, p. 130). Kim and Thayne (2015) reported that "the strength of rapport between an instructor and his or her students influences each learner's affective experiences (e.g. attitudes and confidence) and achievements. When learner-instructor relationships are strong, students better engage in the task and enhance their learning," (p. 101). Unlike demographic or environmental factors, "rapport building represents a simple, instructor-driven intervention that can significantly improve online retention and grades" (Glazier, 2016, p. 1). However, although "students have reported that rapport is an essential characteristic of an effective

teacher [and classroom]...relatively little is known about rapport," (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 147).

Glazier collected numerous published definitions to build a composite definition of rapport as "harmonious interactions between faculty and students [in which] problems are resolved amicably, ideas are exchanged respectfully, and discussions are carried out professionally. A high rapport relationship is one of mutual understanding and satisfactory communication" (Glazier, 2016, p. 5). Wilson, et al. likewise compared several "common conceptions of rapport," such as feelings of "friendliness and caring… [and] close or sympathetic relationship[s] [with] agreement [and] harmony [that are] a crucial part of effective teaching… [and are] associated with student learning," (2010, p. 246).

Wilson and Ryan (2013) clarified that rapport "reflects more than just a caring, likeable teacher; useful rapport tie[s] to student outcomes and seems to move beyond liking the teacher to what the teacher does to make the class more engaging for students" (p. 132-133). Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) agreed that "rapport is [found]… only in interaction between individuals, and [is] not a personality trait. [It is a] mutual phenomenon characterized by mutual attentiveness, …mutual respect, …mutual openness, …mutual attention, … and mutual understanding [with the] mutual attention… [being] positive or harmonious in nature" (p. 168). Kim and Thayne, while they acknowledged several personal characteristics which encourage rapport-building (being supportive and encouraging; showing enthusiasm and energy), similarly agreed that the

current literature supports a view of rapport as a range of interactions which establish "a friendly atmosphere and [make] students feel they matter" (2015, p. 103).

Not all scholars use the term "rapport" to describe positive relationships; however, many of the various descriptions of effective interpersonal behaviors and interactions in online classrooms tend to match the above common definitions of "rapport" very closely. For example, Greene and Mitcham, while never using the word "rapport," described a positive classroom scenario in which one can infer the establishment of rapport, and build a link between the conditions of this scenario and student success, much in the way that scholars of rapport tie it to student success: "When students feel valued and respected, they gain the confidence that they need to share their own experiences, to engage in authentic opportunities for learning, and to work in spaces that might be challenging or unfamiliar" (p. 14).

Other scholars also emphasize the importance of positive interactions and bonding behaviors in an online classroom, though they do not use the word "rapport." Tichavsky, et al. (2015), for example, stated that: [i]nteraction is at the heart of most effective learning environments regardless of delivery format, and interaction tends to aid student motivation" (p. 2). While the authors used the word "interaction," it is clear from the context that they mean to imply positive interactions, such as those which one might expect when individuals have a positive rapport.

Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) added to the body of rapport literature when they conducted a study to find markers of rapport in online and face to face classes. In their findings, they explained that rapport can be recognized as being established when

posture, movements, and vocal style are synchronized between individuals. They found these markers to be less common in online classes than in face-to-face classes; however, it is unclear if the markers are simply more difficult to observe, or if rapport is simply not present. It is also possible that the markers of rapport are different in different contexts. For example, Jones, Warren, and Robertson (2009) pointed to shared writing styles (matching formality, style, and tone of emails, for example), non-class-related conversations, self-disclosure, and clear sincere emotions as indicators of rapport. It would be easier to observe these markers in an online class than such nonverbal elements as posture or movement, though the research is still unclear on how, when, and why the various markers do or do not present themselves.

Critique of Rapport Literature

While the aforementioned literature is useful in establishing a basic understanding of rapport-building issues and their significance in online classes, the available information is far from exhaustive. The research that is available is further limited by the fact that it generally does not take in to account instructors' experiences with an online rapport-building process. The current, limited data largely comes from students' point of view, and not from instructors.

Baran, et al. (2011) also found a consistent problem in the current literature; a lack of concrete, proven best practices for online educators. They conducted an extensive review of scholarship about faculty and students in online college courses, and although they found firm support for the importance of instructors in overcoming the inherent

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challenges of online education, they could find very little in the way of suggested

pedagogy. Further, they could find only limited efforts toward faculty-empowerment, or

developing an in-depth understanding of faculty interactions with students in online

classrooms. They reported that:

> If a distinct pedagogy of online learning is to emerge, the role of online teachers
>
> in the online environment needs to be explored…While the literature on the roles
>
> and competencies of online teachers recognizes the importance of context [to be
>
> competent in online teaching], it is limited in terms of sharing strategies for
>
> transforming teacher practices for online teaching and helping them understand
>
> and adapt to the new teaching environment. (p. 430)

The research that currently does exist on best-practices for instructors

unfortunately contains seemingly conflicting advice. For example, Meyer and McNeal

(2010) suggested that instructors become both more accessible through the use of

technology *and* give up control in order to allow students work more on their own. This

may be difficult for instructors to know how to do. Ross, Gallagher and Macleod (2013)

further pointed out that even the concept of student engagement is "not a permanent or

stable state of either 'presence' or 'distance' [but a] fluid and temporary assemblage" (p.

51). Without a better understanding of instructors' perspectives, experiences, and

relationships with students, scholars and administrators cannot help them to build

appropriate pedagogy that promotes student learning.

Further complicating matters is the fact that many instructors are never given

much training or mentorship to prepare them to navigate online teaching in the first place

(Higgins & Harreveld, 2013), even though it is widely acknowledged that teaching online requires different tactics than face-to-face teaching (Major, 2010). Holly, et al. (2008) emphasized the need to better understand instructors' perspectives, roles, and best-practices in online classes, writing, "As a method of instruction, online courses are as much a social experience as a learning experience" (p. 254).

Unfortunately, although teacher-student rapport is generally agreed to be important in both online and face-to-face classrooms (Kim & Thayne, 2015; Shea, et al., 2010; Song, et al., 2015), it has not been studied enough in distance-learning for educators to understand how this rapport may be created (or how it might be lost) when a course is taken online. The lack of understanding of this relationship building process is extremely problematic (Swanson, Davis, Parks, Atkinson, Forde, & Choi, 2015). Without communication theory about online interpersonal communication between instructors and students, it is difficult to develop pedagogy or andragogy for virtual classrooms.

Although research about student perspectives on the student-teacher relationship is readily available, and quite valuable, "students and instructors have divergent views of teaching" (Wilson, et al., 2010, p. 247) and "participants may assess rapport differently," (Altman, 1990, p. 295), making it essential to record both perspectives when examining the classroom (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Tichavsky, et al. (2015) found that students generally preferred face-to-face classes to online classes because of "a desire for interaction, concerns about motivation, and the comfort of familiarity" (p. 3). It is not known, however, if instructors have similar assumptions about interaction, similar concerns about motivation, and similar feelings about familiarity and comfort. As of yet,

there is only very limited data about trends in faculty assumptions, observations, experiences, and conclusions in relation to online teaching and learning.

In his 2009 literature review, Meyers found that students and instructors may prioritize rapport differently, with students generally emphasizing it more than faculty, though some variation seemed to occur from one discipline to another. Meyers also noted variation in rapport levels within the same classes. He reported that instructors acknowledged that some students are simply harder to connect with than others, for a variety of possible reasons. Understanding the nuances of diverse faculty views, priorities, and experiences may be useful in understanding rapport generally, and in strategizing for improved rapport-building in specific instances.

Inside Higher Education's 2015 Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology found evidence of increasingly negative attitudes about online education when it was compared to face-to-face education. Data indicated suspicion about the role of technology in higher education, as well as divergent opinions about technology between faculty and administration, but the survey could not offer an in-depth understanding of the causes of these attitudes and variations of opinion.

Ehrlich (2002) conducted an extensive study in which she sought to establish guidelines for successful student-teacher relationship building, but her data came entirely from interviewing and observing her students. Her own observations as an instructor make the study somewhat richer, but only somewhat, as they were the thoughts and feelings of one individual. Further, her research subjects were graduate students, and so her findings may not be generalizable to the larger body of undergraduate learners.

Sarapin and Morris (2015) gathered a larger sample to study professors' perspectives of online communication, however, they looked solely at social media use. Further, the authors cautioned against building any firm conclusions from their data due to low response rate and certain gaps in their questioning. Their findings were valuable in the sense that the literature was moved a small step closer to creating a theory of teacher-student online communication, but the limitations of the study (low response rate; failure to differentiate between new students, current students, and former students; gaps in questioning; and lack of class-related communication research) make it less useful for creating a theory that would be useful to educators seeking to build rapport in online courses.

A study in the *Journal of Nursing Education* also focused on the faculty experience, and looked specifically at the student-teacher relationship in online classes. Mastel-Smith, Post, and Lake (2015) found that "faculty promoted helping-trusting-caring relationships [with students] and addressed individual learning needs" (p. 145). This reaffirms earlier studies which establish the importance of rapport, and adds another layer of complexity to the body of research by including faculty and looking specifically at communication as it relates to learning. However, the study involved only six interviews and was narrowly focused on nursing courses. A small-scale study is certainly valuable for establishing a foundation for new theory building, but on its own it is simply not enough to build a theory. The study could not provide any specific advice for faculty because it lacked a solid theoretical basis to understand the nature of the relationships and their origins.

Adding yet more complexity is an issue noted by Schutt, Allen, and Laumakis (2009). The authors sought to provide some guidance for forging strong communities in online classes, and used studies of traditional, face-to-face classes to better understand the challenges of online instructors in creating a positive learning environment. In so doing, they, like many of the aforementioned scholars, found instructor immediacy and presence to be crucial elements of any classroom community. However, they also noticed a consistent problem in much of the existing research: many scholars seem to take it for granted that a face-to-face classroom instructor will always experience rapport, while an online instructor will always find it more difficult and less likely to establish rapport. They pointed out that the elements of rapport may or may not be present in any classroom – face-to-face or digital - and depend greatly on the tools used and the verbal and nonverbal behaviors shown. The authors cautioned their fellow researchers to mind their assumptions when comparing online and offline teaching and learning, and to note the range of instructional and relational quality present in all face-to-face and distance courses.

Another, often taken for granted issue in current literature is the false dichotomy that many researchers construct between online and face-to-face education. Bengtsen and Jenson (2015) argued quite correctly that positioning online education and face-to-face education on opposite ends of a spectrum is less useful than it once might have been. Whereas online education is conventionally assumed to be de facto asynchronous and lacking in physical proximity, and face-to-face education is assumed to position faculty and students in the same time and place, this is simply not true in all instances. As it

becomes easier to communicate in real-time, many online courses are able to provide engaging and interactive opportunities for learning. Further, some distance education courses also require students to meet in-person with each other and/or with an instructor at regular intervals. Similarly, many face-to-face classes are now opting to put at least some content online, either for logistical reasons (a snow day, instructor illness, scheduling conflicts) or for the sake of diverse delivery of lessons (instruction or assessment offered in the form of videos, games, podcasts, comprehension quizzes).

Ignoring the complexity and variation of educational delivery methods in the digital age does the entire field a great disservice. Scholars of teaching and learning would do well to look at the tools instructors choose and the ways in which those tools are used in a range of contexts to explore the pros, cons, challenges, and rewards of building relationships in online and face-to-face courses.

Social Information Processing Theory

While there is only limited research about relationship-building in online teaching, scholars and educators can gain some useful ideas for creating classroom communities online from established communication research. Researcher Joseph Walther, an expert in computer-mediated communication, has spent many years examining relationship-building in online contexts. His Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) (1992) is well-respected by communication scholars and has been applied to a variety of contexts to aid

researchers in understanding the ways that individuals adjust their behavior when their interactions are moved online (Abedin, et al., 2010).

Based in Social Presence Theory (SPT), which was developed from the earliest CMC research, and which explored presence as a sense of salience between partners in teleconferences, Walther's SIPT moved away from seeing quantities of task-related conversation versus social-related conversation as indicators of rapport, and instead explored the quality of each type of interaction. Rather than a more-social-talk-is-better viewpoint, Walther examined when and why certain types of interactions were more successful in establishing attraction and rapport in certain contexts (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001).

In SIPT, Walther posits that the loss of physical closeness in an online environment may slow the relationship-building process, but it does not prevent successful relationships from forming (Antheunis, Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2012; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1992). Rather, individuals interacting online will generally adapt their behaviors to the medium, and take more time and care in collecting the information they need to build impressions of one another (Walther, 1992). Seiler, Beall, and Mazer (2013) succinctly and clearly summarized SIPT as follows: "electronically mediated relationships grow only to the extent that people gain information about each other and use it to form impressions" (p. 352). Much of this effort to gain information and form impressions is related to the communication theory of uncertainty reduction, i.e. the desire to reduce uncertainty when interacting with someone new. This desire may lead individuals to more closely observe nonverbal behaviors

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(facial expressions, posture, movements, eye contact, etc.), or, in the case of text-based communication, to ask more probing questions in order to learn more about a conversation partner in the absence of nonverbal cues (Antheunis, et al., 2012; Walther, 1992). Communicators may also engage in additional self-disclosure online, both to encourage the partner to reciprocate and also to encourage positive impressions on the part of the partner by presenting oneself in the best way possible. This mindful self-presentation is sometimes known as impression management (Seiler, et al., 2013).

Antheunis, et al. (2012) extended SIPT by explicitly tying it to Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT). Their study of conversation behaviors in video-based and text-based interactions supported Walther's theory that uncertainty reduction and impression formation are more difficult online, but not impossible, as participants tend to utilize adapted strategies when visual cues are lost (increased question asking and increased/deeper self-disclosure). In some cases, individuals may be especially motivated to get to know one another better (for example, on a dating site), leading to a hyperpersonal approach (Walther, 1996; Walther, 1992). The hyperpersonal approach involves the conversation participants' overreliance on limited, available cues, to evaluate one another, leading to inaccurate understandings of one's partner. In the hyperpersonal approach, individuals may be perceived in an overly positive or overly negative light, though overly positive, idealized conclusions about character are more commonly found in the literature. These idealized expectations of the other may promote attraction in a way and at a speed that nonverbal cues in a face-to-face scenario might not (Antheunis, et al., 2012; Walther, 1996).

Walther suggested that the "richness" of a medium affects interactions and communication choices. In communication scholarship, "richness" refers to the amount of nonverbal behaviors that a medium can convey, with richer media offering more nonverbal information to the message receiver. When individuals use a "leaner" medium such as email, which provides only verbal (word-based) communication, they may utilize behaviors that they would not choose otherwise, such as increased question-asking to reduce uncertainty and increased self-disclosure to improve understanding (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Walther sees online communication as at least mildly disadvantaged in relationship-building, compared to face-to-face communication. However, this disadvantage may be overcome, according to Walther, with more time and effort, and with different strategies and media. Ultimately, Walther sees online communication not as inferior to face-to-face communication, so much as it is simply different, in terms of the time and strategies required for rapport to be established. Later research has supported his theory in the contexts of online work groups and online dating (Farrer & Gavin, 2009). It stands to reason that if his theory also applies to online education, then educators would notice differences between their relationship- and rapport-building efforts with students online and in face-to-face classrooms.

Although Walther's early work focused on attraction, I can draw some parallels with these studies and some of the current literature on rapport building in the classroom. Like Walther, Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008) found that the nonverbal cues which express personality, reactions, and rapport may be harder or impossible to observe

and to utilize in digital communication. Indeed, "rapport building must be premeditated, consciously promoted, and can only be achieved with more work [online]," (p. 1068). That being said, the scholars agree that rapport-building is possible, given the appropriate behaviors.

In the context of teacher-student rapport-building, Kuh, et al. (2005) emphasized that an instructor must display clear expectations, easily-accessible resources and support, early-warnings for struggling students, and proactive outreach to connect, reduce uncertainty, and reinforce bonds with students. Meyers (2009) similarly recommended behaviors that expressed caring, competence, and expectations clearly, early, and often in order to promote positive relationships with students.

While Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, and Saville (2002) wrote about face-to-face classrooms, their research drew similar conclusions. They used student and faculty survey responses to collect a list of behaviors they believed to be useful in establishing rapport: having clear and fair requirements; showing expertise and preparation; demonstrating caring and understanding; establishing approachability; treating students respectfully; displaying enthusiasm for tasks and subject matter; and promoting practical and critical thinking. These behaviors share many goals with those which Walther and Bunz (2005) recommended for online work groups. Walther and Bunz established six best practices for building trust, rapport, and productivity in online work groups: 1) begin with substantive tasks right away; 2) communicate frequently; 3) multitask, organizing and doing substantive work simultaneously; 4) overtly acknowledge reading one another's messages; 5) be explicit about thoughts and actions; and 6) set deadlines and

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stick to them (pp. 833-835). While many professionals likely undertake these tasks both online and off, Walther pointed out that extra attention, care, and diligence are necessary when working with groups online in order to avoid misunderstandings.

In the context of an online classroom, I could use current education literature to extrapolate the following best practices from Walther and Bunz's original list: 1) start the class right away; 2) encourage students to communicate with each other and with the instructor frequently; 3) introduce the course structure and expectations at the same time that students are actively engaging each other and their assignments; 4) ensure that all messages are acknowledged promptly by recipients, either students, instructor, or both; 5) provide regular instructor feedback on exercises, brainstorming conversations, and drafts, while encouraging students to consistently update one another on progress, questions, challenges, accomplishments, and ideas; and 6) make clear all course deadlines, as well as consequences for late or missing work. Again, many instructors of in-person classes likely follow these guidelines, but online classes may require even more diligence and care in following them.

All of the behaviors described by Buskust, et al. (2002) and extrapolated from Walther and Bunz (2005) come down to showing respect; acknowledging the feelings and needs of others; demonstrating preparedness, time management, and competence; having clear, reinforced boundaries and expectations; and demonstrating care and enthusiasm for the group and for the task. Walther's examination of media richness (the amount of nonverbal information that a particular communication route can convey) also makes his work consistent with current scholarship on teaching and learning. Just as

Walther found that the richness of a medium has an impact on the ways and frequency with which individuals work to reduce uncertainty, Schutt, et al. (2009) argued that media richness directly correlates to stronger perceptions of immediacy and presence, which are important factors in student satisfaction and academic success.

Asynchronous, text-based courses, according to Schutt et al., are less media rich, and therefore, more challenging contexts in which to build immediacy and presence. Courses with synchronous elements that allow for richer verbal and nonverbal communication, on the other hand, show more promise for building a classroom community with immediacy and presence, which promotes learning and student satisfaction.

While Walther might not agree with Schutt, et al.'s conclusions about the detriments of asynchronous, text-based communication, he would likely agree that choosing asynchronous text-based communication would have a significant impact on behaviors and rapport-building. Walther, et al. (2001) found that while seeing faces can be useful for building rapport in the short-term, there is less evidence that nonverbal cues are strictly necessary for rapport-building in the long-term, if participants are sufficiently motivated to self-disclose, reduce uncertainty, and form impressions.

The parallels between rapport research, online education research, and Walther's online relationship-building studies make Social Information Processing Theory an intriguing lens through which to view instructor-student interactions and rapport building. Just as the Walther research explores adaptations for communicators interacting across different types of media, distance education research shows a need to adopt different

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communication strategies as different types of technology are utilized in online courses (Baran, et al., 2011; Holly, et al., 2008; Major, 2010).

As I prepared for, and engaged in, interviews with instructors of online and face-to-face classes, I kept Social Information Processing Theory in mind. Just as Walther focused on the processes by which people build relationships online, my interview questions focused on the processes by which instructors aim to establish, confirm, and maintain rapport with students. Additionally, my interview protocol aimed to understand how professors perceive the amount of time and effort, as well as the types of strategies needed, when working to build rapport with students online and in-person. This aim was inspired by Walther's findings that online and in-person relationship-building tend to require different strategies and different amounts of time and effort.

Over the course of my interviews, I probed for as much detail as possible, looking for similarities and differences in the online and the in-person process descriptions, just as Walter compared online and in-person relationship-building not as better or worse, necessarily, but simply as different. Further, I asked professors to describe their feelings about rapport itself, as it has been suggested that instructors and students often perceive and prioritize rapport differently (Altman, 1990; Meyers, 2009; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012; Wilson, et al., 2010). A full list of questions can be found in Appendix A.

As I collected information, it was important to avoid simple either-or interpretations of online versus face-to-face classes and avoid the false dichotomies discussed earlier in this proposal. Just as Walther has found that online and face-to-face

communication interactions are not simply better or worse, but different and potentially

equally valuable, I attempted to identify the more complex costs, benefits, differences,

and similarities among different communication avenues used by faculty. This is

described further in the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of student-teacher interpersonal communication by building a grounded theory of the rapport-building process. By understanding computer-mediated interpersonal communication, instructors may improve their ability to reduce attrition and improve motivation in online classes, and in academic programs overall. Further, theories of online rapport-building may offer additional insight into offline communication, as well, giving this research the potential to improve learning outcomes in both online and face-to-face courses.

The study took an interpretivist approach, "creat[ing] shared meanings through collaborative…activities [(in this case, interviews)] that integrate new knowledge into …experiences" (Holly, et al. 2008, p. 254) in order to address gaps in the current research about faculty experiences in online education, and to create a grounded theory for improved understanding of interpersonal communication in education. The study's primary goal was to examine how instructors with experience in both online and face-to-face teaching perceive their rapport with students. This information will inform non-faculty of an important point of view. The secondary goal was to use this information to build a grounded theory of rapport-building in online versus face-to-face classes.

The study relied on interviews with experienced college faculty (those with two years or more experience teaching online and face-to-face courses) in order to not just

collect data associated with teaching behaviors and learning outcomes, but to gain a more in-depth understanding of how instructors themselves perceive their behaviors and interactions. As Charmaz (2014) explained, "Intensive qualitative interviewing fits grounded theory methods particularly well [because interviewing] facilitates conducting an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an area in which the interviewee has substantial experience," (p. 85). Without the perspective of online classroom instructors, it is difficult to fully understand the process or to improve future processes. Qualitative research allows insight into a population that is purposefully sampled from potential participants in order to target relevant, information-rich perspectives (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014), in this case, faculty members with two or more years of experience teaching online and in-person. By exploring an under-examined aspect of the online learning context, instructors, and working together with participants to construct meaning, this study required respect for participants' expertise and a rigorous analysis of data that fit well within the philosophy of qualitative methods.

As is the norm in qualitative research, I did not approach this study with any particular hypothesis in mind, preferring instead to use grounded theory to allow flexibility and an open mind for exploration of this relatively new frontier. I hoped to construct meaning and the foundations of a new theory through an interpretivist approach; using my research participants' own words to help me make sense of their experiences and observations. Tao and Yeh (2008) and Huss and Eastep (2015) confirmed the need for a more nuanced, qualitative approach to understanding faculty

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perspective in distance education, a field which they found to be generally underrepresented in published research currently.

Due to this study's emphasis on communication (both instructor-student and instructor-researcher), it was appropriate to use a research framework based in the field of communication studies. Cronkhite (1986) explained that the purpose of communication research is to examine behaviors, their meanings, and contexts. In this case, the behavior will be the instructors' efforts to explain their rapport-building processes and describe their perspectives on those processes in the contexts of online courses and in-person classrooms. By examining the way that professors perceive their rapport-building, and how the process is similar and different in online and face-to-face classes, I hoped it would become clearer how they perceive the class formats and how they experience interactions in each context. While any researcher should use great care in interpreting participants' words, "the ability to construe their modes of expression…allows one to work toward developing [a better understanding]" (Geertz, 1974). Lindlof and Taylor equated the communication process with "the construction of meaning" (2011, p. 4) and Schutz (1967) defined meaning as "a certain way of directing one's gaze at an item of one's own experience" (p. 42). This study examined how instructors gaze at their teaching experiences in online and face-to-face courses in order to build a grounded theory of teacher-student perceived rapport in online classes.

Although, as a community college professor, I have an understanding of college teaching, I have very little experience with teaching online. I approached my participants as experienced mentors; putting aside, but not ignoring, my preconceived notions in order

to appreciate their knowledge, while still acknowledging my own mental frameworks. I will discuss my positionality in this study later in the proposal.

Research Design

Following a pilot study I conducted in 2014, I wanted to build on some elements that I found intriguing and create a more in-depth, focused examination. For this current study, I conducted face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with instructors about their experiences with, and perceptions of, teacher-student communication in the online college classroom, as compared with the in-person classroom. I interviewed 22 community college instructors, each with at least two years of experience teaching both "traditional" (the term used by this institution to describe face-to-face classes) and "online" courses. This particular community college strictly differentiated between "online" courses (those which required students to come to campus only for midterms and final exams) and "hybrid" courses (those which required instructors to deliver 50% or more of the content in-person, with the remainder delivered online). Hybrid and online courses had different sets of rules, different training requirements for instructors, and different oversight and authority structures. I focused on those instructors with online experience (many of whom also had experience with hybrids), rather than those with hybrid experience only, because I was especially eager to learn how limiting opportunities for face-to-face communication would affect the rapport-building process. As with the pilot study, I began this research by sending a mass email to faculty members at my own institution, listing my participant criteria and requesting volunteers. This

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method of purposeful sampling brought me my first interview participants for the pilot study, and it was largely successful in attracting a significant number of participants for this study. In order to maximize diversity and data richness, I used snowball sampling to find additional possible volunteers based on the recommendations of those who had already agreed to participate.

A community college with a large selection of face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses provided an excellent opportunity to speak with instructors who were able to compare their own experiences across media and among diverse groups of students and academic subjects. Additionally, community colleges are often an under-researched area of higher education (Meier, 2013) making data from a community college even more valuable. The institution I approached for my study is one of the largest in the United States with nearly 80,000 students and over 3,000 employees on multiple campuses. It draws diverse students from across a large, metropolitan area, as well as international students from dozens of countries. This student/faculty population provides many opportunities for collecting diverse perspectives.

To increase the likelihood that participants have had numerous opportunities to interact with students in various ways, all participants were drawn from Liberal Arts and Social Sciences departments, such as Communication Studies, Psychology, History, Art, English, and World Languages. These courses tend to rely heavily on discussion, interaction, and qualitative assessments, making them a valuable source of insight. Further, I focused on instructors with at least two years of classroom experience, including experience in both face-to-face and online classrooms. By requiring a minimum

of two years of experience, I hoped to make it easier for participants to draw from their experiences.

Participants

After gaining the approval of the institutional research review board, I sent a recruiting email to the deans of the Liberal Arts Department and the Social and Professional Sciences Department at a local community college. The deans distributed the email (Appendix C) to their faculty and I quickly received responses from interested participants. Initially, I trusted the email to clarify my qualifying characteristics (a minimum of two years of experience teaching online and face-to-face courses) but after completing two interviews which had to be excluded from the data set because the participants had not taught online, I confirmed eligibility when I corresponded with each volunteer to schedule their interviews. It is worth noting that although I did not include those two ineligible participants in my analysis, I gained useful information by talking to instructors who have purposefully avoided online teaching. I will discuss these two individuals more below.

By sending the recruiting email a second time (using the same method mentioned above), I was able to engage several more participants, but I was still short of my goal of 20-25 interviews. In order to increase my data pool, I used snowball sampling. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if there was anyone they recommended that I talk to. Additionally, when I followed up with participants who expressed interest in the study (regardless of whether they were found to be qualified for the study) I asked them to

forward my recruiting email to colleagues on other campuses of the college who might be

eligible and interested. In this way, I was able to collect 22 useable interviews.

Ultimately, the participant pool was a rich one. Departments represented included

History, English, Music, English as a Second Language (ESL), Art/Design, World

Languages, Communication, Religious Studies, Economics, and Psychology. The

instructors' teaching experience ranged from nine years to nearly thirty-five. All but one

of the interviews were conducted with full-time faculty. Of the twenty-two participants,

seventeen teach online courses currently, with the other five having given up on online

instruction, at least for the time being. In the course of the interviews, individuals were

asked if they had a preference for online or face-to-face instruction. Most had a clear

preference, though a few did not, either because they had not formed an opinion or

because they enjoyed mixing the two. Two participants chose neither course format,

instead expressing a preference for hybrid courses that combine elements of both face-to-

face and online classes.

Table 1. Participants

Participant	Gender	Field	Currently Teaching Online?	Preferred Course Type: Online or FtF	Total Teaching Experience (in years): 0-10, 11-20, or 21+
A	M	History	Y	FtF	21+
B	F	Music	Y	FtF	11-20
C	F	History	N	FtF	0-10
D	M	English	N	FtF	11-20
F	F	Art/Design	N	FtF	11-20
G	F	World Lang.	N	FtF or Hybrid	21+
H	M	History	Y	FtF	11-20

I	F	Psychology	Y	No Preference	21+
K	M	Religion	Y	Wants a Mix of Both	11-20
L	F	Communication	Y	FtF or Mix	11-20
M	M	Communication	Y	No Preference	11-20
N	F	English	Y	Wants a Mix of Both	11-20
O	F	World Lang.	Y	Hybrids	21+
P	F	ESL	Y	Hybrids	11-20
Q	M	History	N	FtF	11-20
R	F	English	Y	Wants a Mix of Both	11-20
S	F	Art/Design	Y	FtF	11-20
T	F	World Lang.	Y	FtF	11-20
U	F	World Lang.	Y	FtF	21+
V	F	Economics	Y	FtF	11-20
W	F	World Lang.	Y	FtF	11-20
X	F	Psychology	Y	Wants a Mix of Both	11-20

Participants E and J are missing from the above table because they did not meet

the criteria of the study. While both participants were experienced instructors in the

Liberal Arts, neither had taught online. These individuals were both males who preferred

face-to-face instruction. Participant J at one time was given an online section of a class,

but he ultimately converted the course into a hybrid because he felt so strongly that his

students needed some face-to-face time in order to meet the learning objectives of the

course. Participant E had never taught online, but asked to participate in the study

because he had such strong feelings about online education, most of them negative. He

refused to teach online due to what he saw as inherent disadvantages to online education.

In each of the interviews, I asked the same questions (see Appendix A) with only

minor variations in the question order. The most common change from one interview to

another was the addition of follow-up questions based on the replies of the participants to my predetermined questions. Aside from these additions, the structure and content of the interviews remained largely the same. As I spoke to the participants, I discovered that some of them had taught online courses for colleges other than the one that currently employed them. This discovery added the unexpected benefit of being able to compare some instructors' experiences working with the resources and constraints of different online programs. I was also interested to compare the perspectives of faculty who were currently teaching online courses at the time of the interviews with the perspectives of faculty who had given up their online courses in favor of face-to-face and/or hybrid formats.

All of the participants agreed to be recorded and those recordings were transcribed for analysis. After reviewing and coding the transcripts (journaling as I proceeded) certain categories began to emerge. I color-coded and then arrayed examples of these categories onto a large scroll, which allowed me to compare and contrast participants' comments within specific content areas. The categories are listed and discussed in chapter four.

Communication Research Methods

As a field, communication has a rich history with diverse approaches to research. At its core, "[t]he defining commitment of communication scholarship [is] to study human symbolic action in the various contexts of its performance," (Cronkhite, 1986). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) identified the main subfields of communication research as:

(a) applied communication, (b) group communication, (c) health communication, (d) intercultural communication, (e) interpersonal communication, (f) language and social interaction, (g) media and technology studies, (h) organizational communication, (i) performance studies, (j) rhetorical studies, and (k) strategic communication. Each of the subfields has a unique purpose and key elements which separate it from the other subfields.

Keyton (2001) divided the field of communication research into three main perspectives: the humanistic/rhetorical perspective, which "focuses on how language is used to persuade in a particular case…[i]n addition to the rhetorical event itself;" the critical perspective which "[emphasizes] the broader social structure that provides the context for understanding the inequality and oppression that can occur with communication practices and structures;" and the social science perspective which "look[s] for patterns of messages or communication behaviors…based on observations or measurements across cases or on the in-depth observations from one case over time" (Keyton, 2001, p. 11). All three perspectives are empirical in nature, depending upon data collected through observation, experience, and scholarly analysis to understand human behavior. Due to the social science approach of the proposed study, this section will focus primarily on the social science perspective of communication research with explanations of the major qualitative approaches and methods of social science research and how they are applied to communication studies.

Unlike researchers in the natural sciences, who rely heavily on quantitative data to identify generalizable rules of cause and effect, many social scientists find that the

variables that interest them are often inextricably linked, and their findings may not carry over to other time periods, physical contexts, or social scenarios (Keyton, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Anderson explained (1987), "the purpose of qualitative research is to explicate social action from the actor's point of view. It begins with an encounter of the other in the experience of the everyday world," (p. 265). While some have argued that this emphasis on complexity and nuance within a narrow focus makes the qualitative social science approach "less scientific," those who specialize in qualitative methods argue that human behavior itself is too complex and nuanced to be manipulated and measured in laboratory experiments (Keyton, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). While the majority of communication research favors a quantitative approach, qualitative methods have gained some acceptance.

The earliest research in communication studies, as the field is recognized today, can be found after World War II (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The research was primarily based in positivism (also known as objectivism, empiricism, or rationalism). Positivism (common in the natural sciences) assumes that reality is objective and consistent; truth exists and it is up to the researcher to find it (Anderson, 1987; Neuman, 1997). The truth does not change based on who observes it, but remains constant. Under the positivist paradigm, communication scholars sought to study human behavior using the same methods as physics, chemistry, or biology. There was a strong emphasis on rigor and accuracy, with the goal of explaining actions and behaviors with quantifiable, consistent natural laws. This method of thinking has not entirely disappeared from communication

studies, but it has been modified, and in many cases, replaced by other paradigms
(Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Edmund Husserl, Wilhm Dilthey, Max Weber, and Alfred Schutz were among the first to argue that social science is not the same as natural science and should not be measured or analyzed using natural science methods or assumptions (Neuman, 1997). Building on the work of Kant and Descartes, these scholars did not reject quantitative methods or the positivist approach; they merely questioned the tradition's epistemological assumptions and the appropriateness of those assumptions in behavioral research (Anderson, 1987). Weber used the term "verstehen" to describe the empathetic understanding that he felt should be the goal of social science observers. He made the argument that many qualitative researchers subscribe to today: that it is more appropriate to understand one's research subjects' behaviors and help others to understand them, than it is to try and predict humans' behavior or explain it using rigid, natural laws (Anderson, 1987; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Neuman 1997).

Interpretivism (also known as naturalism or hermeneutic empiricism) seeks to move beyond simplifying human behavior into variables of cause and effect. This paradigm was largely based in German philosophy, hermeneutic philosophy, and American pragmatism, and treated human sciences as separate and different from natural sciences (Neuman, 1997). Some of the key philosophical commitments of interpretive social research are: a belief in socially constructed reality and symbolic interaction; a commitment to deep and shared understanding built through observation, analysis, and dissemination of findings; the view of the researcher as a tool of research and a

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collaborator with research participants; the use of reflexivity to promote scientific vigor; and an emphasis on relativity (Anderson, 1987; Neuman 1997).

Unlike positivism, which assumes that reality is objective, consistent, and independent of observers, interpretivism assumes that reality is a social construction based on symbolic interaction, which can vary from situation to situation and from person to person (Anderson, 1987). This assumption makes the rigid, quantitative, definitive measurements and conclusions of positivism a poor fit for research. For this reason, interpretivism moves away from the approaches of natural science, which seek to identify natural laws applicable to all human behavior. Instead, interpretivists seek to build a deeper understanding of more focused subjects and participant groups, through extensive observation and analysis (Anderson, 1987; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Neuman 1997).

Rather than conduct studies in sterile laboratories which try to emulate real scenarios to manipulate and measure human behavior, interpretive communication researchers immerse themselves in real environments to understand the settings and circumstances influencing communication and actions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Interpretivists do not strive to be objective observers; rather they work to collaborate with their research subjects, making those subjects participants in the meaning-making process of the study (Anderson, 1987). The scholar and the participants are, in a way, all tools of research. Positivists might criticize this collaboration as "going native" or losing objectivity, but interpretivists do not see subjectivity as inherently harmful. Rather, interpretivists encourage active reflection to consider their own role and influence in the

research process, while promoting complete transparency to help a reader understand the study's methods, interpretations, and rationale (Anderson, 1987; Neuman 1997).

This is not to say that interpretivists lack rigor in their work. Indeed, interpretivists have many methods for encouraging validity in their research (these will be discussed in more detail below); they are simply different from those preferred by positivists. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) emphasized that although interpretivism rejected many positivist and postpositivist beliefs, it did not reject these paradigms entirely; it merely pointed out their shortcomings and tried to address them. Positivist scientists do not universally reject interpretivism, either. Many positivists acknowledge the value of interpretivist methods as a useful exploratory step in early research, even if they do not subscribe to the interpretivist approach fully (Neuman, 1997).

Interpretivism has always faced a certain amount of stigma for being a "soft science;" imprecise, inconsistent, and inferior to natural, or "hard," sciences. Further, researchers who use interpretivism to explore under- or unrepresented groups and subgroups have led some to call it trivial or offensive. While it is far from being universally embraced, in recent years, interpretivism has gained a certain degree of credibility and respectability among scholars of communication.

While I hoped that any theory I developed would ultimately be useful for improving pedagogy and establishing best practices, I had to acknowledge that not enough is known about online education to explore cause-effect relationships with any certainty at this time. For this reason, I found it useful to rely on an interpretivist approach; building a nuanced understanding of instructors' point of view in order to

create a theory about the complex rapport-building process. From the interpretivist

approach, I selected the grounded theory tradition to guide my research design.

Grounded Theory and Interviewing

According to Charmaz (2014):

grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for

collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data

themselves… [it] begins with inductive data, involves iterative strategies of going

back and forth between data and analysis, uses comparative methods, and keeps

you interacting and involved with your data and emerging analysis. (p. 1)

Grounded theory fits in to the interpretive tradition because it rejects a positivist-

style testing of a predetermined theory in favor of allowing theory to develop from the

data. Some grounded theory scholars avoid even conducting a literature review in order

to approach their data collection and interpretation with a more open mind (Neuman,

1997). Further, grounded theory allows meaning to be constructed from the researcher's

interpretation of the participants' words and behaviors, rather than asking the participants

to build meaning themselves, or in an equal partnership with the researcher. This style of

construction also brings grounded theory more in line with an interpretive approach than

a critical one (Anderson, 1987; Charmaz, 2014).

In order to explore more deeply the questions I asked in my 2014 study, and to

begin to build a grounded theory, I followed Charmaz's advice to go "back into the

empirical world and [collect] more data," (2006, p. 98). Whereas my pilot study was based on 60-minute interviews with six participants, the study described here involved 22 interviews lasting roughly 50-90 minutes each, with a few taking as long as two hours. Like the pilot study, all interviews were conducted face-to-face and one-on-one, with audio recordings made of each, after obtaining participant permission. A planned question list may be found in Appendix A, though it should be noted that depending on the participants' responses, the order was often rearranged and follow-up questions added, making these semi-structured interviews or "outline[s] of topics to be covered, with suggested questions" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130) rather than a rigid protocol.

Charmaz (2014) explained that "interviewing fits grounded theory methods particularly well… [because interviewing] facilitates conducting an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an area in which the interviewee has substantial experience" (p. 85). I expected that instructors with both online and in-person teaching experience were likely to have valuable insights to offer about teacher-student rapport and rapport-building, making them ideal candidates for this kind of interview. Interviewing is also useful because it "complement[s] other methods such as observations, surveys, focus group interviews, and research participants written accounts," (Charmaz, 2014, p. 85), any of which could prove useful in future studies of teacher-student rapport-building.

Data analysis

In order to find meaning in the interview data, it was necessary to transcribe and code the audio recordings. Charmaz (2014) called coding "the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory… Through coding, you *define* what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means," (p. 113). After submitting the digital audio files to a reputable, academic transcription service, I compared the resulting documents to the original recordings, both to check for transcription errors and to become more familiar with the content. Once this step was completed, I examined the transcripts, line-by-line in a process Charmaz called "initial coding," (p. 114). In this process, the researcher must remain open to all theoretical possibilities and simply build codes which can be examined against the entire body of data. Indeed, "[c]oding consists of…shorthand defining and labeling; it results from the grounded theorist's actions and understandings.... As we define our codes and perhaps later redefine them, we try to understand participants' views and actions from their perspectives" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 115).

While coding line-by-line may seem tedious or unecessary, Charmaz explained that it is useful for interview data because it forces the researcher to examine individual pieces of the data which might otherwise be missed with other coding methods (Charmaz, 2014). After initial coding was completed, it was necessary to review the initial codes to ensure they were firmly based in the data, and not my own assumptions or expectations. It is important to consider perspective—both that of the researcher and that of the participant—and how context, experience, motivation, and agendas may affect language

and interpretation.

Following this reflection, focused coding could begin. In focused coding, the researcher "condenses and sharpens [what has already been done] because it highlights what you find to be important in your emerging analysis," (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Initial codes are examined, considered, compared and contrasted, and questioned in order to build the more conceptual, less descriptive, focused codes. These focused codes are the framework upon which theoretical codes are built.

After focused coding, I had examined the transcripts four times: once to proofread and immerse myself in the data; a second time to create line-by-line, initial codes; a third time to review and consider the initial codes; and a fourth time to build focused codes. At this point, I began a fifth review of the data for the purpose of theoretical coding. At this stage of analysis, the researcher tries to understand and consolidate focused codes into categories. These categories represent connections between ideas and interpretations, which will be explained by emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014).

This stage of the analysis can either be focused and supported, or confused and lost. Great care must be taken to build logical categories that are supported by the data. To assist me with the examination, I used a large scroll upon which I wrote my emerging categories. In each category's column, I placed supporting data from all of the interview transcripts, going through each transcript one at a time to discover if there was enough consistency to merit further consideration of the category. The scroll allowed me to collect together similar codes from multiple voices together in a way that was easier to visualize and compare.

Charmaz (2014) demonstrated that the theory building process requires frequent pauses to examine and re-examine both the data, and emerging interpretations. Grounded theory building may also require the researcher to return to the interview participants to explore new lines of inquiry.

To aid in attempts to build theory, I used a journal to write notes about the observations, questions, and ideas that came to me as I was interviewing and coding. Through the use of detailed procedural notes and analytical and reflective journal entries, I hoped to achieve the kind of back-and-forth examination of data that Charmaz characterized in her descriptions of grounded theory research. I also used member-checking to review emerging theory with my participants and to force myself to question my own assumptions and to identify any missing or misunderstood data. Further discussion of data analysis can be found in the next section.

While my previous study was only a small-scale one, it did produce some interesting, albeit unsubstantiated, codes. The idea of "faking community" and variations on that theme came up repeatedly; the idea that some faculty felt they had to force communication and create the illusion of a relationship in their online classes in a way that they did not in face-to-face classrooms. By using similar methods on a larger sample, I sought to gain sufficient insight to create a well-supported theoretical code or dismiss the code of "faking community" altogether. Throughout this larger study, I was also looking for new and different codes that my previous study did not allow me to discover.

Data Goodness and Trustworthiness

As Charmaz (2006) explained, theory is not objectively found; it is built- a "construction[n] of reality" (p. 10) based on participants' experiences and observations, and shaped by the researcher's own frameworks of meaning. As a result, I needed to acknowledge that both the stories told by my participants in interviews and my interpretation of these stories were constructed. This acknowledgement allowed for a more honest exploration of the meaning-making process; both that of the interview participants, and that of myself as their reporter and analyzer. It was necessary throughout the research process to examine positionality—both my own and that of my participants—to better understand the lens through which we were viewing our constructed meanings.

In order to build and evaluate my understanding, I engaged in two forms of member-checking. First, during the interviews, I frequently paraphrased the provided information to gauge the reactions of my participants and to correct any misunderstandings on my part. After all of the interviews had been transcribed and coded, I went back to my participants, via email, and invited them to reflect further and to evaluate my constructed understanding as it stood at the time. By engaging in member checks at this stage of the analysis, I sought to convey respect for their unique and in-depth knowledge, and gain fresh perspective on my emerging categories and theory.

Member-Checking

The benefits of member-checking are numerous. In addition to forcing me to articulate and summarize my thoughts, these checks allowed the respondents an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings on my part and to revise or add on to any statements which they felt were not reflective of the phenomenon under study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Member checks also show respect to respondents by treating them as partners in the meaning-making process. This kind of collaboration is essential in interpretive research. Further, the participants in this study were not compensated for their time in any way; they were volunteers sharing their wisdom for free. For this reason, it was especially important to me that the participants and their views be treated with respect.

Member-checking is not without its flaws, of course. Critics of the strategy express several concerns, including positivist inclinations, the potential for confusion, issues of conflict and face-saving, and inconsistencies of member checks (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Starting with positivism: some critics argue that the use of member checks imply a belief in a fixed truth or reality that can be definitively determined if one has sufficient data. This assumption goes against interpretive values and negates many of the reasons why one might want to conduct qualitative inquiry. This epistemological conflict is a concern, however, it can be laid to rest if the researcher sets as a goal, not to find one, definitive truth, but rather to understand the perspectives held by her respondents.

In this case, participants were generally in agreement with my findings and consistent in their experiences with only small variations occurring during member checking. After the interviews were completed and the data examined, I sent a follow-up email to all of the participants who met the study requirements. In this email, I asked the participants if they had had any further thoughts about our discussion since our meeting and provided them with a summary of their experiences, as I understood them. The complete text of this email can be found in Appendix D. Of the nine participants who responded to my email, only one disagreed with my summary, and only to a small degree. His experience had been that online rapport started out weaker than face-to-face rapport, but often grew to become just as strong and lasting if both instructor and student put in some effort. This differing viewpoint inspired me to look more closely at factors which could explain the variation. The remainder agreed with my assessment that online rapport tended to be weaker and more short-term than face-to-face rapport. All of the participants agreed with my conclusions about online rapport taking more strategic effort to establish and about autonomy having a role in rapport-building. These responses built my confidence in my conclusions and allowed me to refine the wording of my theory to more accurately reflect their experiences.

Following the completion of member-checks, I proceeded to examine my journal notes and theoretical codes further, in order to move my analysis toward the creation of a grounded theory of rapport-building from the professorial perspective. Throughout the aforementioned process, I also engaged in negative case analysis to rigorously examine my solidifying interpretations.

Negative Case Analysis

Negative case analysis is another way that I hoped to reduce misrepresentations in my interpretations. For the purposes of my study, negative case analysis took the form of frequent checks of my transcripts, codes, and journal for ideas, categories, and interpretations which conflicted with my emerging categories. By actively searching for these and considering them deeply, I hoped to reduce the possibility that I would miss or misunderstand an important theme within the data.

Negative case analysis also has its strengths and weaknesses. While this strategy forces researchers to question their beliefs and assumptions, it may also cause the researcher to second-guess interpretations that have more support in the data. It is easy to become mired in examining the available material, perpetually looking for hidden theories that simply do not exist (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is another point in the process where an expert review was invaluable. In any research project, there comes a time when the scholar is so immersed in the data that guidance or perspective from others is needed. On several occasions, I met with my dissertation chair and various colleagues to discuss and summarize my findings. Not only did this force me to conceptualize and articulate my emerging categories and theories; these discussions were also a rich source of inspiration, which prompted me to consider new questions and perspectives that I had not thought of on my own.

Research Positionality and Teaching Philosophy

As a communication instructor in a diverse, open-admission college, my first priority is building a safe environment in which students feel free to express themselves and share their perspectives, while interacting with diverse peers and discovering new ways of thinking. Breaking the ice is crucial, as is promoting positive interactions with and among students and so I start each semester with an activity in which students interview a partner and introduce that partner to the class. During these mini-speeches, I take notes and draw attention to commonalities such as majors, likes/dislikes, skillsets, and birthplaces, encouraging the students to get to know and support one another as they strive toward shared goals or struggle with common challenges.

To promote and maintain bonds, I give students numerous opportunities during the semester to work in pairs and small groups so they are forced to learn names and interact. Occasionally, I go so far as to make myself the "common enemy" by setting them on a task that seems unreasonably difficult, but in reality can be managed easily with teamwork. This way, students feel pressured to focus and pitch in, showing the group their abilities, and solidifying respect and rapport across the team in the process. I have found that students are more likely to speak up, take risks, and participate when they have had the chance to see their peers in supportive, caring roles. I am most gratified when I learn that former students have kept in touch with each other, maintaining relationships that they built in my classroom.

I also start on day one, establishing rapport as quickly as I can by learning the names and faces of my roughly 125 students. In order to do this, I create a roster with space by each name for student photos and facts, such as "originally from Ethiopia," or "loves salsa dancing," or "hopes to become an engineer." I refer back to my notes frequently to solidify each individual in my mind, and to show the students that I have been listening and making an effort to understand them. I define instructor-student rapport as being present when my students feel safe, respected, and cared for in my class, and I feel it most when individuals make an effort to connect with me outside of class, whether to ask questions, to receive academic counseling or mentorship, or just to chat. After more than a decade of teaching in various capacities (tutor, teaching assistant, mentor, workshop leader, and professor), I have come to value rapport highly among possible student outcomes.

While I have taught many hybrid courses (those with a face-to-face component and a digital component which makes up 50% or less of the course content) over the course of my career, I have always avoided teaching a fully online class because of my suspicion that I will be unable to build the kind of rapport that I find so rewarding and effective. I recognize this bias, and for the purposes of this study, I forced myself to consider the possibility that even if effective online teaching and rapport-building prove to be more difficult, it does not mean that they are impossible. I also had to acknowledge that it is very possible (and not uncommon) for students sitting together in a brick and mortar classroom to feel weak ties to their faculty and the subject of study. It is unfair to

assume that online courses are automatically inferior to FtF courses, based on the nature of their structure alone.

Along with my bias against online education, it is also worth noting that certain personal characteristics may also impact my experiences with online teaching and rapport-building. As an upper-middle class, college-educated, 30-something, White female, whose parents are native-born American citizens, I have had access to certain privileges, opportunities, and experiences that others have not. These characteristics may separate me from some students, and prevent me from fully understanding and connecting with them. While my proposed study will not focus on cultural, socio-economic, generational, or other factors of rapport-building, it will be important to consider the possible role that such demographics may play in the rapport-building process between instructor and student.

Due to my positionality, I had to be especially cautious when analyzing my data. That is why I utilized member checking and negative case analysis. It was important to note these assumptions in the final analysis, however, for the sake of transparency and trustworthiness.

Possible Limitations

As was mentioned previously, it is not the purpose of grounded theory to generalize findings. Rather, it is the purpose of this study to propose theory that seeks to add insight into a process that may be informative to other teachers and scholars. There are many benefits of choosing local community college professors for this research study.

The college setting for this study is one that offers a large workforce of educators who have diverse experiences and backgrounds. Further, because the geographic range of the school contains students of various races, ethnicities, ages, and socio-economic statuses, the study need not be limited by an overly homogenous faculty population who have taught a homogenous student population. However, conducting data collection in a single institution limits possible perspectives to that institution's particular culture. Further, because the institution is so diverse, it is impossible to record or understand all perspectives, and so my sample should not be treated as wholly representative, but rather a useful sampling of observations from several departments and individuals.

The limitations mentioned above, while worthy of consideration, do not lessen the significance of this study or its findings. Rapport-building is an important aspect of education that has only recently been examined in the online setting. By adding to this growing body of knowledge, this study seeks to impact pedagogy in the long term, and to amplify a missing voice (instructors) in the conversation about online education in the short term. Further, by conducting this study in the setting that I did, I was able to contribute to academic understanding of community colleges, which are sometimes neglected in the existing educational research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I will review the process by which I built a grounded theory. I will begin with an examination of the categories which first emerged from the participant interviews and facilitated my understanding of the strategies and challenges of rapport-building. After examining instructors' perspectives of rapport and their experiences with rapport-building, I will introduce and illustrate my theory to draw some general conclusions about the nature of instructors' perspectives on instructor-student rapport in online and face-to-face classes.

Emerging Categories

Instructors often felt differently about their online and face-to-face classes when it came to rapport and rapport building. In asking about instructors' feelings regarding rapport and rapport building, I repeatedly heard words like "organic," "sterile," "real," and "proactive." When asked to describe what rapport looked and felt like, the face-to-face context was often treated as the default condition, with online rapport being compared (often unfavorably) only after some probing. Instructors smiled when speaking of classroom rapport. They described a sense of warmth and easy communication, and a process of encouraging and maintaining that kind of feeling through various means.

Most instructors felt that rapport-building came naturally to them, but often reported difficulties when moving classes online. When instructors were encouraged to describe rapport online, some had trouble, saying that it was hard to imagine. Others rejected the notion that rapport could be built online at all. Rapport-building online was often described as laborious, and sometimes tedious, requiring concerted effort and some creativity. Not all instructors were so pessimistic about online rapport, however. Even as they acknowledged the need for strategic communication, some instructors eagerly described their connections with online students, describing a process of getting to know them as "real people" and joyfully discovering that they could have meaningful and even lasting rapport, given the right circumstances. Several factors influenced instructors' perceptions of rapport and their ability to build it in a given context. These included elements of technology, autonomy, synchronization, and communication content. All of these will be discussed in this chapter, as well as the categories that emerged in the course of my analysis: "faking community," "building the personal," and "teacher vs. facilitator."

"Faking Community": Perspectives on Online and Face-to-Face Rapport

"Faking community" was a concept that emerged from my original pilot study. It was an *in vivo* code from Participant X, an interviewee who felt that she was only pretending to have rapport with her online students. She stated that, while she tried her best online, she generally could not quite replicate the experience of rich, natural teacher-student rapport and sense of community among students that she tended to observe in her

face-to-face courses. When I began my dissertation study, I was curious to discover whether a larger data pool would support this theme. While the instructors interviewed in the new study did not use this exact phrasing, many of them had similar experiences with finding online rapport to often feel "less real" or inferior to face-to-face rapport with students. When asked to explain what made a course's rapport feel "real," instructors described a deeper, more natural, more collectivist, and longer-lasting type of rapport. In the course of this study, I followed up with the individual who coined the term in my pilot study and she explained that, in her mind, "real" rapport is made up of positive, comfortable interactions. She said, "That's what you get in a real classroom." Furthermore, "If you don't have that [interaction], it is a fake class to me and I despise [that]." This participant was able to create "real" rapport in online classes, but only with purposeful behaviors and a higher degree of autonomy, elements which will be discussed further in the following sections.

Participant U also reported feeling a better sense of rapport when there was a richer social experience in the classroom and felt that richer social experiences are more likely to occur in a face to face context. She described a "rich" experience as being one in which, "[students learn] from each other… it's more of a real life kind of communication." This participant found "real" rapport- and community-building to be far more difficult, though not impossible, online. "Realness" for these participants, and others, seemed largely tied to: experiences of personable communication that went beyond simple, task-based discussions; lasting bonds that extended beyond the time and place of the course; student-instructor rapport that was enveloped in a larger, collective

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rapport; and interactions that felt unforced and natural. Conversely, "fake" or poor rapport was defined by a lack of communication or by communication limited to task-based interactions (discussing grades or asking questions about homework, for example), forced conversations (such as discussion boards that required each student to post a comment), and/or individualized discussions (instructor-student conversations that excluded other members of the class). The elements that made rapport real or not are described in further detail below.

Personable communication; Not just Task-Based. When asked what good rapport looks like and how one knows when it has been established, several individuals discussed students going "above and beyond" minimum course requirements to interact with instructors and peers. Many instructors pointed to students coming early or staying after class to converse, noting that the conversations that were most useful in establishing and assessing rapport were those which expanded upon course content, or even went beyond it. That is, when students were not just asking questions about requirements for tests and assignments, but were applying what they were learning to their own lives, or sharing outside interests willingly, rapport seemed more present and real. Examples given by participants included students sharing stories from their own lives which were brought to mind by the day's lesson, or students asking about instructors' children. One instructor had recorded a lecture in which, unbeknownst to him, his cat made regular appearances behind him. After seeing the video, students began regularly asking him about the cat's well-being.

Rather than "fake," Participant W used the term "formal" to describe her interactions with online students, and her difficulty connecting with them and with building rapport. She desired a more informal, relaxed atmosphere and found it easier to create such an environment in a face-to-face class:

> [T]ruth be told, I prefer [teaching] face-to-face. I just enjoy that teacher-student interaction. I enjoy being in the classroom… you don't get that same level of interaction in the online class. I mean, you get interaction, but it's not like a human, face-to-face interaction. There's a social aspect of [face-to-face courses] I guess. Just seeing people and talking to them.

Several other individuals discussed formality and informality as being important factors for "real" rapport-building. Participant R felt that email (the most commonly used communication tool among the online instructors interviewed) was, by definition, more formal and less "low-key" and Participant P reported having to "make more of an effort… to get [online students] to be a little bit more relaxed." Formality wasn't only used to describe the tone of the interactions, but the content of the interactions, as well. Participant W explained that, "a lot of … the rapport-building process is based on small talk" and that low key conversations and small talk are often missing in online interactions. Participant V had a similar observation, reporting that she had rarely experienced rapport with online students, conjecturing that: "[m]aybe there's just [less] opportunity for rapport [online] because we're never doing something as informal as talking about ourselves." Participant T found that most aspects of face-to-face teaching

could be replicated online, with the exception of "talking to each other and getting to know each other," which she felt could only take place in a physical classroom. While she and other instructors started their online courses with ice-breaker discussions, this was often the end of informal self-disclosure and conversation.

Such off-topic "chit chat" was a key element in making rapport "real" or "informal." Participant N, for example, expressed frustration that grades were the "only communication" she had with some students. She and others used extensive feedback to try and engage the more reticent students, but there was often no way to know if that feedback was being read. A desire for additional communication beyond grades was largely universal for these participants.

Participants also gave examples of discussing favorite sports teams, weekend plans, or new movies with face-to-face students before and after class as both a part of the rapport-building process and a sign that rapport has been established successfully. When student-teacher interactions were based solely upon clarifying concepts, assignment feedback, and policy questions, rapport was felt to be weaker or nonexistent.

> You get to know your in-person students. It's easier to get to know them and to
> build a deeper rapport… I'm never going to get to know my online students as
> well as I'm going to get to know my in-person students. You don't chit chat with
> the online students. They email you a question. (Participant B)

Informal conversations and those which moved course concepts into new contexts that were more meaningful to students (such as when a student reported seeing an

example of a course theme in his or her own life) were highly desired by instructors for building, maintaining, and assessing "real" rapport, but they were not widely found to be present in online courses. For example, "Rarely do I just email a student and say, 'What's your favorite sports team? Did they win this weekend?' or 'What did you do this summer?'" Moreover, Participant W shared. "It seems almost inappropriate, in a way, to reach out and do that." This participant and others found a catch-22 in online communication, in that they needed students to self-disclose in order to create rapport, but they sometimes felt they did not have enough rapport to ask students to self-disclose. Practicality also played a role in some instructors' discomfort. Participants often pointed out that they could speak faster than they could type, making spoken communication easier and thus, more likely to include unnecessary details.

Much of the realness of the rapport seemed to be steeped in the sense that the people involved in the interactions were "real" themselves and seemed to be tied to elements of self-disclosure and how well student and instructor were known to each other. Words like "human" and "real person" appeared regularly in the interview transcripts, with instructors describing many of their online interactions as an attempt to, as Participant T said, "get more of the human element in there" and show the students that there was a "real" instructor in the course and that that instructor was a living, breathing human and not an automated system or grading machine. Some participants also felt that their online students were less "real" or "human" due to the faceless nature of many online interactions. Participant L, for example, felt that online students seemed

to blur together, with no individual, identifying features, saying, "I can't even give you the name of a really good online student I've had before."

Instructors often lamented that their online students tended to be faceless and even genderless, due to a common reliance on text-based communication. Several expressed concern that online students may not be doing their own work. Hearing voices and seeing faces contributed to a sense that students and rapport were "real" and the person whom the roster said they were. Participant P, for example, was ambivalent about online education in its current, largely text-based form. Rather than an active participant in the communication process, she felt that communicating through a computer made her more passive and less enthusiastic, saying:

> I'm not opposed to [online classes] as long as [you can] see people's faces. I don't like just looking at the screen… you get distracted. But if people see your face [in real time], you can laugh and talk and relate to one another. It's better than just staring at or hearing [a recording].

Participant Q likewise expressed concern about online communication, saying that it was difficult to "really appreciate how good [students] can be" without seeing them or observing their nonverbal behaviors. She felt such cues to be essential for understanding individuals' behaviors and cultural influences. Participant M agreed, saying:

> When you walk in the room [of a face-to-face course] you get to put a face with the name. You get to see their reactions. You get to hear their voice, [see] who

they are, their identity. It becomes actualized instantly when you walk in the room. The online identities are present just as much, but you stay in that place where they're still just names for the first couple of weeks… I have to be incredibly proactive.

Participants frequently struggled with the loss of nonverbal cues in communication, favoring media-rich channels of communication such as video-chats and phone calls that allowed them to see facial expressions and hear vocal tones. When logistics made it impossible to communicate synchronously or in media-rich channels, instructors had to rely on text-based communication to gain information, and this often left them feeling disadvantaged and less confident that students were "real."

The sense that students are "real" may have implications for more than just a pleasant classroom experience. Just as students who feel rapport are more likely to successfully complete a class (Glazier, 2016), some instructors revealed that when they feel rapport with students, they are motivated to work harder to maintain that connection and promote student success. Participant B, for example, realized in the course of the interview that her online students might receive less outreach because her rapport with them tended to be "thinner" and "weaker."

I almost always follow up with my face-to-face students [when they appear to be struggling] because I've usually seen them… With the online class… sometimes I follow up if they've reached out to me, but sometimes I don't. I probably should.

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This idea that seeing equals knowing and knowing equals caring enough to put in extra effort to connect with, and assist, students was a commonly discussed one. Several individuals described how helpful it was to have even a small amount of face-to-face time with online students. In one interview, Participant V described how a face-to-face meeting with an online student who came to her office in a time of crisis changed her outlook on her relationship with that student.

> Then, I felt like I really [knew] her. All semester, I knew she was one of the better students [based on] her grade, but that's all I knew about her. Then [she came to see me and] it's like, 'Oh! You're a real person!' That, to me, was rapport.

Similarly, Participant S described the experience of meeting a former online student on campus:

> I realized that she was an online student… we had had a decent back and forth in class, but I didn't know her. I felt a little bad about that, actually, because when she came in, I didn't have any idea who she was.

In order to make themselves and their students more "real" online, many instructors described posting photographs of themselves and encouraging students to do the same, in order to connect faces to names within the course. Several also made it a point to ask students about their outside interests and bring up non-course based topics for discussion in personal emails and conversations throughout the semester. Many of

these attempts failed, however, as students were often reluctant to share photos (some instructors felt the same way about posting pictures of themselves) and instructors often found it cumbersome and unnatural to try and prompt off-topic conversations in task-related emails, such as the participant cited above who felt it was "almost inappropriate."

To encourage sharing and rapport-building in face-to-face courses, several faculty purposely arrived early to class, and some even made it a habit to occasionally dismiss a class early so that students could conveniently and easily approach and converse. One instructor used class breaks strategically, making sure to stay at her desk when she dismissed the class so that she was easy for students to approach without students having to make extra time for meetings. Many instructors who similarly used physical proximity and convenience to engage students reported being unable to determine a comparable strategy in an online format.

On the subject of time, a few instructors described students "losing track of time" and showing surprise when their instructor dismissed them at the end of class. This level of intense focus and engagement which led students to ignore the clock was cited as a sign that good rapport had been established. Instructors felt that if a student had been made to feel comfortable and confident in their relationship with faculty, then they were more likely to enthusiastically engage with course material and discussions; a fact which has largely been borne out by existing literature (Kim and Thayne, 2015; Rovai, 2002).

It should be noted that these "signs" of rapport—engaging in side conversations and losing track of time—were almost exclusively described in the context of face-to-face classes. In fact, in the course of the interview, when participants were first asked

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what rapport looked and felt like, they generally cited examples of ideal student-teacher rapport, and most of these examples came from face-to-face courses they had taught. Participant X explicitly stated, "You don't often feel any real interaction [when]… you don't occupy the same space." While a few online instructors cited examples of students emailing them with off-topic questions and comments, or going above and beyond what is required in their focused approach to assignments, most examples of rapport-driven engagement took place in situations when student and instructor were onsite together. It was difficult to extrapolate what pre- and post- lesson conversations would look like in an asynchronous learning environment, and some instructors cited this loss of synchronicity as a major challenge to building "real" rapport.

The participants who enjoyed teaching online seemed to be the ones who most often used richer media for nuanced and synchronous communication. For example, many of the instructors hailed channels such as video-conferencing, text messages, and phone calls as increasing the feeling of rapport between instructor and student by creating a personalized experience akin to one-on-one tutoring. As one of these instructors, Participant N said, "I think the future of online teaching has to … diversify how the teacher and the student communicate." Using diverse communication methods is not always possible, however. Internet access concerns led most instructors to favor communication that required less bandwidth and simpler technology. Tools such as video conferencing were often seen as highly useful, but also highly unrealistic for use with a large, economically- and geographically-diverse class. In addition, time restraints meant that phone calls to students had to be limited.

Sometimes, the nature of online learning itself discouraged synchronized, media-rich communication, such as when real-time, person-to-person conversation practice was changed to an option, rather than a requirement, for students in online foreign language courses. Participants shared that after numerous students complained of difficulty syncing their busy schedules with those of their equally busy peers and instructors, the publishers of foreign language textbooks and course designers opted to give students automated conversation partners, rather than relying on human participants for partnerships. Instructors were permitted to use live interactions for extra credit activities, but not for required assessments. Since a major benefit of online courses is their flexibility, the college and the publishers have tried to minimize, or avoid completely, any activities which would require a student to be online at times that are not convenient for them.

The cost of convenience and access seemed to be the loss of a communication resource that was valued by many instructors. This was according to several online instructors who had seen the evolution of this particular online program, as well as the resources commonly provided by textbook and online content publishers. The limitations on communication options contributed to some instructors' sense that they primarily communicated with online students about grades, and only very rarely about anything personal, off-topic, informal, or "real." The loss of realness led to a feeling of weakened rapport that was less likely to last over time and space. Indeed, the durability of rapport was another important theme that emerged from the data.

Lasting Bonds Extending Beyond the Time and Place of the Course. Online rapport was sometimes described using words like "surface," "tenuous," and "short-term" in comparison to face-to-face rapport which was described with words like "deeper" and "long-lasting." As Participant F shared, "It's the face-to-face that lasts… who knows who my online students are? I couldn't tell you their names or where they are." When discussing signs of successful rapport and levels of strength of rapport, one element that came up repeatedly was the presence of rapport outside of the class. Just as off-topic conversations were said to indicate rapport, many instructors also described interactions taking place outside of the required class time and location as being good tools for building and signaling the presence of rapport. Participant R observed:

> [Online] the rapport dies down very quickly… You build the rapport in the face-to-face [classes] and you can see them again and again… [when] they come back [to campus] or you invite them to an event. Online, you don't have the rapport that [lasts]. I really feel like it ends… I always feel like [face-to-face rapport] is a little bit stronger…I don't think I've ever gotten a request from someone online [for a letter of recommendation]. It's not as though I wouldn't do it. The rapport is there… it's much more surface and I try really hard for it, but I don't know that they even want to go deeper. It's something about the face-to-face connections that makes the students… ask you for that letter of recommendation. They see you in the hall.

Participant S also talked about hallway meetings, saying, "I don't like not … being able to run into [students] in the hallway. I don't think you [have] the same

personal connection." Similarly, Participant T explained that "when [students] come by just to say 'hi' I know that there is [rapport]. It's more obvious outside the classroom." She reported looking for clues like students not looking at the clock, volunteering for opportunities outside of class, and asking for additional reading or information. Other instructors mentioned the same indicators, as well as asking for letters of recommendation or career advice, coming to optional meetings or events, checking in with an instructor after the course had ended, and choosing to enroll in a second class with the instructor.

Some instructors, such as Participants O, T, and X, had some students in online courses who followed up, either to ask for reading recommendations or career advice and support, or to take another course with the online instructor, but these seemed to be the exception more than the rule. Participant L also had some students ask for letters of recommendation, but she declined to serve as a reference, saying, "…I can't support them in that sense. Although online they got As… I just don't know what they look like. I don't know how they interact. I don't know their social [skills], their mannerisms, their etiquette. I can't tell that online." Most instructors found that few, if any, online students chose to interact outside of the classroom setting or stay in contact after a course had ended. For example, when asked if she ever heard from students after a class had ended, Participant C, who had come to dislike online teaching, said "Definitely not… I never really got to know any of them." She felt that "there's a limit" to what an instructor can do online to build rapport and encourage student engagement. This sense of online courses ending without any continuation of communication between teacher and student

was part of the reason that several instructors felt that rapport online was less established or "real." Not only was "real" rapport described as extending beyond the classroom, it seemed to extend beyond the student-instructor relationship, as well.

Student-Instructor Rapport Enveloped in Collectivist Rapport. Faculty often pointed to the importance of a sense of collectiveness or community to student-teacher rapport. An example is Participant X who remarked, "When [students] submit their assignments directly to me [without being able to see and consider the work of their peers] it doesn't feel like a class. There's no community.... It's like I'm a private tutor." This idea of being a private tutor rather than a member of an interactive community was a part of the reason that some online instructors felt more like "graders" or "facilitators" than "teachers."

While this theme will be discussed later in this chapter, the idea of instructors as "private tutors" was common with instructors describing their efforts to address each individual student's needs, and their frustration with addressing the same challenges and concerns over and over, since students could not hear each other's questions being answered or mistakes being corrected. While instructors found this kind of interaction draining at times, some also identified benefits:

> I think, in some ways… you have a more personal relationship with each individual student online…Online students reach out to you individually and then you address their concerns [individually]…It's not always such a public

relationship, which, in some ways, is good because you develop strong relationships with certain students.

Even in light of this benefit, however, this instructor and others felt that in many instances, classes as a whole would benefit from hearing individual questions and expressed a desire to promote a more collective form of interaction and communication in their online courses. As Participant H explained, "[Face-to-face, students] feed off of each other… [online, I] can only get the ball rolling so many times." Generally, communal learning seemed to contribute to the sense that a class was "real," and to instructors feeling like they could build rapport with the students in it.

Some instructors pointed out that even if they were not interacting with a student directly, if the context was face-to-face, that student could see other students interacting with the instructor and thereby gain a sense of the instructor's level of competence, enthusiasm, and compassion. To a degree, instructors found that they could sometimes build rapport with one student by first building rapport with others in plain sight. By setting the tone for the entire class, instructors felt better prepared to set the tone of interactions with individuals. When courses moved online, instructors often observed that students had fewer, if any, opportunities to see their peers interacting with them, which they perceived as contributing to reduced rapport and satisfaction with the course. A few instructors brought up their statistics with student complaints as evidence that online students were less likely to be happy with faculty. Participant G, for example, said, "Teaching on campus, in all my … years here, I have twice had students complain about

me. Twice. [Online,] the [number of] students complaining about their teachers became huge."

Of course, it is impossible to know from the data how much peer interactions actually impact individual students' satisfaction with instruction or their learning. Some instructors blamed increased complaints on a lack of civility that they felt was more likely to be found in online communication. Further, it cannot be known, from this study, the degree to which numbers of complaints varied between face-to-face and online classes. What the data does show is that many of the instructors interviewed felt that online classes were less likely to have a sense of community or a natural flow of conversation that they think would improve overall rapport. This sometimes led to a less satisfying experience on a personal and a professional level with participants feeling less able to teach effectively and enjoyably when working online.

Participant A, for example, described teaching as "a dog and pony show" in which instructors play the role of an entertainer to some degree. He and others described the "vibe" that faculty can get from an "audience," and how a group of students can excite, inspire, and energize an instructor.

> When I go into a classroom, I just enjoy seeing the students and get pumped up. I
> can be really tired before class [but] I feel less tired after class. I get energized by
> the class…Online, it just doesn't work that way…I guess many teachers… have a
> little bit of an actor, ham, [or presenter in them]… You need an audience for
> that…something to feed off of… it's fun.

Similarly, Participant F found that while she still gets excited for the first day of school in her face-to-face classes, she does not feel the same way about her online classes. As she explained, "There's [no] first day jitters… I [don't] feel that online. I [feel] more worried about… the technology working and everything." Many instructors expressed frustration or boredom, describing online teaching as a mostly passive experience, which involved sitting at a computer for long periods.

One issue that may have contributed to this feeling of boredom that some instructors reported is a loss of spontaneity and humor online. Humor often arose in the interview conversations as a key difference between online and face-to-face teacher-student interactions. Several instructors cited humor as a preferred tool for breaking down boundaries between teacher and student. This included self-deprecating humor designed to promote equality and decrease distance related to status, as well as observational humor relating to challenges of the course and to characteristics of students and their discussion contributions. Such humor was often described as only working in-the-moment, when instructors could point to something that had just happened for comedic effect. Participant K, for example, said he does not even think about humor, though he uses it frequently in face-to-face contexts: "It automatically flows from me. You never know what I'm going to say. That's what I do." This comic timing and spontaneity seemed to be largely absent in asynchronous communication, leading to a reduction in joking in online interactions. Many instructors expressed concern that humor could more easily be misunderstood when nonverbal communication elements were missing. Thinking about her reduced use of humor online when compared to face-to-face,

Participant I hypothesized, "If I [could teleconference] I could probably have a much more personal interaction with my [online] students… they'd know how funny I am!"

Loss of spontaneity was also a concern for many. As Participant S observed, "When you're in person, you can see [somebody's mood]. You can take that moment and help them through it, or celebrate it with them, whatever it is. Online, you just don't have that." Spontaneity and humor, in addition to reducing boredom and frustration with a class, also represent a kind of relaxed and unplanned form of communication that many instructors felt was required for good rapport and rapport-building.

Unforced, Natural Interactions. Reflecting on the importance of collective rapport along with instructor-student rapport, Participant S stated, "Online, it's just you and [the] student. There are group discussions and everything, but it's not organic or spontaneous." This participant felt that her online interactions were, if not fake, at least forced. Similarly, Participant H called online rapport "one-dimensional" when compared to face-to-face rapport. The idea of "organic" and rich rapport in communication was mentioned several times in the interviews. Participant S, for example, perceived online teaching "to take… more concentrating," whereas she felt a face-to-face classroom inspired more immediate, automatic actions. She said this seemed true for the students, as well.

> When the students interact in face-to-face] discussions, it's more organic than
> being told to respond to people in [online] discussion boards. I find that these
> organic conversations can lead to new questions or new assignments or new

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[ways of] thinking. I think that it's important to take the pulse of the students, too. What interests them?

One method that instructors and instructional designers used to encourage online interaction was discussion boards. Most online courses taught by participants started with an introductory prompt on the class discussion board, which asked students to tell the class a little about themselves and to respond to the posts of at least two other students, noting connections and shared characteristics. Participant V, however, dismissed discussion boards as less real and "very disingenuous" because "there's no discussion." That is, most students in her classes tended to complete their posts at the last minute, and rarely went back to see who had responded to their posts. The instructor herself admitted that although she takes notes about students' posts so that she can get to know them better and refer back to their contributions, she usually has no time to check and use those notes. In more substantive discussion boards, those which asked students to post their thoughts about course concepts and readings, Participant V found that many students— either out of necessity or laziness—just repeated the ideas of those who had posted before them on the board because everything had already been said by those who posted first.

This sense that online communication was more forced or "stilted" and face-to-face communication was more "organic" and natural was prevalent among the participants and left many, though not all, of them feeling that online communication was inherently inferior. Words like "sterile" and "cold" were used to describe online interactions, such as when Participant C stated, "it's so anonymous online. It's cold and sterile" to explain why she has lost her enthusiasm for online teaching. "Fun" and

"warm" were more often used to describe face-to-face interactions. Participant V explained thusly:

[W]hen you're asking me about [rapport in] my classroom, I feel it. It's a feeling…I never get a good feeling when I sit down [at] my computer… I don't know how you would feel anything… When I log on to that class, it's because I have to do work. When I go into my classroom, I get to talk about [my subject], which I would do outside the classroom… Sitting down and interfacing with a computer isn't fun to me.

Echoing Participant V's sentiments, Participant X did not originally want to teach online because she felt that online courses were "sterile," "fake," and "not warm and fuzzy." Participant S had experience as both an online teacher and an online learner. In both contexts, her opinion of online education was the same. "[W]hen I've done coursework online, I learn things, but… I don't feel like I'm part of a community… I think that's part of learning—being involved in a cohort— [and] I think that's just more established in person." It was also interesting to note that one of the most enthusiastic proponents of online education that I spoke to, Participant M, tended to use the words "digital" and "real" to differentiate between online and face-to-face courses, even as he emphasized the benefits of each. When asked about his word choice, he considered the question carefully, saying:

It feels just as real [but] it takes a different level of focus. It's real. Those are real bodies. Those are real students. Those are real voices. I don't get to see their

faces… [and] it takes me longer to recognize that it's a real class…when I teach a

face-to-face class, on day one, I walk into the room and I can see the faces of the

students. I can see how they're reacting… I can just see them.... It's like it's real

right away. The online class, they're still real students, but it normally takes me

about two weeks to really start to understand who [they are] and what they are

like and what they are interested in.

This participant felt that online rapport could become "real," given time and

proactive communication, a process which will be discussed in more detail below. In a

follow-up conversation to the interview, he argued that online rapport was equal in

potential to face-to-face rapport, with both requiring investment from teacher and student

in order to grow, thrive, and last. Not everyone felt so optimistic, however. Participant L

stated:

you don't know what these people look like, how they act, their demeanor. You're

just not going to have that connection as [you would with] someone that you see

twice a week. You see their reactions. You see how they act in class. You see how

they interact with you back and forth in that hour or two. It's just a human thing…

the rapport I have with my online students is not the same as the rapport I have

with my face-to-face students…[it] just doesn't create the same connection as that

face-to-face connection. As much as I try…not having that physical body present,

you're not going to have the same rapport.

Participant G currently does not teach online, but spent a great deal of time

working with the online program as it evolved into what it is today. She found that "there

are many things you can do to create community in an online course" but her work load often prevented her from doing them. She reported that she was "no longer willing to put in all those hours in order to get… a satisfactory amount of interaction." She felt that strong, lasting rapport was possible with online students, but the amount of extra work required to build it was unrealistic given the number of students and the amount of administrative tasks required by the program. The idea of online rapport-building as a more laborious and mindful process came up numerous times in the course of the interviews. Rapport-building online will be compared to face-to-face rapport-building in the following section.

"Building the Personal": Natural vs. Purposeful Rapport-Building

All of the instructors interviewed reported some degree of difficulty with building rapport online. While the degree of difficulty varied, participants agreed that online rapport took more time and mindful effort to establish than face-to-face rapport.

> [Rapport-building online] is not as instant[aneous process]… the form of communication is often asynchronous, so you have to wait for the students to respond. You don't get the immediacy in the same way this back and forth, live and face-to-face. You have to accept that it might take a little bit longer to develop some of that rapport and not be frustrated when it doesn't happen the first week… I have to invest in a different way to establish [online] rapport. (Participant M)

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Many participants differentiated online and face-to-face rapport-building by intentionality. They described a slower, more labor-intensive process of rapport-building when they moved from a face-to-face course to an online course. Many felt that online rapport-building took more thought and strategy, and came less naturally than face-to-face rapport building. Some felt that online rapport-building was more difficult, or, in some cases, impossible. As Participant N explained,

> Onsite, [rapport-building] is fairly easy. Online, it's more difficult… I think that one thing that is challenging is [that] feeling like they're a room full of faceless people… just as it's difficult for them to connect to me, it can be difficult for me to connect to them… it takes a little more personal effort.

Whereas face-to-face rapport building was often described using terms like "organic" or "natural," online rapport-building was often said to require "extra work," "mindfulness," or a more "active" or "proactive" approach. Participant G, for example, spoke of "the dirty little secret of distance learning…that it [takes] way more time to teach...because you work with each student individually." Further, instructors tended to see online rapport building as more difficult than building rapport face-to-face. As Participant T said:

> It's harder to connect with the students online…. I can't physically go over to them. It's dependent on them answering their email or answering their phone. There's something else in the middle between us, which facilitates communication, but if they don't respond, it just leaves us disconnected.

Similarly, Participant Q reported the need for making a "positive focused effort to develop rapport" online, saying that he found it "really difficult" to do, while Participant X stated, "I think that in face-to-face [classes, rapport] sometimes happens naturally… but you have to be much more intentional [online] because if you take [rapport] for granted, it…won't happen. [You must] keep it as a priority." This individual, and others, pointed out that it is quicker and easier to gauge reactions and adjust teaching tactics when face-to-face, witnessing nonverbal communication in real-time. She also felt that the simple act of being face-to-face with students kept rapport at the forefront of her mind more easily, whereas she had to remind herself to work on building rapport with her online students "because [rapport]…get[s] pushed down the priority list." She also described rapport-building online as "doing anything extra that would come naturally in a face-to-face class…trying to figure out how to make it real, how to make it feel like a class."

This idea of "extra" work versus something that is natural and taken for granted was a common one. Participant N used the phrase "building the personal" to describe the process of designing course communication and content with rapport-building in mind. For her, that included taking notes about students to refer to their challenges, accomplishments, interests, and past contributions in email messages and other communication. For others, it involved efforts to reference current events in and out of the classroom to "prove" that emails and announcements were not being pre-written or recycled from other classes. Participant L used the phrases "giving a couple humanistic points" and "giv[ing] a little bit of humanistic side" to describe such practices, while

Participant K described a process of "making your presence…by means of your communication, and maybe some [technology]." Similarly, Participant B used the phrase "the live factor" to describe the impression that one is engaged in real-time communication with a fellow human being. Strategies for "building the personal" are described below.

Rapport-Building Strategies. Participant R described a process of making numerous mindful choices when designing a course that encourages rapport-building, saying, "the fonts that you use, the colors that you choose—everything is going to send a message" about the course and the instructor leading it. Participant F likewise found that, "just [writing something short like] 'I'm looking forward…to meeting you and getting to know you' seems to do a whole lot." Participant M also had a few strategies that he liked to utilize for online rapport-building. Instead of emailing reminders to students, he would record short audio or video files of himself speaking. He would create original lecture videos in which he mindfully included references to his online students' names, interests, and prior discussion contributions, sometimes going so far as to imagine there were students in the room with him when he recorded so that he could create a sense of conversation rather than lecture.

> I'll say things like, 'Now, I know what you're thinking…' [and] I engage in…
> small talk…. I purposely insert the same things [I'd have in a face-to-face
> discussion]. I imagine the class there." He went on to say, "Is it more work for

me? Yes. Do I have to do it? No, [but] I like to try to keep the students'

experience personal, just the way it becomes personal [in a face-to-face class].

Many instructors added human touches by posting photographs of themselves and

encouraging their students to do the same so that faces could be connected to names. As

Participant P shared,

I think in the online environment, it's important for the students to know a little

bit about you as the instructor so that they feel sort of connected to the class…I

think it's crucial that they at least…[see] your face, a [photo, or] a little bio or

something so they [know] 'Who is this person?' If possible, record a few

videos…it's good for them to have that.

Participants also emphasized the importance of setting clear expectations through

both words and behaviors; modeling what students should do in the online course.

Participant M for example, explained, "if I don't post my picture, if I don't talk about

who I am, then they won't do that with each other. If I'm…not commenting and having

conversations [in the discussion board]…then they won't. They [follow] the way that you

behave." Participant I shared that she had fun expressing herself through photography,

skipping a conventional headshot and opting instead for a vacation photo because, she

said, "that's me!"

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In addition, some instructors recorded verbal feedback for students to listen to, rather than using only text-based communication. It was sometimes said by participants that a human voice helped to build rapport between student and instructor. Audio recording was especially common among the foreign language teachers who worked with students on correct pronunciation. Phone calls were also sometimes used to supplement email communication, with the express purpose of letting students hear instructors' vocal tone. This was often done when faculty wanted to project sincere concern, empathy, or patience to a troubled or struggling student.

These "extra" steps made some instructors feel a little more connected to students and several instructors suggested that online education could be improved by offering more options for personalization, such as the avatars and profiles used in video games and social media. Participant L, for example, wanted access to photos of students, saying "[Online] they're just names, and I don't even know the faces to the name[s]." Technology and privacy concerns were the most common barrier that kept individuals from pursuing personalization options, however. Simple technology makes courses more accessible to diverse learners with varying degrees of internet access, and protecting personal information is a concern for both students and faculty engaging in online communication. Email and older, more well-known software packages and applications were more commonly utilized for these reasons, though many instructors were experimenting with other technology and tools.

Regardless of the channel or technology used, online instructors invariably cited the importance of using students' names and providing quick replies to student

communication so students, Participant T shared, "they know that they're being heard and that someone's listening or reading," and caring about them as individuals . Participant I described her commitment to "respond[ing] to every [post, including responding] to the responses!" This need for prolific and near-real-time responses led many instructors to check their class email frequently on their phones, causing many to complain about their work-life balance as online teachers. As Participant R shared, "[Students] can't wait 48 hours. They need you to respond within… 24 hours." Thus, in order to create a flexible, individualized experience for students, instructors had to give up some of their own freedom.

Participants shared additional strategies they used to build rapport with students. Participant T entered student email addresses one-by-one into e-cards to send informal greetings to online students on holidays. She hoped that this tactic would make her seem more approachable and her class more informal. Participant R was careful to consider tone in her emails, saying, "They can't hear you saying, 'I believe in you.' You have to say it in a way that comes off [in an email]." This participant emphasized the need for positive language, careful word choice, extra feedback, and mindful punctuation. "Sometimes," she said, "I will use exclamation points [to convey excitement]… I think a smiley face [(emoticon)] makes everybody feel good!" Participant N also reported using carefully chosen words, emoticons, and punctuation to express enthusiasm and convey a positive tone. These participants and others reported spending significantly more time on messages to online students because they would not have the opportunity to correct misunderstandings face-to-face. Participant X, on the other hand, described quickly and

carefully crafting replies to students' emails. "I [respond] to emails immediately, [saying] 'Calm down! It's going to be ok!,' as if I [am] having a conversation with [my student]."

It is important to note the participant's choice of words here: "as if I [am] having a conversation." She did not seem to define this interaction as a conversation, but rather as some kind of stand-in for, or imitation of, conversation. Indeed, by conveying an encouraging tone and positive attitude in her emails, and by replying to messages as quickly as possible, she sought to imitate face-to-face communication and replicate real-time conversation.

Many instructors, including Participant X, opted to utilize text messages and phone calls to promote near real-time communication, sometimes targeting specific issues like missing work, missed classes, or behavioral concerns. It was widely agreed that calling all students on a regular basis was not logistically realistic, and that sharing one's personal phone number could be problematic (though some instructors chose to do so). However, it was also agreed that some conversations were greatly improved when tone of voice could be clearly conveyed and reactions more accurately gauged in real-time. As Participant R explained, "I feel like my tone in an email may be misconstrued or unclear, so I will follow up with a phone call...because I really want them to hear [my concern] and … my reasoning." Some instructors suggested that it might be easier for online students to be uncivil in their communication because they would not have to face their instructors the next day. Whenever possible, they encouraged students to come to their campus offices, though this was not always possible, and for many students, it was

not preferable. When contact was made via phone or in-person, instructors tended to have better results in the long-term. Participant V, for example, shared,

> I think in every case- [and] there's only a handful of cases- when I've had [online] students call me on the phone or come in to see me, I've had better rapport with them for the rest of the semester. Just talking to them on the phone… it just makes us both realize [that] the other person's human… [online] they could be robots.

Building the Personal: Online vs. Face-to-Face. Some of the methods that participants described were similar to the methods they said they used in their face-to-face classes. Participant X, for example, tries to "avoid negativity…[Emphasize] your commitment to their success…Try to get people laughing…lighten the mood…Learn names…make references to things people have said [point out] share[d] interests [among peers]." The online program asked instructors to start their distance courses with an ice breaker that required students to introduce themselves and reply to the introductions written by other students. Instructors were also encouraged to introduce themselves, and many worked to reply to all of the students' posts in order to show the posts were being read, and to point to common interests in order to promote bonding between themselves and the students, as well as among students... These methods were similar to some that most instructors were already using in their face-to-face courses.

Another way that some instructors tried to make online courses feel more like face-to-face classes was through the use of synchronous communication. Participant U, for example, offered weekly online meetings for students to speak synchronously with

each other and with their professor. The online meetings were optional, as per program guidelines which encouraged flexible scheduling for busy students. The instructor encouraged session participation as much as possible, however, and recorded the sessions so that more students could take advantage of seeing the interactions. Even so, the participant felt that the text-based online sessions were "not the same was sitting [together] in one classroom [wherein] you [can] hear the tones of the voices" and so she encouraged students to come to campus whenever possible. She even created special events on campus to entice online students to make the trip. "I try to meet them at least once [face-to-face], but it's not always possible," she said. Similarly, Participant T offered homework support through Google Hangouts, an instant messaging program.

It is worth noting that some of the responsibilities that instructors cited as competing with rapport for their attention could be construed as related to rapport-building. For example, instructors often felt weighed down by grading and answering emails, both of which could be said to contribute to rapport-building by establishing and maintaining students' expectations that their messages and assignments will be read and addressed promptly and courteously. In fact, many instructors cited quick, carefully-worded replies and regular, encouraging messages as a preferred tool for building trust and emphasizing their availability to students who might be hesitant to ask for assistance.

While instructors commonly discussed the need for proactive, mindful strategies in order to "build the personal" online, they also often revealed a similar process of strategizing in their descriptions of face-to-face rapport-building. For example, instructors commonly described using a strategy of arriving to class early and using post-

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class or break-time to encourage conversation or eavesdropping on small group activities to get a better idea of how students were feeling about a lesson. These strategies were often described as "natural" and "organic" in the face-to-face context, with most instructors reporting having no difficulties building rapport in the face-to-face classroom. In fact, when asked to describe how they build rapport with students, in-person actions seemed to be the first ones that came to most participants' minds. Instructors seemed to take these behaviors for granted as being automatic, even as they described them as being a strategic choice.

Face-to-face rapport was not always taken for granted, however. Participant M, for example, pointed out that "rapport building is a continuous process" regardless of course context. This participant, as well as many others, acknowledged that rapport is not guaranteed to be present in face-to-face classes and even reflected on whether difficulty with online rapport-building might be a personal challenge, a problem of technology, or even just a misperceived condition. That being said, it may be less important whether instructors are "correct" in their comparisons of the two contexts, than it is that they commonly hold this point of view. The feeling that online rapport-building requires more strategic thinking and mindful effort was fairly consistent, hence it is worth asking how this perception might shape or impact teaching methodologies and attitudes toward online education.

Barriers to Building the Personal. When discussing what made online rapport-building sometimes seem like more work, instructors often mentioned class sizes as a concern. Several individuals had online courses with higher enrollment limits than their traditional, face-to-face classes, which was a common source of frustration. Minimum and maximum enrollment was not uniform at this college; the online program set its own standards, while face-to-face course standards were determined by departments in collaboration with their divisions. Some instructors felt their face-to-face and online courses had become too large. They emphasized the difficulty of tailoring their approach to each individual's needs and goals when there were so many students to teach. Several instructors stated that high attrition rates in online classes were not only expected, but necessary, with many of them planning activities that assumed a smaller number of participants than the number enrolled at the start of the semester.

Another challenge that was mentioned in interviews was students who did not want to connect with an instructor or peers. Lack of engagement or interest was witnessed across all types of classes, but some instructors felt especially disadvantaged when they could not see a student's face or body language to get clues about the cause of the problem (feeling bored versus feeling overwhelmed, for example). Participant T wondered if rapport might exist with online students without her being aware of it. She stated:

In face-to-face, I feel like I know if I have rapport. Online, I don't…I don't always know [if] I'm connecting or not… I don't know if [they're] listening or

not. You have to err on the side that [you're] making a difference and just [keep trying].

Some posited that an online course could be especially attractive to students who wanted to avoid social interaction and just earn the college credit. If this is the case, then some issues of engagement and rapport-building associated with online courses could be less related to the course context itself and more to the expectations, and even preferences, of the students who tend to opt for online learning. Participant P pondered that online courses might be especially attractive to students who are busy and stressed—the exact students whom she found hardest to connect with because they were frequently tired and overwhelmed.

Students in remote areas were also assumed to benefit from online education options, and were also a cause for concern among instructors. Participants often opted for less personalization and simpler technology because these choices reduced bandwidth needs, making courses more accessible to those who might be without reliable internet access. Synchronization was also reduced when instructors realized that students in different time zones, such as deployed military personnel, and students with slower computers would be disadvantaged. The need for accessible technology and flexible scheduling was a difficult barrier with which many struggled.

Further limiting options for rapport-building was the protocol of this institution's online program, which required instructors to teach their courses exactly as prescribed by the course design team. In many cases, participants were teaching courses they had not

helped to design, and found their hands tied when they wanted to experiment with new technology, content delivery methods, or course materials. Even instructors who had been on the design teams were restricted from making changes without the permission of the rest of the team, leaving many frustrated with their options for evolving their courses and connecting with their students. The implications of autonomy and control reached beyond the student-instructor relationship, impacting the participants' overall satisfaction with online education and begging the question, "What is a teacher?"

"Teaching vs. Facilitating" What Makes a Teacher a Teacher?

A common refrain from instructors who felt less favorably toward online education was that online education involves, as Participant V said, "none of the fun parts and all of the terrible parts" of teaching. These individuals felt that online teaching involved more grading (the terrible part) and less interpersonal interaction (the fun part). Some had trouble calling online teaching "teaching" at all, saying some variation of Participant B's concern, "I don't feel like I'm teaching. I feel like I'm facilitating." When asked about her experience with online education, Participant F also said: "It's not like teaching…" In the course of the interview, Participant V often held up her fingers to form "air quotes" when she used the word "teaching" in an online context, saying:

> I always say I'm 'teaching' [when I work with online classes] because I don't feel like I'm teaching…because, to me, teaching is…rapport, learning from your students, students learning from you…that's the [kind of] teaching environment I

enjoy and none of that is in my online classes…I feel like [online education is] all the bad parts about teaching and none of the good parts. It's all grading.

Participant H had a similar sense of detachment, saying:

Online, [I've had] students, after a class comes to an end, say 'I enjoyed the way you delivered the class,' which I find ironic because I really hadn't done anything…I'm not delivering the class, I'm just facilitating [their] engagement with the material.

This participant and others described feeling "like a course facilitator" rather than a teacher when control over content and delivery choices were taken away and placed in the hands of online course designers. Participant L, for example, said that online courses were "plug and chug," saying, "Do the work [and] I grade it...It's a lot more…of a business online. 'Let's get down to business! You're here to get your work done efficiently and as [flexibly] as possible [and] I'm here to do the same." Similarly, Participants D and H called the courses "canned," referring to the fact that the content was pre-prepared and organized by someone other than the instructor. When asked about how content was delivered in online classes, Participant V also felt disconnected from the learning process, saying, "It's all reading the textbook and doing the quizzes and discussion board [assignments]." Lecture of any kind was rarely used by those interviewed. As Participant V explained, "it's all [student] self-motivated and self-guided." Participant T echoed this idea, explaining that "[online] the instruction primarily

[comes from] the textbook. In the classroom, I usually present the [lesson]." Participant T explicitly expressed a preference for face-to-face teaching because she is able "to create more…Online is basically being a grader." Likewise, Participant L saw the student-instructor relationship as strictly utilitarian: "They do the work. I grade it."

Whenever an individual differentiated between "teaching" and "grading" or "teaching" and "facilitating," I asked them to explain in detail what they meant. The difference generally seemed to exist in opportunities (or lack thereof) for creativity, spontaneity, change and evolution, and ownership or control. It was widely agreed upon among all participants that online teaching was not always conducive to spontaneity or adaptation. Because students were exploring course material on their own schedule and at their own speed, it was seen as unfair for instructors to adjust content after it had been posted. This meant that if an assignment was not working as desired, it could not be adapted. As explained earlier in this chapter, instructors in this particular community college's online program taught from course "shells" that had been created by a team of teachers and instructional designers. Only those on the team could make changes to course content, and then, only with the agreement of the entire group. This meant that updates and corrections were generally very slow in coming, and for those who had not developed the course, desired changes might not come at all.

Having ownership and control of the course seemed to directly correlate to general satisfaction with a course. Participant H posited that, "if [instructors] were able to change [courses] the way we want to…there'd be more motivation and desire to teach online because then it [would] feel more like what we do in person, which…makes the

course and experience much better." Many of the participants seemed to agree that when they felt free to correct errors, improve lessons, experiment with technology, and update material, they were more likely to enjoy and appreciate online teaching.

Autonomy seemed key in feeling more like a "teacher" and less like a "facilitator" or "grader." Participant F, for example, had no autonomy, which may explain why, even though she built rapport with her online students when "they spent the extra time and put another sentence or two [in their emails]" to express themselves and establish their identities, she still felt that online rapport was inherently inferior to face-to-face. Participant M, on the other hand, had tremendous autonomy in his courses, and felt strongly that online rapport, while it might take longer to establish, was generally just as strong, meaningful, and long-lasting as face-to-face rapport.

Autonomy is not the only requirement for rapport, however. Participant A had total control of his course's development, saying "It's my class and I designed it and I teach it." In spite of this sense of ownership, he still felt some disconnect with his students, saying that too much of their communication was "a flat word," wondering if more visual cues might be useful for building rapport.

Participant X had experience in both teaching from someone else's "shell" and helping to create the "shell." In describing the former, she expressed frustration, saying, "I didn't have an opinion or voice. I taught the class and I immediately despised it." Participant W taught several different online courses regularly and did not have input on the creation of any of them and shared,

Whenever I ask about certain policies and changing them…I've been told 'This is the way it is. A certain group of people decided on this. Just do [it].' There's not a lot of instructor input into [course development], which I don't think is optimal…I do think that it's fair to include instructors in these [decisions] because ultimately, we're the ones [who] have to enforce them.

Participants K, M, and O, on the other hand, had an influential role in the evolution of all of their courses and were the most enthusiastic about online teaching, as well as being the most optimistic about their ability to build rapport with online students. Participants D and G expressed concern about ownership of actual content, wondering how instructors' courses could be appropriated by institutions, possibly pushing teachers out of the equation entirely. Participant D stated:

It's not entirely clear to me that a college could not take my [online] lectures… [and say] 'OK, we don't need you anymore…we [have] your lectures.' Now they would still need to have a monkey somewhere to respond to the students.

Though he trailed off with a laugh, his concern about faculty development and retention was serious. He was not the only participant to think that online teachers could be dehumanized to become a simple cog in the wheel of education. This participant likened online teaching to "plugging in a teacher" like a piece of machinery, which came up in several other interviews, denoting an underlying concern about the role of instructors in the future of higher education. When describing her role as an online educator, Participant C asked rhetorically, "[W]hy would [the students] need me if they're just

looking at a textbook and taking online quizzes?" She, too, reported feeling more like a grader or facilitator than a true teacher.

Student-Instructor Rapport: A Grounded Theory

In reviewing the categories that emerged from the interviews, it became easier to understand some of the challenges of online rapport building, as well as some of the strategies that instructors utilize to make connections with their students. I theorize that rapport tends to feel stronger to online instructors when: 1) both faculty and students have access to personal information (in the form of photos or introductory bios, as well as off-topic conversations about interests and values); 2) when course communication includes synchronized interactions using richer media that convey nonverbal cues; and 3) when instructors have sufficient control over a course to feel ownership and autonomy when making key pedagogical and technological decisions. In this theory, I define "strong" rapport as being established when an instructor feels confident that they have built a bond with their student is present, firm, and lasting. "Weaker" rapport is established when an instructor doubts the presence or durability of the bond.

I posit that rapport is more difficult to establish online, but with more time and mindful media use, it may be established in meaningful and rich ways between online instructors and their students. In creating my Theory of Instructor-Student Rapport Online (TISRO), it is helpful to diagram the relationship between key elements and the depth and strength of rapport (including the ability of rapport to last over extended periods of time and distance) between online teacher and student. The diagram below

illustrates the nature of rapport-building, based on the experiences and observations of the community college faculty interviewed for this study.

Here, rapport is shown as a spectrum to display the progressively strong rapport that may be built between any two people, given the right set of circumstances. When communication is purely text based, nonverbal cues are limited to font choices, colors, and emoticons, which makes clear, nuanced communication more difficult. When media choices become richer to allow for tonal, physical, and other nonverbal cues, meaning and intent are more easily discerned, making uncertainty reduction easier as well. As uncertainty is reduced, interactions may move beyond simple, task-based communication (such as questions about an assignment's due date) to include off-topic or out-of-context interactions (such as a student visiting a professor's office to bring an interesting article from the day's newspaper), though self-disclosure and off-topic communication may require more mindful effort and time online, depending on media richness (if a smile cannot be seen, then extra words may be used to convey kindness in an email message). As interactions, uncertainty reduction, and self-disclosure become easier and more natural, rapport gains strength and is more likely to survive time and distance, such as when students become so comfortable with an instructor that they return to campus after graduation to ask for advice or a letter of recommendation.

Strong Rapport ("Real," Lasting)
- Media Rich
  - Nonverbals Easily Available in one format or another
- Extensive, Natural Self-Disclosure- organic and unthinking
- Regular Off-Topic Communication/Conversations Outside of the Classroom Setting
- Easier Uncertainty Reduction

Weak Rapport ("Fake," Tenuous, Temporary)
- Media Moderate
  - May use phone calls, emoticons, etc. to supplement text and increase nonverbal options
- Increased, Mindful Self-Disclosure
- Some Off-Topic Communication
- Difficult Uncertainty Reduction

No Rapport
- Media Lean
  - Text Only- few, if any nonverbal elements
- Limited Self Disclosure
- Content-Based Communication Only
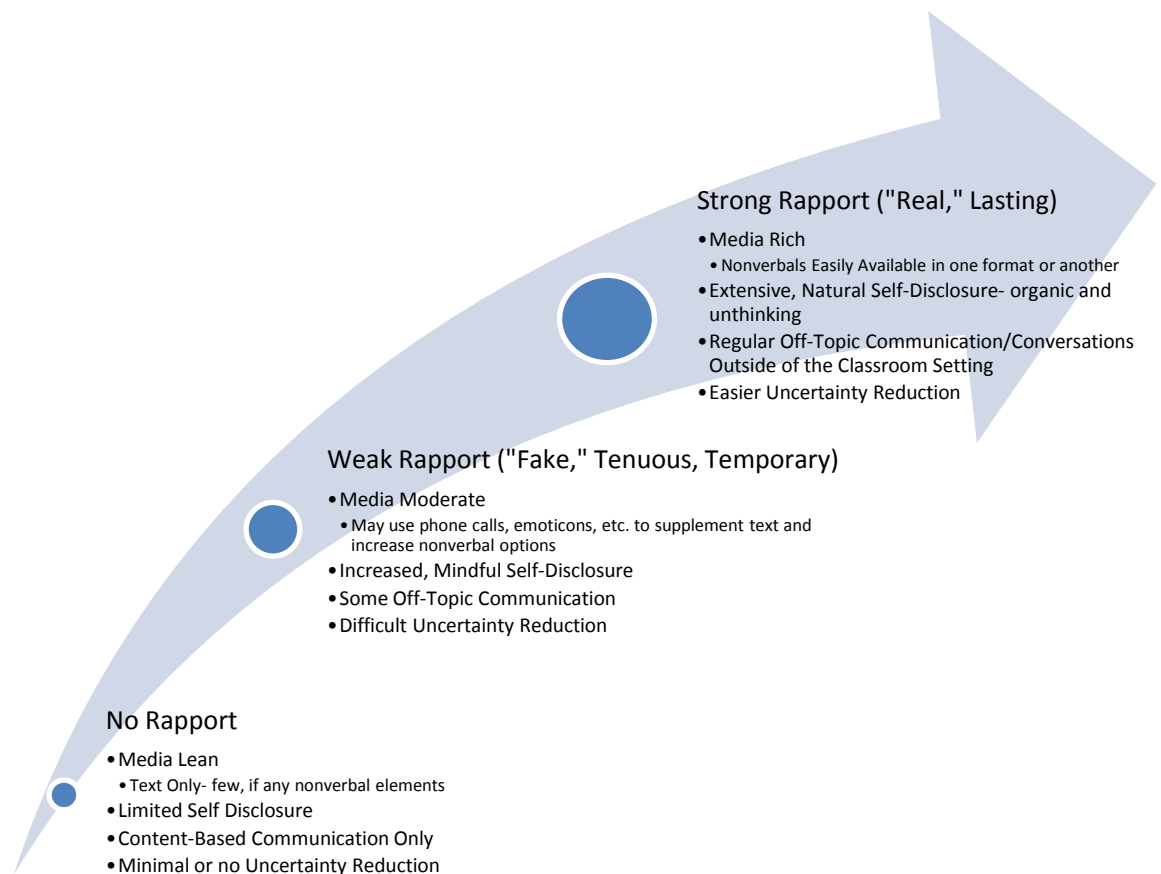- Minimal or no Uncertainty Reduction

Figure 2. Theory of Instructor-Student Rapport Online (TISRO)

The data collected in this study does indicate that Walther's Social Information Processing Theory may be applicable to online education. Ties to current literature, implications, recommendations, and suggestions for future research will be explored in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will summarize my findings from chapter four and explore my theory's connections to existing literature. I will then discuss the implications of my findings as I make recommendations for application. Finally, I will suggest directions for future studies to continue the work I have started in this project.

Summary of Findings

In summarizing my findings, let me begin with the research questions I posed in Chapter One and address each one.

Research Question One: What Theory Describes how Instructors Perceive their Rapport with Online and Face-to-face Students?

When participants were asked to describe what rapport looked like when it was present between instructor and student, they often did so using a face-to-face context. They described activities and behaviors that arose onsite when rapport was present, such as witnessing students staying after class just to talk or greeting instructors enthusiastically upon entering. Upon deeper probing, instructors sometimes had trouble identifying and describing rapport with online students. Some individuals doubted they had rapport, while others were unsure if it might exist. Those who felt confident that they had rapport often found that it was built through their interactions using richer media,

such as phone calls, video chats, and in-person visits. Those who were able to build rapport through primarily text-based methods of communication (such as emails and texts) found that off-topic conversations had more power to forge connections. Examples of this included students self-disclosing details of a personal problem they were struggling with or contacting an instructor for the sole purpose of sharing good news or interesting information unrelated to course content.

Without exception, all of the instructors interviewed felt that instructor-student rapport plays an important role in education, and that an instructor has a responsibility to build the foundation for rapport in the classroom, both in the process of course design and in the day-to-day activities of a class. This prioritization of rapport is in keeping with current literature (Kuh, et al., 2005; Rovai, 2002; Tichavsky, et al., 2015; Tinto 2012; Zhao, et al., 2005), as are many of the practices that the participants reported using to build rapport. As Ke (2010) suggested, many of the instructors found it helpful to give feedback and instructions using video and audio files, rather than text, and all of those interviewed valued self-disclosure and course design for having the potential to forge strong bonds.

The participants, like many education researchers, expressed concern about instructor-student rapport online (Delahunty et al., 2013; Griffiths and Graham, 2010; Morgan & Tam, 1999), and sought to confirm many of the same markers of rapport that Wilson and Ryan (2013) delineated, such as student enjoyment of material, consistent attendance, and attentive engagement with course activities. Instructors defined rapport largely in terms of a feeling that comes from positive interactions, like Tichavsky, et al.,

(2015) defined rapport as being conducive to mutual understanding, trust, and respect, similar to Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012). When nonverbals were removed from communication, and posture, movements, tone, and facial expressions could not be used as a hint of student emotions or instructor intent, instructors used writing style, graphics, emoticons, and even fonts to fill in missing information. This is in keeping with the assertions of Jones, et. al. (2009) that different markers of rapport should be expected in different contexts.

Instructors' views of rapport differed from some of the current literature, as well. Specifically, researchers like Altman (1990), Meyers (2009), and Wilson (2010) whose reports posed the possibility that instructors and students assess and value rapport differently, were not in line with the perspectives on rapport that my participants described. Most of the instructors felt that rapport was essential to learning and pointed to some of the same traits for assessing rapport that students in previous studies have (e.g. trust and respect). Further, while instructors typically expressed concern about online rapport, they were not universally suspicious of the role of technology in education, as the survey conducted by *Inside Higher Education* would suggest (2015). Even those who opted to stop teaching online commonly reported an appreciation for, and a preference for using, certain technological innovations in their classrooms. Further, unlike the instructors whom Schutt, et. al. (2009) examined who tended to take rapport for granted in face-to-face courses, most of the instructors interviewed were well aware of the danger of idealizing face-to-face courses, and expressed thoughtful reflectiveness when comparing online and face-to-face rapport.

In the course of member-checking, I asked participants if they would agree that online rapport could be as rich, meaningful, and lasting as face-to-face rapport, given the right circumstances (time, communication options, mutual interest in connecting) and all those who responded agreed that it was. These results are in keeping with Walther's Social Information Processing Theory (1992); the connections between my findings and SIPT are discussed in detail below. Instructors added a nuance to SIPT by discussing the strength of rapport, in terms of its ability to last over time and distance. Many instructors felt that online rapport was more likely to be short-term and tenuous rather than lasting and vibrant, though the strength was greatly influenced by a variety of elements, discussed below.

Research Question Two: What theory can describe similarities and differences in instructors' descriptions of their online rapport-building methods vs. their in-person rapport-building methods?

Participants often recalled making a special effort to build rapport with online students. While they had particular strategies they used in each context (joining in student conversations in the classroom, or calling online students who were late with assignments, for example) many faculty seemed to almost take face-to-face rapport-building for granted. They used words like "organic," "natural," and "easy" when describing their efforts to build rapport in-person. Online, they were more likely to feel like they were forcing rapport or faking community, using words like "formal," "less low

key," or "sterile" to describe their feelings about the rapport-building process with online students.

In the course of member-checking, I asked instructors if they felt that flexibility, autonomy, synchronized communication, and richer media played a role in rapport-building. All those who replied agreed that these elements had an impact on the ease with which they could build rapport (or not) with students. In line with SIPT, when instructors had more options for designing course communication opportunities and choosing media channels, they felt better able to increase the quality and quantity of communication, and by extension, their rapport with online students. These options can be problematic, however, due to issues of technology and access.

In addition to constraints based on students' technical abilities and access, instructors at this particular institution also reported that autonomy was sometimes a problem. Without exception, instructors discussed course design as a significant factor in the online experience, just as Ke argued in 2010. For better or for worse, the way a course was designed had a major impact on the instructors' confidence in their ability to connect with their students. In a program that leaves some instructors without any control over how their course content will be arranged, delivered, scheduled, assessed, or adjusted, there was a great deal of concern over who was making key decisions, and why. Instructors felt disconnected and constrained. When instructors were a part of the design process (either as the creator of a course or as a member of a development team), they seemed far more favorable toward online courses, generally, and felt more engaged with

their specific course. Instructors felt more invested in the courses that they had a hand in building.

Some of the participants had had full or partial control over the design process, and while they readily identified weaknesses in their classes, they generally felt pleased with their work, confident in their ability to grow and improve, and more optimistic that they could make a meaningful connection with their students. One participant who was a particularly prolific course developer within the online program enthusiastically lauded the numerous opportunities she found to be creative and to collect powerful data in order to assess student learning outcomes and improve future classes online. Some instructors taught multiple online courses and could compare their experiences teaching classes that they had designed themselves and teaching classes that someone else had designed.

The individuals who had experience teaching both self-designed and other-designed courses detailed their frustrations and comparative dissatisfaction with courses designed by others. Many described the process of having to reverse engineer a course to try and understand the choices that had been made, and the rationale for those choices. Sometimes, they could not understand, or did not agree with the choices, but were forced to abide by them anyway. These individuals were frustrated that they could not make changes that they felt confident would make the teaching and learning experience more pleasant and productive.

In several cases, instructors found themselves disappointed by what they perceived as uninspired content delivery, overly simplistic assignments, and a lack of respect for instructors' experiences and preferences. One participant felt that course

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designers viewed instructors as "trouble-makers" who had to be "whip[ped] into shape" and "plug[ged] in" to a course shell. Others felt that program policies limited their opportunities for connecting with students in engaging and effective ways, and reported feeling disconnected from the teaching process. These frustrations are in line with the feedback of the larger participant pool surveyed by *Inside Higher Education* (2015), which suggested that faculty and staff may have differing views of the role of technology in education and the role of instructors in course design.

For instructors experiencing this kind of disconnect from their lessons, it might be especially difficult to feel connected to students, making rapport building all the more difficult. One requirement that contributed to many instructors' sense of disconnection was being forced to maintain a mainly or entirely asynchronous course. Several participants reported asynchronous communication as being a major obstacle to rapport-building and a few mentioned their disappointment when publishers and course designers removed synchronous peer-to-peer communication requirements due to student complaints about scheduling difficulties. These participants still offered synchronous conversation opportunities as extra credit options, but they were no longer permitted to require synchronous interaction between or among students. One participant stated that if she were not allowed to offer the option, she would give up online teaching all together. Some participants did give up on online teaching, citing frustration with program policies, distaste for online content or structure, and/or unrealistic expectations from administrators in the program. Participant G recalled "I fought to be a teacher to the bitter

end" but ultimately she felt that she could not build the kind of learning experience and

student-teacher rapport that she desired without sacrificing more than she was willing to.

Connecting Findings to Existing Literature and Theories

There are meaningful connections between my findings and existing literature.

The theories and concepts I will discuss in this section include Walther's Social

Information Processing Theory, Uncertainty Reduction, and Media Richness.

Walther's Social Information Processing Theory. Walther's Social Information Processing Theory suggests that online relationships can be just as rich and meaningful as face-to-face relationships, given enough time and self-disclosure. (Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2008). While Walther's research did not take place in an educational context, one can extrapolate from his data that if the theory holds true in a classroom setting, then it would mean that online instructors would spend more time and mindful energy self-disclosing and building rapport with their students than would instructors in face-to-face courses. Through my interviews, I sought to learn if instructors noticed a difference in their rapport and rapport-building when asked to compare their online and face-to-face teaching experiences. I hoped, through my research, to learn more about the instructor perspective in online education, and to build a greater understanding of relationship-building in a new context. Walther's theory proved to be a good fit for the data I collected, with many connections between his findings and the experiences of my interview participants. In the following section, I will draw comparisons between Walther's data and my own.

Walther's Social Information Processing Theory in the Education Context.

Walther's Social Information Processing Theory posited that physical distance between communicators may cause delays and difficulties in relationship-building, but does not necessarily prevent understanding and connection from developing (Antheunis, et. al., 2012; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1992). The ability to build rapport comes from behaviors adapted to the communication medium, which may facilitate participants' disclosure of relevant, personal information, from which impressions may be built (Walther, 1992). Specific elements of Walther's research and research connected to SIPT are discussed below as they relate to my findings.

Quality Over Quantity. Just as Walther's SIPT prioritized quality of communication over quantity when examining conversations and relationship-building (Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001), many of the instructors interviewed found that forcing more communication was not necessarily the best way to build rapport with online students. While many of the instructors were guided by program protocols to require regular participation in online discussion boards, this did not correlate universally to successful rapport-building. Instructors pointed to the importance of non-task-based conversations, informal dialogue, out-of-class communication, and social connections over purely task-based, regulated, formal communication in the context of the class webpage or course emails. Even when the discussion boards required off-topic conversation (such as the commonly used ice-breaker assignment which required students to introduce themselves and respond to the introductions of others), the forced nature of

the correspondence left many instructors feeling that rapport had not been established in a meaningful, lasting way.

Uncertainty Reduction. Examining Antheunis et al.'s (2012) connection of Walther's Social Information Processing Theory to Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) offers additional connections between SIPT and education. Antheunis et al. argued that individuals meeting each other for the first time seek to reduce their uncertainty about each other by carefully monitoring nonverbal behaviors and artifacts, such as clothing, posture, facial expression, vocal tone, and eye contact. These behaviors and artifacts may be lost online, especially when communication is primarily or wholly text-based, and so observations may be replaced by mindful, probing questions intended to gain information from which to form opinions. Participants may also opt to self-disclose more than they might face-to-face in order to be known and understood, and to promote matching self-disclosure by their conversation partner (Antheunis, et al., 2012; Walther, 1992).

Instructors in my study reported the desire to have students know them better and to encourage students to make themselves more known. In online classrooms, this often involved the instructors posting photos of themselves and asking students to do the same; publishing a short biography of the instructor's background and interests, and asking students to do the same; using colors, fonts, emoticons, and punctuation to express creativity, tone, and personal style in course communication; and asking off-topic questions about interests, current happenings, and previously expressed ideas in individual emails. Participants reported varying degrees of success reducing uncertainty

and building rapport with these methods. The variation seemed to relate, in large part, to the consistency of the behaviors and the instructors' sense that they had options and autonomy for connecting with students.

Media Richness. "Media richness" refers to the amount of nonverbal behaviors that can be conveyed via a particular medium. For example, email is generally considered a "lean" medium, with text alone being the primary tool of conveying meaning. A video conference, on the other hand, is a very "rich" medium because it can display tone, movement, facial expressions, and posture, as well as words. Walther found that the richness of a medium had an impact on the behaviors of those using it to communicate, with leaner media inspiring users to ask more questions to gain information they may feel is lacking in the interaction (Daft, et. al., 1987; Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

While the instructors interviewed preferred richer media like video calls, phone calls, and face-to-face conversations, as Walther has suggested, they were often forced to rely on leaner media due to resource and time constraints. To make up for the loss of nonverbal communication, they were careful to be extremely precise in their word choices, punctuation, and use of fonts and emoticons to ensure their tone was conveyed accurately. They started many of their emails with questions about the students' personal lives and interests, for example, asking a student how she was feeling after the student had previously mentioned having the flu. They added details about themselves to their emails and class posts, such as photos of their pets, stories about their children, and statistics about their favorite sports teams. This is in line with Ke's findings that self-disclosure aids in building a sense of presence in an online environment (2010). Many

instructors emphasized the importance of regular, weekly messages to build and maintain rapport, and to prompt students to check their class webpage and school email. Several also described including current information such as comments about the weather or recent school events to prove that their messages were freshly-written and not pre-written and auto-sent, or recycled from a previous class.

Instructors used email and webpage postings with all of their classes- not just the online sections. Although all instructors gave examples of sharing personal information about family, pets, educational background, and hobbies (either through email or through face-to-face, in-class conversations,) the use of the other aforementioned behaviors were less prevalent, or at least, less prioritized in face-to-face sections. Several participants reported being slightly less prolific and precise in their email use when they could simply approach a topic with a student at the next face-to-face meeting. Tone and word choice were slightly less pressing issues because more sensitive topics were often saved for in-person conversations. Likewise, referencing current events and making weekly online messages were seen as less important when an instructor was going to see students in the physical classroom on a regular basis. As Walther suggested, many of the instructors wrote more information and asked more questions when they were communicating via email, whereas they relied more on observing students' body language and facial expressions in the classroom, and on tone of voice in phone calls.

Implications and Recommendations

   Walther found online communication to be mildly disadvantaged, but not hopeless, when compared to face-to-face communication in the context of relationship-building. He found that the loss of nonverbal communication through distance could be overcome with time and media-specific strategy, making online communication different from, rather than inferior to, face-to-face communication. His Social Information Processing Theory has been supported in the contexts of online work groups and dating (Farrer & Gavin, 2009) and aligns in the context of online education, as well. As suspected prior to the study, instructors did, indeed, notice differences in the ways that they built rapport in their face-to-face and online classes. Rapport building was more mindful and required more effort online, with adjustments being required for certain media (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008; Walther 2002). Walther's advice for successful online work groups was also mirrored in the best practices found by the instructors interviewed for this study. Just as Walther and Bunz (2005) suggested that online work groups: 1) get started right away; 2) communicate frequently; 3) multitask, getting organized and doing substantive work simultaneously; 4) overtly acknowledge what was read in one another's messages; 5) make thinking and doing explicit; and 6) set deadlines and stick to them (pp. 833-835). Many of my participants had also learned through training and experience to contact students early and often; offer an ice breaker activity and tips for course success at the start of the semester; reply to emails quickly and in detail; and create a clear structure and avoid making changes once the semester had begun.

The above practices are in line with best practices for rapport-building that currently exist in higher education literature, which emphasizes clear expectations, frequent communication, and positive relationship-reinforcement (Buskist, et. al., 2002; Kuh, et al., 2005; Meyers, 2009). While the practices are consistent between face-to-face and online contexts, they were often given greater emphasis and attention online due to the fact that many of the instructors interviewed felt more concerned about misunderstandings and rapport-building when they moved their courses online.

Looking at Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development, as it was applied to education by Renn and Reason (2013) instructors and students are in the microsystem, where they directly interact and influence one another. When interaction is limited in quality, quantity, or both, an important part of the student experience is lost. Students must understand and meet the demands of online courses, in terms of necessary technology, foundational knowledge, dedicated study time, and discipline. They must commit to regular, thorough, and prompt communication in order to increase their bonds with instructors and peers. These bonds allow students to gain more from their courses, in terms of overall satisfaction and learning outcomes, which makes completion more likely (Benson, et. al., 2005; Granitz, et. al., 2009; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012).

Instructors must foster a sense of community in the digital environment by modeling self-disclosure and uncertainty reduction; prompt and thoughtful communication; and regular use of off-topic chit-chat. Whenever possible, instructors should select richer media for communicating with students, or, barring that, utilize alternative means such as font, word choice, emoticons, and other stylistic choices to

establish sincere concern and trustworthiness. Unfortunately, instructors are often constrained by a lack of time, resources, and autonomy.

In the mesosystem, factors appear which influence both students and faculty. Instructors are often pulled in many directions. With competing pressures to teach, research, publish, and serve their institution (on top of any personal or familial responsibilities), time-intensive activities like calling online students or answering emails promptly might fall by the wayside. Since prompt, regular interactions are key to successful rapport-building, this is a direct threat to student success and retention. Instructors need support, both personally and professionally, in order to have the time they need to interact with students in rich and meaningful ways. This support may come from the exosystem (administration and policy makers) as well as from colleagues, family, friends, and community in the mesosystem. Similarly, students need support from the mesosystem. In addition to going school, many students also juggle work and family responsibilities. Time and money concerns can pull students' focus from their school work, directly impacting their learning and likelihood of completion. If students are not counseled on how to manage their time and prioritize their commitments, they may take on more than they can handle. If they do not have the support of their families and community, they may be more likely to continue in their degree programs. This is true not only of online students, but of face-to-face students as well.

A great deal of responsibility for establishing an environment in which online students and faculty can be successful falls to entities in the exosystem, such as administrators and policy makers. Administrators must carefully balance the costs and

benefits of increasing class sizes and instructors' course loads on rapport-building and student success. Policy makers must ensure that students have access to the technical resources necessary for synchronous or near-synchronous communication, as well as providing instructors with diverse communication options for interacting with students. Institutions of higher learning and their surrounding communities would do well to offer whatever support they can in the form of child and elder care services, food and housing assistance, and other necessities to ensure that students can focus on their school work. Institutional marketing must also consider the expectations that are set for online education. Students should know when they enroll in an online course how much or how little synchronous, media-rich, and collective interaction they can expect. Institutions must prioritize convenience, access, communication, community-building, and rapport-building and create policies that reflect their values and that mitigate the challenges to rapport-building between instructors and students (the microsystem) whenever possible.

Complicating matters for entities in the exosystem is the societal pressure to make college degrees cheaper and more convenient to obtain. An increasing number of careers require a college diploma, but with tuition costs rising, it can seem an insurmountable challenge to many. Online education can look like a panacea for issues of access, encouraging some to join the digital movement without fully considering the challenges. While it is tempting to be an innovator and solve problems with technology, individuals at all levels- micro-, meso-, and exosytem must approach new solutions with caution, ensuring that the right tools are used in the right ways, for the right reasons. Institutional leaders must carefully weigh the benefits of convenient asynchronous communication

which allows far away, technologically underserved, and busy students to access educational opportunities, against the potential loss of community and rapport that can come with largely text-based, asynchronous interactions. Further research is also needed to determine and implement best practices for online teaching and learning. Additionally, the contexts of the macrosystem and chronosystem, while not the focus of this study, may have implications for rapport-building that require further consideration. The culture and expectations, as well as the student's maturation and generational trends likely play a role in the student's relationship with instructors, both online and in person.

Future Research

In the following section, I will use my experience to offer suggestions for additional studies. In the course of reviewing my data, I found three areas of online education research that I believe merit much deeper examination: teaching as a social experience; managing expectations in online education; and defining online education.

Teaching as a Social Experience

In classes with fewer opportunities for student-student interaction, there may be less of a chance of building community. While one-on-one relationships were viewed as important, instructors also pointed to the importance of a collective relationship in student-teacher rapport building. Often, it was expected that rapport was better built with students when those students could see the instructor interact with their peers, and thus, learn more about the instructor's behaviors, attitudes, standards, and communication style through observation as well as through direct, individual experiences. Existing literature

examines the ways that rapport-building influences community-building, but at this time, there is not much discussion of how community-building may influence instructor-student rapport. Future studies would do well to compare students' and instructors' perspectives on rapport—both between instructor and student, and among classmates. A longitudinal study of classroom communication between individuals and among groups may offer meaningful insight into the relationship between individual rapport and communal rapport.

Managing Expectations in Online Education

A concern shared by all of the participants was what they saw as unrealistic expectations on the part of online students. Students were often found to be technologically and/or academically unprepared for online learning, with many holding the belief that online courses are, by their very nature, easier than face-to-face classes. Many professors felt a need to start each semester with a detailed explanation of what is required to be successful in an online course. These individuals' experiences are consistent with the findings of Tichavsky, et. al., (2015), which indicated that many students' perceptions of online courses may be largely impacted by negative assumptions, rather than negative experiences. If misconceptions of online courses are widespread and have a significant impact on student behaviors, then it would be worthwhile to discover where these misconceptions are coming from and how they may best be addressed.

Some suggested that an online course could be more likely to attract students who are eager to avoid social interaction. If this is the case, then some issues of engagement

and rapport-building associated with online courses could be less related to the course context itself and more to the expectations, and even preferences, of the students who tend to opt for online learning. Future studies would be well advised to examine how online courses are marketed to, and perceived by, students. Similarly, it would be valuable to learn more about which students are most likely to be attracted to online learning. Several instructors raised the possibility that online courses might be especially attractive to students who are busy and stressed- the exact students whom instructors found hardest to connect with because such students were frequently tired and overwhelmed.

Defining Online Education

As was mentioned previously, current literature is exploring the nuances of online and distance learning. It is increasingly common to find instructors mixing face-to-face and online elements in their classrooms, blurring the lines between distance education and face-to-face education. Some instructors use online quizzes to build students' skills outside of the face-to-face class, and some online instructors require individuals to come to an on-campus meeting at least once over the course of a semester, for example. Future studies should avoid treating online education and face-to-face education as a dichotomy, and instead treat them as ends of a spectrum, with a variety of hybrid types in the middle.

Even the most ardent supporters of online education among my participants tended to favor their college's hybrid courses; those in which content is split roughly 50-50 between face-to-face and online contexts. Hybrids were described as offering the best of both worlds in terms of communication outlets and flexible scheduling, and instructors

frequently described a process of selecting their favorite tools and strategies from online and face-to-face courses to create their hybrids.

Comparative studies of different institutions' and instructors' classifications of "online," "hybrid," and "face-to-face" courses are needed to build working definitions that will allow scholars to more clearly discuss and analyze the role of technology in education. Additionally, longitudinal studies of how specific digital tools and practices influence learning would be useful in isolating specific characteristics which may affect student outcomes and retention. For example, examinations of courses which regularly use video conferencing technology or which successfully promote peer-to-peer rapport-building would be useful for understanding online communities in education. Initiatives which aim to improve technology and resource access to underserved students and communities must also be studied and evaluated.

Conclusion

While this study was limited to a group of participants ffrom a single institution, it offers a theory about the instructor point of view of rapport, which has, until now, been largely neglected in higher education research on communication and relationship-building in online courses. The theory offers that communication quality, quantity, and methods all impact rapport strength and durability, with rapport-building requiring more mindful intent and effort for online teachers than face-to-face teachers. The location of the study also adds data to a smaller, but growing body of literature examining higher education in the community college setting. By placing a well-supported theory like

Walther's Social Information Processing Theory in a new context, educators can begin to understand how technology may shape, and be shaped by, human behaviors and interactions. The Theory of Instructor-Student Rapport Online posits that media use, self-disclosure, communication content, and uncertainty reduction all play an important role in the building of positive and lasting relationships in the digital classroom. By expanding this study's participant pool and diversifying the institutions from which they are recruited, the theory can be further developed and applied with more confidence to additional settings.

APPENDIX A – INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction
1. Tell me a bit about yourself- why did you become a teacher? What is your field of expertise? How long have you been teaching?
2. When and why did you first begin teaching online?
   a. What percentage of your classes are online, in a typical semester?
   b. Which online tools do you like to use for teaching and interacting with students?

Main Part of the Interview
3. In your experience, what does the phrase "student-teacher rapport" mean?
4. How important is "rapport" in the classroom setting?
   a. What goals do you have for rapport in your classes?
5. How do you establish rapport with your students?
   a. What do you do first? What comes next?
   b. Have you found any tools or strategies that help in establishing rapport?
6. What are some challenges that affect the rapport-building process and how do you address these challenges?
7. Generally speaking, how easy or difficult is it for you to establish rapport in the classroom?
8. What does rapport look and feel like?
   a. How do you know when you have established rapport successfully?
9. What does a lack of rapport look and feel like?
   a. How do you know when rapport is lacking?
10. Does rapport or the rapport-building process look different in any way when you are teaching online, versus when you are teaching face-to-face?
    a. If so, how?
11. What feelings or thoughts come to mind when you think about online teaching and learning?
12. Do you feel equally prepared and comfortable establishing rapport online and in a physical classroom? Explain.
13. Do you have a preference for teaching online or teaching face-to-face?
14. Is there anything that would make you more or less likely to teach online in the future?

Closing
15. What do you wish you had known about rapport-building when you began teaching? When you began teaching online?
16. What else do you think it is important for me to know that we have not yet discussed?

APPENDIX B – INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Instructors' perceptions of teacher-student rapport and rapport-building in online vs. face-to-face classrooms

RESEARCH PROCEDURES
This research is being conducted to build a grounded theory to explain how community college instructors perceive rapport and the rapport-building process with their students in online and face-to-face courses. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute, one-on-one interview about your experiences with, and opinions about, student-teacher rapport and rapport-building. This interview will be recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS
There are no benefits to you as a participant other than the chance to reflect on your unique experiences and perspective as a teacher of online and face-to-face classes. Your participation may also benefit other scholars, educators, and administrators by improving their understanding of the instructor experience, computer-mediated communication in education, rapport-building variables, and digital pedagogy.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The data in this study will be confidential. All identifying information will be removed from interview transcripts and analyses, and stored separately (along with original audio recordings) behind locked and/or password-protected barriers which may only be accessed by the interviewer. A code or pseudonym will be attached to the collected data from each interview. Through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link your responses to your identity, but only the researcher will have access to that identification key. All recordings and identifying information will be deleted and/or physically destroyed within one year of project completion.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no

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penalty of any kind. There are no costs to you or any other party. Please note, in order to participate, you must be an instructor with two or more years of experience teaching online and face-to-face classes.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Meredith Aquila, a doctoral candidate at George Mason University. She may be reached at 571-481-7785 or via email at maquila2@masonlive.gmu.edu. The supervising Principle Investigator is Dr. Jan Arminio, who may be reached at jarminio@gmu.edu in the event of any problems or concerns about the investigation process. You may also contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.
_____ I agree to audio recording

_____ I do not agree to audio recording

_____
Name

_____
Date of Signature

APPENDIX C- RECRUITING EMAIL

Dear NOVA Faculty,

For those of you who don't know me, I am a Communication Studies (CST) professor at NOVA-Alexandria, and I am currently working on my doctorate at GMU.

As part of my dissertation project, I am interviewing college instructors with at least 2 years of experience teaching both online and face-to-face classes.

If you meet the above criteria, I would like to invite you to participate in my study, which seeks to better understand the faculty perspective on some important issues related to online teaching and learning. Ultimately, this study could help improve pedagogy in both online and traditional contexts.

While I cannot offer any incentives to volunteers, I will do my best to work around your schedule (each interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes and can be conducted at the location of your choice) and make this experience as engaging and enjoyable as possible. Additionally, your knowledge may ultimately help many other educators and administrators who are interested in best practices for online education and positive student-teacher communication.

The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed so that I can review and think deeply about the data I collect. In order to protect confidentiality, all identifying information will be removed from your answers, and all notes and audio recordings will be locked away safely where only I can access them.

If you are interested, please contact me at maquila@nvcc.edu or 571-481-7785 to learn more or to schedule an interview. I thank you in advance for your assistance.

Respectfully,

Meredith Aquila

APPENDIX D: FOLLOW-UP EMAIL

Hello!

If you're receiving this email, you were kind enough to participate in my dissertation research project. Thank you!!

Following our conversation, I wondered if you had any further thoughts to add, having had more time to think about online vs. face-to-face rapport-building. I'd especially like to know your opinions on the following preliminary conclusions:

1. Online rapport seems to have the potential to be as rich as face-to-face rapport, but it requires more mindful effort and self-disclosure (both on the part of the teacher AND on the part of the student) in order to grow. Further, having some synchronization (phone calls, skype conversations, etc.) or at least some background information (such as photos and "biographies" at the start of the class) seems to help with the rapport building process.
2. Rapport-building may feel easier when the instructor has more flexibility/autonomy to affect course design and online practices
3. Face-to-face rapport often feels stronger and longer-lasting than online rapport.

Do these statements match your experience? What am I missing? What am I getting right/wrong? Any thoughts you have would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you again for your support!

Best Wishes,

Meredith Aquila

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