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LEARNER EXPERIENCE OF SILENCE

IN COHORT-BASED DISTANCE EDUCATION

BY

LESLIE JEANNE DURAN

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The future of learning.

Approval of Thesis

The undersigned certify that they have read the thesis entitled

LEARNER EXPERIENCE OF SILENCE IN COHORT-BASED DISTANCE EDUCATION

Submitted by

Leslie Duran

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Distance Education

The thesis examination committee certifies that the thesis
and the oral examination is approved

Supervisor:
Dr. Dianne Conrad
Athabasca University

InternalCommittee Member:
Dr. Susan Moisey
Athabasca University

External Committee Member:
Dr. Beth Perry
Athabasca University

External Examiner:
Dr. Ellen Rose
University of New Brunswick

November 23, 2017

Dedication

To my father, G. David Steinman

He taught me many things, including how to approach the world with a sense of wonder.

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Abstract

This study explores how distance learners experience the phenomenon of silence online. Guided by the primary research question – *What are the lived experiences of online silence for learners who are members of distance learning communities?* – and a phenomenology of practice approach, I interviewed 12 post-secondary learners who were engaged in cohort-based distance learning to explore their lived experiences of silence online. I further investigated how participants described the four phenomenological existentials of lived body (corporeality), lived space (spatiality), lived time (temporality), and lived relationship with others (relationality) in relation to their experiences of silence online. The participants were forthcoming in their interview and generous in sharing their experiences with me. The interviews, 22 in total, yielded thick, rich data.

I carefully transcribed each interview and used iterative rounds of a whole-part-whole interpretive process to discern key features of the four phenomenological existentials and to identify key themes that inform our understanding of the phenomenon under study. Following each interview, and in between each round of interpretation, I used journaling to reflect on (a) my developing understanding of the phenomenon of online silence, and (b) the unfolding research process.

The participants' experiences highlighted that silence is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that was both enacted and received by the participants. Speaking out online was done carefully, sometimes with partial voice and sometimes in fuller voice with a sense of spontaneity and connection. Participants described profound ways that they experienced corporeality, spatiality, temporality, and relationality in the online learning

environment. Participants described challenges and successes while becoming embodied

through their words in the discussion forums, mediating the physical separateness and

asynchronicity of the online space, and maintaining relationships with others in the

distance learning community.

The six themes that emerged were: (1) Learners enact purposeful silence; (2)

Learners absorb silence from others; (3) Learners perceive, and use, silence as

demarcation; (4) Learners experience silence within voice; (5) Learners use deliberate,

complex strategies while engaging in online discourse; and (6) Learners hear each other

in trusted community. These six themes give new understandings to the silence online

and reflect multifaceted and nuanced aspects of the participants' experiences of this

phenomenon.

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Chapter 1. Significance of the Problem

Silence is "a nothing that is a something . . . worthy of study and attention."

(Gaige, 2013, p. 10)

Overview

In many distance education courses, the majority of interaction occurs in asynchronous, text-based discussion forums. Instructors and students post messages and respond to other people's postings, resulting in a threaded discussion. In these threaded discussions, if an instructor or learner does not post, or is delayed in responding to another's post, the absence of communication comes across as silence (Xin & Feenberg, 2006). Although silence in face-to-face classrooms has been the topic of considerable research interest, little investigation has been done into the experience of silence in the online classroom, particularly when the primary method of academic discourse is asynchronous and text-based.

In this study, I used a phenomenology of practice approach to explore the lived experience of post-secondary distance learners to gain insight into the phenomenon of silence online. In this chapter, I set forth a rationale for the need for the study, then conclude with the research questions and purpose of the study.

Rationale

Social constructivist approaches to learning assert that interaction is a fundamental requirement for the development of community, the creation of meaning, and the promotion of learning (Bates, 2015; Conrad, 2014). In face-to-face classrooms, communication occurs in both verbal and non-verbal ways. If a student is not speaking out in a face-to-face

classroom, the instructor and other students can use non-verbal indications such as facial expression, body position, and eye contact to give meaning to that person's lack of contribution to the dialogue. One quiet student may be intently listening to the classroom discussion, maintaining eye contact with the speakers and taking notes; while another leans back with arms folded and gaze averted, appearing disengaged.

The environment of asynchronous, text-based online dialogue constrains paralinguistic cues (Walther, 1996; Wiesenberg & Hutton, 1996). Silence in computer-mediated communication can "shape many different forms and meanings: marginalization, nonparticipation, uncertainty, reflection, the lack of feedback or of interest, etc." (Gradinaru, 2016, p. 130). When silence occurs online, members of the learning community may be left to wonder whether the silence "signifies agreement, polite disapprobation, indifference, or perhaps even complete absence from the conference. Only explicit evidence . . . counts online" (Xin & Feenberg, 2006, p. 11). From the instructor's perspective, silence from learners can be distressing, and the underlying reasons for the silence can be difficult to interpret (Beaudoin, 2002; Benfield, 2000). Instructors generally require active communication with the learner to know what the learner is thinking, feeling, and experiencing (Benfield, 2000).

The topic of silence in the context of traditional face-to-face classrooms has been explored in depth by several researchers (Alerby & Alerby, 2003; Caranfa, 2004; Granger, 2011; Hamelock & Friesen, 2012; Procknow, 2011; Reda, 2009; Schultz, 2010; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). This body of research documents the multifaceted complexity of silence in the face-to-face classroom and describes positive, negative and neutral connotations. Silence in face-to-face classrooms can be an expression of empowerment, used for

protection, or imposed as a punitive or censoring measure. Silence can also reflect a time of learners finding their voices. Collectively, this body of research urges instructors to listen – to pay critical attention to – the silences that occur in their classrooms.

Despite the persuasive literature on the importance of paying attention to face-to-face classroom silence, the topic of silence in online classrooms has received little attention and remains a phenomenon that is poorly understood. Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007) investigated how two groups of online learners and instructors (a high-school course from the rural Midwestern United States and a graduate-level course in the Asian-Pacific) "use and interpret silence" (p. 5). The main research question was, "What forms and meanings do online silences take within text-based communications, and how are those forms and meanings enacted?" (p. 8). Zembylas and Vrasidas used an ethnographic approach and examined both synchronous and asynchronous text-based dialogues.

Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007) found that although online silences arise from learner non-participation, confusion, and marginalization, silence is also a byproduct of thoughtful reflection. Gunawardena (2014) describes similar positive attributes of silence in distance education: "Silence allows people time to collect thoughts, think carefully, listen to others, and provide opportunity for reflection, integration, and consensus of many diverse perspectives into a workable solution" (p. 96). The temporal disruption of the asynchronous online learning environment, while adding complexity to online dialogue, affords learners the opportunity to receive a question, take time to reflect on the content, search out related references, and compose an answer before posting it online (Hew, Cheung & Ng, 2010; Hewitt, 2005).

There is a need for "the development of deeper analysis – both empirical and theoretical – on the notions of online silence, social presence, and communication, one that overcomes the negative assumptions that permeate current perspectives about the meaning and significance of silence in online education" (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007, p. 20). In this study, I probed the phenomenon of online silence as post-secondary, cohort-based, distance learners describe experiencing it during online courses that rely heavily on asynchronous, text-based communication. The focus is on learners because "students understand their own silences in far more complicated ways than [instructors and theorists] do, often seeing multiple causes and issues at play" (Reda, 2009, p. 7). Online instructors may ascribe meaning to learner silences that does not resonate for the learners themselves. Schulz (2010) cautions that when we as researchers and educators think about learner silence, "we usually make assumptions . . . without probing the depths of what that silence might mean for that student at that particular time" (p. 2846).

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to understand the experience, embodiment, and meaning of online silence as a phenomenon lived by online graduate distance learners. I took an interpretive, phenomenology of practice approach to the study. The main research question is: *What are the lived experiences of online silence for learners who are members of distance learning communities?* To contain the scope, I focused on graduate students who were engaged in cohort-based online learning that occurred primarily or entirely in asynchronous, text-based discussion forums. In the study, I further explored how these distance learners experienced the four phenomenological existentials of lived body, lived

space, lived time, and lived relationship with others (van Manen, 1990) in relation to silence online.

In keeping with a phenomenological approach, the research questions did not seek to define online silence, identify underlying causes of it, nor establish a theory to predict or describe it (van Manen, 1990). The questions sought only to understand manifestations of the phenomenon of silence online as the participants experienced and described it. This research study aimed to challenge the assumption that silence online is synonymous with non-participation and to further explore alternative perceptions and interpretations of silence in online learning communities.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the study including the rationale and the research questions. In Chapter Two, I critically review existing literature related to online silence in asynchronous, text-based distance education communication. Chapter Three describes the research approach of phenomenology, specifically the interpretive approach of phenomenology of practice. In Chapter Four, I describe the methods used in the study. The results of the study are presented in Chapter Five, followed by a discussion of the implications of these results in Chapter Six.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review begins with a critique of existing definitions of online silence in asynchronous, text-based distance education discussions, followed by descriptions of the experience of online silence in the same context. It then segues into a discussion of lurking behaviour and different types of interaction. Last, because "we can only speak of silence in situations where speech is what is expected or where it would be appropriate" (Bollnow, 1982, p. 1), I conclude with a discussion of various factors that influence learner participation in asynchronous, text-based discussions. These factors include culture; learner characteristics such as motivation, health conditions, and gender; timing of the discourse; characteristics of the social environment and learning technologies; instructional design; and role expectations.

Definitions of Online Silence

The experience of silence is, by its very nature, subjective. The construct of silence online is a difficult one to define, and experiences of it may vary according to whether the conversation is synchronous or asynchronous and whether one is the sender awaiting a response, or the recipient delaying to respond in kind (Kalman, 2008). Few published studies include research questions that explicitly address silence in asynchronous, text-based online learning contexts. When the topic of silence online emerges in the literature, it is most commonly as an emergent theme from a different primary research focus. Silence was identified as a theme, for example, in Antonacci's (2011) study of the influence of different types of instructor messages on asynchronous, computer-mediated discussions; in Brown's (2011) exploration of online instructors' perceptions of diversity and marginalization; and in

Conrad's (2002a) investigation of factors that influence participation in online learning activities. As a result, I found few operational definitions of online silence in the literature.

In their ethnographic study of how online learners and instructors enact and understand online silence (described in Chapter One), Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007) used a qualitative definition of online silence as: "the condition of being quiet, that is, not making any written comments in spite of expectations to do so" (2007, p. 5). The authors' definition included an expectation that learners participate in the online discussion, but they did not specify the source of these expectations (e.g., grading rubric, expectations of other learners). By focusing on enacted silences, the study excluded the perspective of people who are receiving silence, for example, who have posted comments and who are experiencing silence while they are waiting for replies from others. This omission is notable, as some distance learners find it "disarming, even alarming, to invest the time to post a message and then get no response" (Benfield, 2000, "Language," para. 5).

In contrast, Kalman, Ravid, Raban, and Rafaeli (2006) argue that a quantitative description of online silence is necessary for accurate differentiation between true online silence, mere pauses or delays, and lurking. Kalman et al. define online silence as "no response after a period of 10 times the average response latency" (p. 15). Using a sample that included business e-mail and public online discussion forums as well as asynchronous distance education course discussions, Kalman et al. found that less than 4% of responses met their quantitative criteria for silence and that 70% were posted within an average response latency period. This quantitative definition of online silence is compatible with a positivist worldview and does not address the meanings behind the silences nor consider the diverse and individual experience of silence online.

Experiencing Silence Online

Distance learners who have been participants in research studies allude to experiences of silence in asynchronous online learning environments. One participant in a phenomenological study of the experience of writing online during a web-based course reflected on her experience of entering an online discussion forum to post: "I expect to meet some people here. No one is here, yet. I start 'talking.' No one responds. Where do my words go? I feel alone. No one is here, ever" (Adams & van Manen, 2006, p. 10). This learner experienced online silence as loneliness and the online environment as a void into which her words fell, unheard.

Another participant in an ethnographic study on social networks in asynchronous learning networks in an online course echoed those thoughts, commenting that asynchronous, text-based learning "is a cold medium. Unlike [face-to-face] communication you get no instant feedback. You don't know how people responded to your comments; they just go out into silence. This feels isolating and unnerving. It is not warm and supportive" (Wegerif, 1998, p. 38). Learners who post a message and wait for responses that never come report feeling that they are unintelligent or the content of their message was inadequate (Murphy & Coleman, 2004).

In an unpublished masters thesis, Mico-Wentworth (2014) conducted an organizational ethnographic study to explore how a group of online graduate learners defined and interpreted online silence. Participants in this study defined silence as a lack of presence, and noted it particularly when there were delayed responses to important messages and after an assignment had been turned in for grading, or when there was limited participation in the

discussion forums. Participants wanted clear expectations for response times to be articulated and respected.

Instructors also describe experiencing silence in the online classroom. In a reflective paper that describes personal experiences of the author and a colleague as they transitioned into online teaching, the colleague lamented that her online students "…don't let me know anything, they don't reply to my emails, they don't reply to my messages in the forum! There's just this awful, sort of silence" (Benfield, 2000, "The Tempo of Online Conversation," para. 1). Students need to actively, visibly communicate for the instructor to know what they are thinking or feeling (Benfield, 2000; Mattsson, Karlsson, & Lindström, 2008). Students may also ignore directions, feedback, or requests made by the instructor; they may pose questions about assignments to each other rather than to the instructor; and they may refer to the instructor in the third person, as if the instructor was not reading the posts – thus, in effect, silencing the instructor (Ahren & El-Hindi, 2000; Beaudoin, 2013; Dennen, 2005; Mattsson et al., 2008).

Lurking Behaviour

The topic of learners who "lurk" online – i.e., learners who log on and read postings, but do not actively contribute to the discussion themselves, has been addressed in the literature. Taylor (2002) differentiated workers, lurkers, and shirkers regarding participation trends in asynchronous discussions as a part of an online, post-graduate course. Workers are proactive participators who both visit and actively contribute to the discussion board at a higher rate than average. The lurkers participate on the periphery; visiting regularly, but rarely initiating posts on the discussion board. Shirkers are parsimonious participators who visit the discussion forums infrequently and contribute less than an average number of

postings. Taylor reported that the grade point average was different between the three groups, with workers attaining the highest average and shirkers the lowest. Interpretation of these findings is limited, however, as statistical tests were not used to determine significant differences in the grade point averages between the three groups, and the data focused on frequency and timing of posts rather than on content.

Beaudoin (2002) studied 24 students from two online graduate education courses who did not visibly participate during a weeklong learning activity with a guest speaker, despite instructor expectation of participation during that week. Beaudoin surveyed these learners to explore the reasons for their non-participation during this part of the course. The response rate was 100%. Seventy-five percent of the student participants reported that they did not post because they preferred to read what other people wrote, or because someone else posted comments that were like those they had planned to post, making their efforts seem redundant. Seventy-nine percent of the student participants reported that they could learn as much as or more from reading others' comments as writing their own.

Beaudoin (2002) posited that instructors who utilize a social-constructivist approach might view students who lurk as parasites. A parasitic lurker takes from the learning environment and benefits from this knowledge, but seldom, if ever, contributes back to the learning community. A type of parasitic lurking behaviour called *social loafing* occurs when the learner feels anonymous within the group and "tries to profit from others while minimizing essential contributions" (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003, p. 340).

Other researchers take more a more positive perspective on lurking-type behaviour. In a correlational design study of learners in a graduate-level distance education program, Moisey, Neu and Cleveland-Innes (2008) found that while the act of reading other learners'

posts had a moderately strong positive correlation (r = .60) with sense of community, the act of posting responses did not correlate positively with sense of being part of the learning community. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) further acknowledge:

[Meaningful engagement] may mean that a student is engaged precariously by following the discussion, reflecting on the discourse, and actively constructing meaning individually. Ideally, interaction would be required to confirm understanding. However, students may be cognitively present while not interacting or engaged overtly. This reveals another challenge in understanding the qualitative nature of interaction in an online context. (p. 144)

Other researchers offer different terms for learners who may be present in the online classroom without being visible to others there. Fritz (1997) described *witness learners*, who spend a considerable amount of time in course-related activities and who do seem to learn from doing so, although they do not visibly participate online. Beaudoin (2002) found evidence that some learners take the time to internalize information emerging in the discussion and create a written response, but do not ultimately post the response online.

Sutton (2001) expanded on previous conceptualizations (Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena, 1994; Moore, 1989) of four types of interaction (learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-interface) by adding a fifth type, *vicarious interaction*. Sutton's intent was to articulate the experience of students who learn by observing and internally processing the interactions of others. Vicarious interactors are cognitively engaged in the course content and dialogues but do not make that engagement apparent to others by posting.

Culture

National and ethnic cultures of learners and instructors, and the academic culture of the online classroom, all shape expectations of social norms and appropriate discourse in the online classroom. Gunawardena (2014) describes three specific occasions when cultural differences may hinder participation in online discussions: (a) expressing disagreement, especially if the participant is a non-native speaker; (b) sharing personal information, and (c) asking for help. Students from cultures that are under-represented in the online classroom may be "unwilling to seek help because they fear others will perceive they lack ability" (p. 95). Gunawardena also notes that in some cultures silence is seen as rudeness, but in other cultures, silence is a sign of respect (2014). Learners from collectivist cultures may avoid posting critical comments to maintain goodwill in the group (Gunawardena, 2014). Maintaining harmony may also be an expectation of online academic culture. Learners from low-context cultures might interpret "lack of response to an email or to an online discussion forum… as lack of interest in low-context cultures where explicit verbal and written contributions are assessed and rewarded" (Martin & Cheong, 2014, p. 465).

Conrad (2002a) found evidence that learners use silence as a conflict avoidance strategy when the online discussion gets heated or argumentative and that learners cease participating if the online discussion gets too emotional. Conrad's (2002a) findings may reflect that norms of academic culture tend to favour rational over emotional discourse (Boler, 1997).

At times, members of the dominant culture in a learning community may silence members of non-dominant cultures unwittingly from a desire to be helpful. Smith (2005) describes an online adult learning course for masters and doctoral-level students. During a

series of problem-based learning group activities, the non-native English speakers were delegated fewer responsibilities than their native-English speaking peers because the other group members "felt these learners had faced unusual challenges of adapting to the United States and completing their studies. These efforts, although well intentioned, negatively influenced the non-native English-speaking learners' experiences" (p. 192).

Despite the potential for cultural misunderstandings in asynchronous, text-based dialogue, conflicts can be mitigated with care and attention from learners and instructors. Gunawardena (2014) asserts "digital environments can create third cultures where identity can be constructed and negotiated through interaction with other participants" (p. 84).

Characteristics of the Learners

Intrinsic and personal factors influence a learner's participation in the online learning community. In the sections that follow, I review how motivation, health conditions, belief in self-efficacy, gender, and learning style may impact participation in online dialogues.

Motivation

Motivation is a complex learner characteristic that can both positively and negatively impact the learner's participation in online classroom discussions. Although motivation for learners to contribute to discussion forums can come from external sources, such as requiring such participation and grading the discussion (Rovai, 2002), motivation should not be viewed merely as a dichotomy of intrinsic versus extrinsic.

Hartnett, St. George and Dron (2011) used Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to describe motivation as being on a continuum ranging from amotivation (absence of motivation) to intrinsic motivation (self-directed, autonomous motivation). SDT asserts that there are four hierarchical types of external motivation between those end points. Their

location on the continuum is determined by the "degree to which externally motivated behaviour is autonomously determined" (p. 22). The four types of external motivation are as follows: external regulation (learners compliant due to rewards or punishments); introjection (learners compliant because of the expectations of others); identified regulation (learners compliant with a task as a means to an end); and integration ("the final and most autonomous type of extrinsic motivation, where learners engage in the activity because of its significance to their sense of self" (p. 23).

Instructional design also affects motivation. Hartnett et al. (2011) used a case-study approach to explore the influence of learning activity on motivation in two web-based, pre-service teacher education courses. Both courses required participation in the online discussions. The first course used problem-based learning (PBL) as the major learning activity. Learners in this course had to work in groups to solve a complicated, ill-structured scenario. The second course required learners to do microteaching sessions where they planned and taught two lessons on a topic of their choice, and reflected on their experience afterward.

Using the Self-Report Motivational Scale as an outcome measure, along with interviews and questionnaires, the researchers found that during the PBL activity, about half of the learners rated themselves as having less overall self-determination. Learners who perceived that the PBL learning activity was not relevant to their learning goals, or who felt they had inadequate guidance from the instructor, were more likely to rate themselves as being either amotivated or externally regulated. In contrast, during the microteaching activity of the second course, all learners rated themselves as being on the autonomous end of the continuum. The researchers concluded that motivation to participate in online

learning activities is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Motivation becomes more self-directed when learners have choices of activities that enable them to pursue topics that are meaningful to them.

Other factors that affect motivation include the free-rider effect, occurring when a group member believes that the group's efforts are sufficient without their input and consequentially has little motivation to contribute (Kerr & Bruun, 1983). A related phenomenon, the sucker effect, occurs when group members who are active participants become aware of the free-riders and thus withdraw or cease their own efforts to avoid being exploited (Kreijns et al., 2003). Learners will also lose motivation to participate if they feel they are being excluded from the dialogue or ignored by the others (Hew et al., 2010; Murphy & Coleman, 2004).

Gender

A number of studies have investigated the influence of gender on participation in asynchronous, text-based dialogues. There is evidence that, at times, male voices silence female ones by dominating the online discussion, ignoring posts made by the females or making deprecating replies (Blum, 2005; Marks & Sibley, 2006; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007). Rovai (2002) noted that some males use individualistic voices when posting, which is less conducive to dialogue than the relational, connected style of voice more typically utilized by female students. However, Swan and Shih (2005) found no gender differences in perceived social interaction in their mixed methods study of graduate students in four online courses.

Health conditions

Health conditions include mental and physical capacities such as finger dexterity, memory, stamina, mental state, and visual acuity. Learners with such impairments may "face a second 'digital divide'" (Burgstahler, 2002, p. 5). For example, people with fine motor impairments that limit dextrous movements of the fingers may experience physical difficulty selecting small buttons on a keyboard or screen. People with visual impairments may rely on screen-readers; however, these readers do not interpret graphic images. Learning management systems that have a crowded or inconsistently formatted layout may present a barrier to people who rely on screen magnification devices to read their computer screens or those who have learning disabilities (Burgstahler, 2002).

Asynchronous, text-based learning can also be a means of supporting participation in learning for people with certain types of impaired body functions. Long, Vignare, Rappold, and Mallory (2007) explored the experience of learners with hearing impairments enrolled in a second-year, blended learning course at an American institute of technology. A strong majority of the deaf and hard-of-hearing students reported that the online portion of the blended course was a benefit. They were pleased that they could communicate directly via text with their teacher and peers, without having to go through a third-party interpreter as was sometimes required during the face-to-face portion of the course. One participant with a hearing impairment commented, "I like the [online] discussion board and being able to say my opinion. I think it was much easier for me . . . than in person" (Long et al., 2007, n.p.).

Mental state, particularly anxiety, has been identified by a variety of researchers as a reason for learners not posting in online discussions. Kreijns et al. (2003) describe *communication apprehension* as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with

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either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p. 341). The anxiety that prevents visible participation stems from a variety of sources, including fear of the perceived public nature of online dialogue and permanency of the written comments (Beaudoin, 2008; Benfield, 2000) as well as nervousness about how peers will receive the posts (Wegerif, 1998). *Imposter syndrome*, a feeling of incompetence despite evidence to the contrary, has also been identified as a detriment to adult learners fully engaging in online academic dialogue (Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Learning style

A plethora of theories about differing learning styles is available to explain learner preferences and cognitive styles (Marks & Sibley, 2006). Certain personality traits and preferred learning styles have been correlated with less responsiveness in online discussion (Beaudoin, 2002; Hew et al., 2010). As one example, Ally and Fahy (2005) used the Kolb Learning Style Inventory (LSI) to compare how the learners with the four learning styles defined in the LSI (Diverger, Assimilator, Converger, and Accommodator) differed in beginning new discussion threads. They found that Accommodators and Assimilators started higher mean numbers of new discussion threads than did Convergers and Divergers. However, despite some evidence that learning styles and personality traits affect participation in online learning, the overall evidence supporting their impact on participation and learning outcomes is weak (Marks & Sibley, 2006).

Temporal Aspects of the Online Activity

Temporal aspects of the unfolding dialogue in online discussions, such as the timing of initiating and responding to posts, influence learner participation. Conrad (2002b) found that online learners wanted to be able to access the course website a week or more prior to

the start of the course in order to have time to become familiar with the site navigation and content. Learners want and expect instructors to post their first message before the start of the course. However, they do not want nor expect their classmates to post early. Some even report feeling anxious if too many peer posts are already present at the opening of the course (Conrad, 2002b).

Students perceive instructors as being silent when they are slow to answer questions or give feedback on assignments (Beaudoin, 2008). The perception that an instructor is invisible can also cause increased anxiety in learners regarding final marks and how they will be graded (Conrad, 2002a). The timing of responses is "critical to the online interaction, particularly in asynchronous communication" (Tu & McIsaac, 2010, p. 144).

Regular and rapid feedback from the instructor was the element of effective online moderation most valued by learners in a Welsh study on effective e-moderation (Thomas, Jones, Packham, & Miller, 2004). The researchers interviewed 35 Bachelor of Arts students and found that infrequent or delayed communication was the highest-ranked characteristic of ineffective online moderation. Without adequate instructor contribution, discussions taper out and learners may stop posting altogether (Baker, 2011; Hew et al., 2010; Hewitt, 2005; Xin & Feenberg, 2006).

Lack of available time has not been shown to be a consistent predictor of learner participation in online dialogue. While studies by Beaudoin (2008) and Cheung, Hew, and Ng (2008) did not support lack of time as a significant reason for not posting, a participant in a Wegerif's (1998) study noted:

[t]o my great regret, I have not been able to contribute as much over the past few weeks and this has been to my distinct disadvantage. I have been logging in regularly

and reading the messages posted, but I just have not had the time to reflect on my own

comments. (p. 37)

Characteristics of the Social Environment

Characteristics of the social environment both elicit and inhibit participation from

learners. The number of participants involved in the discussions, difference in status

between speakers, the style and content of the messages posted by others, and the anticipated

duration of the discussion partnership all may influence whether or not a learner decides to

post.

The number of learners in the online classroom has a meaningful impact on

participation in the learning activities. Rovai (2002) recommends a minimum of eight and a

maximum of 30 students as the optimal range for a single class with one instructor in a

course with online discussions. Courses that have too few learners do not generate enough

interaction to build community (Rovai, 2002), and courses with too many learners have been

shown to have decreased interactivity (Kim, 2013).

The status of the dialogic partner(s) may also influence online interactions. When

learners do not respond to an instructor's posts, it could be because the instructor is not

considered to be a legitimate participant in the learner's dialogue, or that the students are

intimidated by contributions made by the instructor (Beaudoin, 2013). Learners involved in

online dialogues where they may choose their discourse partners tend to cluster together by

social standing (Rice, 1994). A post from the instructor that comes across as an

authoritative, final answer can cause further discussion to cease (Hewitt, 2005).

The style or content of the posts of the other learners and instructor are also factors in participation. Learners will cease participating in an online dialogue if they feel that another learner is threatening them, coming across too forcefully, or pontificating on a topic (Conrad, 2002a; Hew et al., 2010). Instructors who are less skilled in facilitating constructivist online dialogues risk limiting active participation from learners (Xin & Feenberg, 2006).

Learners in the online environment often have choices of which classmates they will respond to when multiple discussion threads are active (unlike the typical face-to-face environment where it is more common that only one conversation happens at a time). Conrad's (2002a) participants made their choices about whom to respond to based on factors such as the amount of respect they had for the other person, as well as the degree of familiarity, kinship, and like-mindedness they felt for the other classmate. Last, the anticipated duration of the discussion partnership also has been shown to affect the likelihood that a learner will engage in an online discussion. Both Walther (1996) and Poscente (2003) found that when distance learners were to engage with their peers over a longer duration, they were more likely to participate in the discussion than when the discussion partnerships were more fleeting.

Characteristics of the Technology

Learning management systems that are easy to use show evidence of being a positive factor in increasing online participation and collaboration (Wegerif, 1998), whereas technical challenges are a potential source of diminished learner participation online. Technical challenges include design features of learning management systems that are not user-friendly, such as an inability to toggle between a discussion thread and a message being composed in response (Murphy & Coleman, 2004). The layout of the screen is also a factor

in participation if learners have difficulty way-finding through the many posts of multi-thread, multi-topic online dialogues, and withdraw from the conversation or lurk without participating as a result (Hew et al., 2010; Tu & McIssac, 2010; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007).

Frustration with using technology may cause learners to abort messages in progress or not attempt to post at all. Wegerif (1998) described a participant who could only access the learning management system from work using a long-distance connection. Due to the cost, this participant minimized the amount of time spent online. The participant felt a divide between himself and his classmates who had less restricted Internet access, describing them as being an in-group of which he could not be a part. The participant in Wegirif's study also felt that these classmates tended to dominate the online discussion.

The use of emoticons in asynchronous academic dialogue is a feature of technology that has generated discussion in the literature. Emoticons are used at times to add emotion and personality to the text-based discussion (Conrad, 2004).   While use of emoticons can enhance social presence (Tu & McIsaac, 2010), there is also evidence that learners might choose to not reply to a post if it contained emoticons whose intent or meaning was not understood (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2007).

Instructional Design

Thoughtful instructional design, with carefully considered topics for online discussion, supports participation in online dialogue. In their study on learner motivation in online courses, Hartnett et al. (2011) found that the "perceived importance, relevance, and utility value of the activity . . .were just as important as the interest or enjoyment of the

task" (p. 33) and that allowing choice in which learning activities to do made learners feel more autonomously motivated to participate in the activity. Tu and McIsaac (2010) concur with the importance of learner choice and add that familiarity with the discussion topic encourages learner participation in the dialogue. Tu and McIsaac conclude, "When the students were more familiar with the discussion topics, they felt more comfortable participating in the discussions; otherwise, they felt intimidated and were reluctant to join the conversation" (Tu & McIsaac, 2010, p. 145).

In discussion boards with multiple active topic threads, learners have choices as to which message or messages they will respond. Conrad (2002a) describes learners making their choices based on factors including the length of the initial post (with long, rambling posts less appealing to respond to than shorter, more focused posts), whether or not the message was part of a continuing dialogue with which the learner was already engaged, and whether or not anyone else had responded to that post. Learners did not want to leave any posts "orphaned" (p. 66). The subject line and the content of the message were also factors in the learners' decisions of whether or not to respond to specific posts.

Role Expectations

Learners in online classrooms carry role expectations about what it means to be a teacher or a student and what behaviours that are expected of someone in that role. Instructors who are new to online teaching may be very qualified, dedicated, and experienced teachers, yet they struggle to know how to bring these qualities into the online learning environment (Beaudoin, 2013; Benfield, 2000; Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2002). They may grapple with the belief that maintaining a low profile online means that they are minimizing or abdicating their teaching duties (Beaudoin, 2013).

Kreijns et al. (2003) noted, "many instructors find it difficult to make the transition from complete control of the classroom to unobtrusive monitoring" (p. 348). In a qualitative study of five Canadian university instructors who were teaching an online course for the first time, Conrad (2004) described her participants' experiences of segueing to this role. One participant spoke about awareness of the need to be less of a "talking head" (p. 34) and more of a facilitator, allowing the students to contribute "content within the structure I provide" (p. 34). Another participant, keen to be perceived as active in the online classroom, stated he "tried to log in often and make myself as visible as I could" (p. 35). Upon reflection, however, he wondered if he entered the discussions too early, subsequently imposing undue influence on the direction of the conversation. The participant commented, "I probably could have posted a little less and let the students get to the point themselves" (p. 35). Striking a balance between being silent and speaking up was challenging for several of the participants in Conrad's (2004) study, and they discussed the need to change their teaching habits by adopting a less teacher-centric approach in their online classrooms so that the voices of the learners could emerge.

Skilled online instructors pay attention to the unfolding dialogue and intervene when necessary, maintaining a watchful silence interjected with episodes of online visibility. It can be a difficult balance to strike. Learners may interpret a lack of instructor input as disinterest or an abdication of the instructor's responsibilities (Conrad, 2002a); yet if the instructor's presence is too dominant, it may not leave room for learner contribution in the dialogue (Xin & Feenberg, 2006).

Learners also have internalized role expectations of what it means to be a student, however, "asynchronous collaborative learning . . . necessitates rethinking the role of

student" (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes & Fung, 2004, p. 62). Some learners prefer to be passive recipients of content rather than be active in the social construction of knowledge (Swan & Shih, 2005), yet distance learning requires students to become more self-directed (Garrison et al., 2004). For students to be successful in taking on the role of distance learner, they need to reconceptualise notions of learning environments, become familiar with new learning technologies, and gain confidence engaging in new methods of academic discourse (Garrison et al., 2004).

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed literature on silence in asynchronous, text-based online classroom dialogues. The chapter covered contrasting definitions of online silence, descriptions of the experience of online silence, and lurking in online classrooms. I concluded the chapter by exploring various internal and external factors that influence learner participation in asynchronous, text-based classroom dialogues. In the next chapter, I describe the research approach by giving a brief overview of the development of phenomenology and describing the specific phenomenological approach of phenomenology of practice which I used in the study.

Chapter 3 – Research Approach

Introduction

In the previous chapters I provided an overview of the study and reviewed existing literature on the topic of silence online. In this chapter, I describe the chosen research approach, phenomenology of practice, by first providing a brief historical overview of the philosophy of phenomenology, followed by my rationale for selecting phenomenology of practice as the specific approach for this study.

Research Design

What are the lived experiences of online silence for learners who are members of distance learning communities? This main question of the study emerged from my own experiences of online silence as a distance learner and a distance educator. Van Manen (2014) notes that such a seemingly ordinary experience that causes us to "pause and reflect" (p. 31) can be the origin of a phenomenological question. The question sparks a desire for deeper reflection to understand how the phenomenon is experienced and what it means. Insights into phenomenological questions lie within the participants' perceptions of their lived experiences, which will vary from person to person (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003).

Phenomenology emerged from the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl (1931/2012), in reaction against the positivistic paradigm of reductionism that was prevalent in the scientific community of the early twentieth century. Husserl was concerned that an over-emphasis on positivism would result in the dehumanization of society, and he wanted to "reinstate the everyday human world as the foundation of science" (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nyström, 2008, p. 31).

The aim of Husserlian phenomenology is to gain meaningful insights into the essence of human experience of a phenomenon. Phenomena are excerpts from daily life – for example, experiences that come from being in relationship to others, from interacting with objects, or from experiencing various emotional states. In a reductionist view, objects ought to be analyzed as separate entities from the researcher (Dahlberg et al., 2008). In contrast, an important construct for phenomenologists is *intentionality*, or the idea that there is a connection between subjects and objects. Husserl conceptualized intentionality as unidirectional: subjects (people) have experiences of a phenomenon (the object); the phenomenon is experienced in the consciousness of the person (Vagle, 2014).

Husserl (1931/2012) asserted that phenomena have pure essences; in other words, fundamental characteristics that make the phenomenon under consideration "that particular thing and not something else" (Vagle, 2014, p. 29). Becoming aware of the essence of a phenomenon means coming to know "*what* it is" (Husserl, 1931/2012, p. 77, emphasis in original text). Husserl's approach is considered to be transcendental, as the essence of the phenomenon is universal and transcends time, space, and social context (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Vagle, 2014). Essence is a controversial concept for phenomenologists. Critics such as Heidegger argued that a focus on essence aligns phenomenology with positivism by reinforcing an emphasis on a notion of universal truths. Heidegger (1982) challenged transcendental phenomenologists with the question, "How can we speak at all of a unitary concept of being despite the variety of ways-of-being?" (p. 18).

Experience is always in the moment, and only through language and reflection is it brought into consciousness. For Heidegger, the source of meaning of phenomena is not solely in the consciousness of the person, but it is more dynamic. Meanings emerge as

people interact with each other and with language (Vagle, 2014). The focus of Husserlian phenomenology is epistemological in nature – to experience the phenomenon by knowing it, whereas Heideggerian phenomenology is ontological – to experience the phenomenon by being in it (van Manen, 2011).

The French existential phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that phenomena are embodied as people directly interact with the physical world and that perception (awareness and understanding) of one's lifeworld is a critical background for how one experiences phenomena there (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van Manen, 1990). Situating people in a physical world, Merleau-Ponty wrote:

> I understand the world because there are for me things near and far, foregrounds and horizons, and because in this way it forms a picture and acquires significance before me, and this finally is because I am situated in it and it understands me. (1962, p. 363)

Merleau-Ponty's work was notable in part for advancing the idea of people being immersed in a physical world of sights, sounds, textures, objects, and relationships. He developed the concept of *lived body*, recognizing that persons constantly inhabit their bodies, perceive the world with them, and are recognized by others through them (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Our bodies anchor us in the world; we are our bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty argued that our bodies inhabit space and time; we are relationship with space and time and our bodies contain memories of both (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Merleau-Ponty's is work also addressed how one's sense of being in the physical world changes over lifespan development and following bodily injury (Bakewell, 2016).

More recently, phenomenologists such as Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003) and Vagle

(2010, 2014) assert that the experiential meanings that are unearthed in phenomenological research are inextricably tied to the researcher and will shift as the researcher engages with the phenomenon and in intentional relationship with the participants. Dahlberg (2006) argued, "Meaning is disclosed in the researching act that takes place between the researcher and the phenomenon" (p. 12) and added, "as researchers we are also part of the same world as we are investigating . . . it can be hard not only to distinguish a particular phenomenon from its context, but also to distinguish ourselves from the phenomenon" (p. 15). Exploration of a phenomenon gives meaning to that phenomenon and the presence of the researcher is linked to this discovery of meaning.

Phenomenological inquiry involves use of *vocatio* and *reductio* (or *reduction*) (van Manen, 2011). Reductio gives rise to vocatio, which is carefully crafted writing that gives voice to the pre-reflective experience of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2011). Reductio is the deliberate setting aside of our expectations and attitudes in order to be able to focus on the lived experience of the person. In Husserlian phenomenology, the reductio is known as *epoché* or *bracketing* (LeVasseur, 2003; van Manen, 2014). Husserl (1931/2012) described epoché as follows:

> At the phenomenological standpoint, acting on lines of general principle, we *tie up* the *performance* of all such cogitative theses, i.e., we 'place in brackets' what has been carried out, 'we do not associate these theses' with our new inquiries; instead of living *in* them and carrying *them* out, we carry out acts of *reflexion* directed towards them, and these we apprehend as the *absolute* Being which they are. (p. 97, emphases in original text)

Husserl's insistence that phenomenologists bracket, or cut off, presuppositions and previous theories was a direct reaction against positivism. Husserl (1931/2012) cautioned that theory and empirical presuppositions limit the phenomenologist's ability to discover the pure essence of the thing under study.

Subsequent phenomenologists advocated for a reconceptualization of Husserl's construct of bracketing (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003; Given, 2008, van Manen, 2011). Bracketing can be particularly challenging for researchers who have personal experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Bednall, 2006). Offering an alternative envisioning of presuppositions as a "thread that ties us to the world" (p. 47), Dahlberg and Dahlberg (2003) wrote:

We don't want to cut [the thread] off, we *cannot* cut it off as long as we live, but we must slacken it in order to give us that elbow-room that is needed if we want to make clear what is going on in the encounter between ourselves and the world… We can *bridle* it! We can stop the pre-understanding from an uncontrolled effect on the process of understanding. (p. 47)

Bridling, from the equestrian use of the term (Dahlberg, 2006), is a strategy of reining in our judgements, interpretations, and pre-conceived ideas about the phenomenon under investigation. Bridling is a continuous, forward-looking, and active process used by the researcher throughout the duration of the study to keep pre-understandings at bay, so that the researcher remains open to discovery.

Van Manen (2011) differentiates various approaches to the reduction, including the eidetic reduction, the hermeneutic reduction, and the heuristic reduction. The *eidetic*

reduction (also known as *eidos* or essence) focuses on the researcher reflectively becoming aware of aspects of the phenomenon that are invariant and make it unique from other experiences. Van Manen cautions that the aim of the eidetic reduction is not a universal generalization about the phenomenon, but an exploration of possible meanings that are by nature incomplete and tentative.

The *hermeneutic reduction* requires researchers to reflectively give attention to any assumptions that emerge when writing the manuscript. This includes not interpreting emerging themes too quickly. As a component of this study, I included in Chapter Two a review of literature on various factors that may foster an understanding of the experience of silence online. The processes of gathering and reviewing this literature allowed me to reflect on my preconceptions about online silence, about events that might trigger an experience of it, as well as what that experience might be like for a learner. I also brought into the research arena my own lived experiences with silence as an online learner and an online instructor. As a phenomenological researcher, I needed to mindfully and actively bridle these expectations and experiences as I turned my focus towards the participants' lived experiences of the phenomena. These reflections provided an important foundation to use when I was engaged in eidetic and hermeneutic reduction.

The *heuristic reduction* necessitates that researchers maintain a sense of openness and wonder towards the phenomenon under investigation, including bringing that sense of wonder to the reader in the final manuscript. I strove to approach the research questions with curiosity and openness as I explored and interpreted the participants' experiences of silence online. During data gathering and interpretation, I aimed to maintain "a wondering, contemplative tone that resists finality and rigidity" (Vagle, 2014, p. 57) by employing a

variety of strategies, including using reflection, actively seeking elements in the data not addressed in the literature review, bridling my own experiences and expectations, avoiding asking the participants leading questions, journaling, and having regular in-depth dialogues with a doctoral candidate colleague, concurrently conducting a phenomenological study, about our ongoing research process. These strategies are discussed in more depth in Chapter Four.

Phenomenology of Practice

Phenomenology as a theoretical perspective has a complex philosophical history. My interest in the phenomenon of silence online comes from my own lived experiences as a distance educator and a distance learner. Van Manen (2011, 2014) emphasizes that different methodological approaches are appropriate for researchers who are philosophers and for those who, like myself, are not philosophers. *Phenomenology of practice,* also known as "applied phenomenology," is appropriate for contexts in the applied human sciences such as education and health care (van Manen, 2011). Van Manen (2014) further adds that phenomenology of practice "refers to the kinds of inquiries that address and serve the practices of professional practitioners as well as the quotidian practices of everyday life" (p. 15). Phenomenology of practice is an interpretive, or hermeneutic approach to phenomenology that allows researchers to draw on various phenomenological traditions (van Manen, 2014). Because of its practical application to lived experiences in educational contexts, I chose to follow phenomenology of practice methodology for this study. I employed Dahlberg's (2006) strategy of bridling over the Husserlian construct of bracketing as Dahlberg's conceptualization of this practice resonated for me.

Van Manen (1990) draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty by emphasizing in phenomenology of practice the importance of corporeal, spatial, temporal, and relational ways of being in the world, ways of being that van Manen describes as the "four fundamental existential themes which probably pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings" (1990, p. 101). Distance learners inhabit two lifeworlds: the three-dimensional world of their physical location, and the virtual world that they enter when they go online. As the four existential themes were originally conceptualized as being in the "real" world rather than the virtual world, I felt it was important to explore in these aspects of the online lifeworld of the participants in their lived experiences of silence online.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a brief overview of the development of phenomenology and some of its tenants such as epoché and essence. I then presented my rationale for choosing to utilize van Manen's (1990, 2014) interpretive phenomenology of practice approach, and Dahlberg's (2006) strategy of bridling. In the next chapter, I address issues related to the research methods including participant recruitment, research ethics, and researcher role. I also describe the specific methods used in data gathering and analysis, elements of trustworthiness, and limitations and delimitations of the study.

Chapter 4 – Methods

Introduction

Having presented in the previous chapter an overview of phenomenology and my rationale for selecting phenomenology of practice as the approach for this study, in this chapter I discuss considerations related to selection and recruitment of participants, maintaining ethical standards, and my role as an interpretive phenomenological researcher. Next, I detail the methods used for data gathering and interpretation, and the strategies I used to establish trustworthiness. The chapter ends with an overview of limitations and delimitations of the study.

Participants

Purposive recruitment (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith & Hayes, 2009) was used for this study to ensure that all potential participants had experienced the phenomenon of silence online in an asynchronous, text-based distance education context and could reflect orally about their experiences. During recruitment, I strove for heterogeneity in the sample, to ensure that a variety of voices were captured.

Inclusion criteria were the following:

1. Participants were learners in a cohort-based post-secondary distance education course or program of study that has an expectation of participation in asynchronous, text-based discussion as a significant component of the interaction.
2. Participants had completed at least two online courses that required the use of asynchronous, text-based discussion.

3. Participants were enrolled in the distance education course or program of study at the time of the initial interview, so that communicating online in an educational context was a part of their present lifeworld.

Exclusion criteria were the following:

1. Participants could not be persons who were students in online classes I was teaching at the time of recruitment and data gathering.

2. Participants could not be student peer members of my doctoral cohort.

I elected to exclude learners in courses I was instructing at the time, as I did not want the power dynamics at play in a learner-instructor relationship to interfere with learners sharing their experiences with me honestly and openly. I excluded members of my own doctoral cohort for two reasons. At the time the study began, I had been learning online with these peers for more than three years. My first concern was that we were too close to each other's experiences, and therefore it might be harder for me to bridle my own preconceived ideas or interpretations while I was interviewing them and analyzing their transcripts. Second, I recognized that they may be reluctant to share negative experiences of silence online that may have been inadvertently caused by something I might have posted or done during an online course we took together.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Athabasca University (Appendix A). The recruitment flyer is shown in Appendix B. Participants were given a written description of the study and an informed consent letter for signature (Appendix C) to inform them as to the purpose of the study, details about the nature and duration of their involvement, contact information, assurance of confidentiality,

and acknowledgement that they could withdraw participation at any time without penalty or consequence.

The recruitment strategy, approved by the REB at Athabasca University, occurred in two ways: through personal contacts (n = 3) and by approaching online learners in specific online courses taught at a western Canadian university (n = 9). For the second means of recruitment, and following REB requirements, approval was first obtained from the university's Academic Vice President to approach the Deans of individual departments about recruitment within their departments. I contacted one departmental Dean, who granted consent to allow me to contact the instructors of four courses in his department. All four instructors agreed to allow learners in their courses to be contacted about the study. A graduate student administrator forwarded the description of the study, informed consent letter, and a brief cover letter to the learners in each of the four courses.

Twelve participants in total agreed to be included in the study. The number of participants required for a phenomenological study is shaped by the nature and complexity of the phenomenon in question. It cannot be determined in a formulistic manner, and it "is important to emphasize that phenomenological inquiry cannot strive for empirical generalization – from a sample to a population" (van Manen, 2014, p. 352). Each participant's contribution adds more layers of meaning, yet each participant's experiences are unique. My goal in determining how many participants were needed was to obtain "just the right amount of experiential material . . . [to create] a scholarly and reflective phenomenological text" (van Manen, 2014, p. 353). The number of participants required varies depending on the richness of the data gathered from individual participants.

Dukes (1984) suggested a range of three to 10 participants for a phenomenological study and Creswell (2013) proposed three to 15 participants. Determination of participant numbers may be also be informed by previous studies (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 2014). In a review of numbers of participants in PhD dissertations that used qualitative interviews as the method of gathering data, Mason (2010) reviewed 57 phenomenological dissertations and found the following: (a) participant numbers ranged from seven to 89 participants; (b) the mean number of participants was 25; and (c) the mode and the median both equaled 20 participants. Based on the recommendations of Dukes (1984) and Creswell (2013), and on Mason's (2010) findings, I had proposed recruiting between eight and 20 participants for this study.

At the beginning of each interview, prior to beginning the audio recording, I collected demographic data in a self-reported manner related to program and discipline of study, country of home location, anticipated credential at completion, sex, age range, and length of time the person had spent as a distance learner. This information was collected to ensure some heterogeneity in the group of participants. The 12 participants represented masters and doctoral level distance education students from four different universities, located in Canada or the United Kingdom. The participants represented three different academic disciplines (education, business administration, and health management). Nine participants were female and three were male. Ages ranged from 40 to 65 years. At the time of the interviews, the participants resided in either Canada, the United States, or in Western Europe. Participants had been online learners for an average of five years, with a range of one to 16 years. One participant identified as being a non-native English speaker. In order to protect participant

confidentiality, I have not included a table with participant-specific demographic details.

Demographic data of the participant group are summarized below in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Age Range	40 to 49	50 to 59	60 to 69
	n = 6 (50%)	n = 4 (33.3%)	n = 2 (16.7%)
Discipline	Education	Business Administration	Health Management
	n = 10 (83.3%)	n = 1 (8.3%)	n = 1 (8.3%)
Time as Distance Learner	1 to < 5 years	5 to 9 years	> 9 years
	n = 7 (58.3%)	n = 3 (25%)	n = 2 (16.7%)
Sex	Male	Female	
	n = 3 (25%)	n = 9 (75%)	
Program of Study	Masters Degree	Doctorate	
	n = 2 (16.7%)	n = 10 (83.3%)	

I did not collect data related to other variables, such as disability status, socio-

economic status, ethnicity, or gender identity which may have also captured variations in

learner experience with the phenomenon under study. The purpose of research using

phenomenology of practice as an approach is not to demonstrate correlations nor causality

between a given status or demographic with any particular manifestation of the phenomenon

(van Manen, 2014). The demographic data I did gather were solely for guiding the ongoing

purposive sampling and ensuring that a range of voices was included (Angen, 2000).

I assigned each participant a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. This seemingly

simple process proved more complex than I anticipated. To better understand potential

power dynamics at play, and to guide decision-making (for example, whether or not to retain the ethnic origins of participants' real names when assigning their pseudonyms) I consulted several sources (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Lahman et al., 2015). I ultimately selected names that were suitable to the participant's decade of birth, but not intentionally associated with the ethnic origin of their real name. I assigned the 12 participants the pseudonyms Becca, Frances, Jane, Jonathan, Karen, Katrina, Mandy, Mark, Nalini, Naomi, Tamara, and Thomas.

Role of the Researcher

Phenomenology is an approach which brings mindful focus to everyday experiences. In the case of this research, the phenomenon of learner experience of online silence is the understanding that I sought to bring to expression. By choosing phenomenology of practice as my approach, I aligned myself with hermeneutic phenomenology. My primary role, therefore, was one of descriptive interpreter (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009; van Manen, 2014). My responsibility as a researcher using phenomenology of practice was not to conceptualize the participant's experience, but rather to focus on how the phenomenon is lived in the participants' everyday lives (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990). Using heuristic reduction and vocatio, I identified themes that emerged from the learners' experiences and aimed to provide a text that would provide deeper understanding of learner experience of silence online. I strove to do this in a manner that would resonate with readers and bring them a new understanding and sense of wonder about the phenomenon (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; van Manen, 2011).

In the spirit of openness and wonder, and following the recommendations of several phenomenologists (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003; Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990), I began the

research process by engaging in phenomenological reflection and journaling about the phenomenon of study. This process includes asking myself, and others around me, questions such as the following: "What is silence?" "Do you ever seek out silence?" "What is the difference between silence and quiet?" "Does silence imply loneliness?" "Is silence a time of expectation?" These questions helped me to define and refine the research questions and generate ideas for interview probes. As the research process unfolded, I actively and regularly journalled to (a) reflect on my developing understanding of the phenomenon of online silence and the lived experiences that are described by the participants; (b) record my ongoing efforts to enact the hermeneutic reduction by bridling my presuppositions and judgments based on previous knowledge and prior understandings of the phenomenon of learner experience of silence online; (c) critique my interviewing skills; (d) develop questions for future interviews; and (e) document decision points and associated references consulted at each one.

Data Gathering Methods

The primary data gathering method was open-ended, loosely structured oral interviews, which were audio-recorded on primary and back-up recording devices. The interviews were conducted by phone, video call (i.e., via Skype or Face Time) or in person, based on the participant's preference. One follow up interview was conducted by email. Two of the participants did not have a second interview, as one participant did not respond to requests to schedule the second interview; and another was travelling out of the country and unavailable during the time remaining for gathering data. Data were therefore gathered from a total of 22 interviews. Initial interviews were approximately one hour in duration; follow up interviews approximately 30 minutes.

In the planning phases of the study, I had hoped to be able to conduct as many of the initial interviews as possible face-to-face, in the participants' homes. This did not turn out to be practical, as I had limited access to persons who met the inclusion criteria and who lived within a reasonable travel distance from my rural home community. Upon reflection and consultation of the literature (Herzog, 2012), I decided that using a variety of technologies to conduct the interviews is in keeping with the routine lived experience of distance learners, and so was a contextually natural means of data gathering for this group of participants and the phenomenon of interest.

Phenomenological interviews for data gathering should not follow a preset course of questions (Vagle, 2014; van Manen, 1990). During the interviews, I had a list of possible questions to ask as prompts if needed (Appendix D). The interviews were conversational in nature, but grounded by the main research question with an aim to elicit personal life vignettes known as *lived experience descriptions* (van Manen, 2014). During the interviews, I strove to focus the discourse on the participants' own experiences of silence online, and away from their "opinions, views, perceptions, or interpretations" (van Manen, 2014, p. 298) of the phenomenon. At times this proved to be challenging, as some of the participants I interviewed were doctoral students in distance education who were well-read in literature about various aspects of online interaction.

In the initial interview, I typically began by asking the participant a general opening question, such as "When you hear the phrase *silence online,* does that bring up any emotions or experiences for you?" I began the follow up interview by asking the participant if he or she had thought of anything further, building on our previous dialogue, that he or she wanted to share with me. Subsequent questions for both interviews varied as I attempted to remain

open to the person's experience and actively bridle my own preconceived ideas. Earlier interviews informed subsequent interviews, which provided an opportunity to probe more deeply into experiences that were touched on in the first interview and nascent themes emerging from early stages of the iterative process of interpreting the data (Vagle, 2014). The second interview was also a means of prolonging engagement with the participants, adding to the trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 2013).

In reflecting on my use of active bridling during the subsequent interviews, I realized it was a fine line at times between asking probing questions that might elicit experiences that built on topics that other participants had expressed in their interviews, and "leading" the conversation in a specific direction that would echo another participant's experience. For example, one participant that I interviewed early in the process (Jane) made a comment about a time she felt a sense of "buzz" in the online course. This word struck me as significant, an experiential state of being that could be thought of as being in direct opposition to silence. In later interviews with other participants, I explored this idea further by asking them to tell me about a time that they felt a sense of "buzz" in an asynchronous online discussion. In my own reflections on the transcripts of their answers, I had to be mindful of the hermeneutic reduction and being open to hearing the lived experience being expressed by each participant, and not merely seeking confirmation of something I had heard before in a previous interview.

Interpretation of the Data

I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews with the assistance of Dragon (Version 5.0.4) software that converts spoken word into text. I manually transcribed each interview,

made numerous corrections to the text converted with Dragon, and formatted it into dialogue as would be found in a dramatic script.

A research interview is a "co-authored conversation in context" (Poland, 1995, p. 292), and the transcription process necessitated making several reflective and intentional decisions (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005). I decided to attempt to capture the rhythms and cadences in the spoken dialogue and not denaturalize it prematurely. I retained filler words such as *um*, stammers, partial words and repeated words. I did not correct grammatical errors, and I aimed to capture pronunciation that occurred in natural speech (for example, words such as "kinda" and "cuz"). I made note of any significant pauses, and italicized words that were emphasized by the speaker. I also made note of laughter, sighs, and audible disruptions in the environment, such as a barking dog or a ringing phone. Occasionally, when there was a word or a phrase I could not discern, I would make a note in parentheses that I could not transcribe the word, or note if it was my "best guess" at transcription.

For interviews that occurred either face-to-face or by video-enabled technology such as Skype, I would record gestures if they were essential to contextual understanding of a word or phrase being used. In the interest of confidentiality, I removed any specific references to names of people, cities, workplaces, and universities and replaced the proper noun with a generic term in brackets (e.g., "[name of university]"). I then reviewed each transcription thoroughly for accuracy. This process usually required listening to each recorded interview a minimum of three times. Making purposeful decisions about how to transcribe the audio interviews, and taking precautions to ensure accuracy, are aspects of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Poland, 1995).

Participants were given the option of reviewing the transcripts of their interviews to check for accuracy and to correct transcription errors if needed (van Manen, 2014). Five participants (41.7%) chose to review their transcripts. The transcripts were password protected and emailed to the individual participants with the password sent in a separate email. On the advice of Carlson (2010), I attached a cover letter to the transcripts, explaining that it was a record of a spoken dialogue, and so grammatical errors, filler words, and incomplete sentences are common and to be expected. I requested feedback to add to clarity, to expand on any thoughts, and to correct any errors they might note. One participant filled in some words or phrases in the transcript that had been difficult for me to understand on the audio recording. Another added a few additional comments and minor points of clarification related to the content we had been discussing. The other three participants had no suggestions for changes to their transcripts.

I used the following iterative process (modified from Vagle, 2014) to engage with and interpret the transcribed oral data, along with a printout of the email correspondence that was used to collect data for one follow up interview:

1. Reorient myself to an interview transcript by reading it holistically. This step was meant to immerse myself back into the interview. In a journal entry I wrote before starting this step for the first interview, I wrote, "Time to put my pen down. Start to read. Keep an open mind." At this point, my aim was to reacquaint myself with the conversation, but not to begin to interpret it. Not yet.

2. Re-read the interview transcript line-by-line with "careful note taking and marking of excerpts that appear to contain initial meanings" (Vagle, 2014, p. 98). After this step was completed, the printed interview transcript was usually

covered with lines of highlighted text and margin notes. I took care to engage in the heuristic reduction by actively bridling my suppositions and pre-conceived ideas. I asked myself questions such as, "Is this what I expected to find?" "Was I looking for this?" "What elements are unexpected?" I was also mindful to continually orient myself to the phenomenon under investigation, specifically the experience of silence online by distance learners and to maintain the sense of wonder of the heuristic reduction.

3. Compose a lengthy journal entry with my reflections on each interview. (When this step was completed for all 22 interviews, these journal entries totalled 140 single-spaced pages.)

4. Repeat steps one, two, and three for additional interview transcripts as they became available.

5. Craft follow-up questions for subsequent participant interviews.

6. Complete a second line-by-line reading of the interview transcripts to begin to articulate meanings, noting parts of each transcript that might contribute to meanings of the phenomenon and looking for meaningful phrases I may have overlooked in the first line-by-line reading.

7. Complete reflective journal entries for each interview based on new insights gleaned from step six.

8. Complete a third line-by-line reading of the interview transcripts to further articulate each part identified in step six, for each participant.

9. Begin to coalesce the voices of multiple participants around specific topics. I accomplished this by writing brief summaries on a number of topics that were

recurring in the participant interviews, as possible precursors to larger themes. These focused topical summaries had titles such as "feeling safe online" and "being authentic online." The process of writing them helped me reflect on and solidify emerging meanings and themes.

10. Return again to the interview transcripts to look for themes, and give these themes preliminary titles. This step was one of the most challenging ones, and a step that I had to repeat multiple times, going back and forth between this step and the previous one.

11. Revise the manuscript to achieve the vocatio – the evocative description of the phenomenon that provides the reader with new understandings and sensitivities about the phenomenon.

While completing iterations of steps five through 11 above, I reflectively considered the interview transcripts and my journal entries for descriptions that captured the four existential phenomenological themes of corporeality, spatiality, temporality, and relationality (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 1996; van Manen, 2014). These four existential themes are fundamental to phenomenological experience, and "are productive categories for the process of phenomenological question posing, reflecting, and writing" (van Manen, 1990, p. 102). Careful consideration of corporeality, spatiality, temporality, and relationality helped me to situate the online lifeworld of the distance learner participants. These four existential phenomenological themes, and the other themes and understandings that emerged from the interpretation of the data, are discussed in detail in Chapters Five and Six.

This iterative process of interpreting the data required careful writing and rewriting in an alternating process of reflection and action: reflecting on the content and my own bridling actions, proposing tentative meanings, and writing to explore emerging themes and develop them into longer, narrative passages. As I wrote, I inserted passages of relevant participant quotes, which were often lengthy. In subsequent re-writing, I pared the direct quotes down and did light edits for clarity and succinctness (e.g., removing filler words, repeated words, and tangential sentences), while aiming to retain the uniqueness of each participant's spoken words. I made these editorial decisions following recommendations made by van Manen (2014) to make the text "insightful and accessible" (p. 254). My aim was to create a final document that respected the experience and contexts of the individual learners, and included adequate description for the reader to (a) gain a deeper understanding of what it is like to experience online silence as a distance learner, and (b) judge the trustworthiness of the data, research process, and findings.

Trustworthiness

The credibility of qualitative research cannot be established using methods developed for validation of quantitative research (Angen, 2000). Instead, interpretive researchers use strategies to assure the reader of the trustworthiness of the research, such as the following: prolonged engagement and persistent observation; triangulation; peer review; building trust; checking for misinformation; negative case analysis; clarifying researcher bias and assumptions; member checking of results; and rich, thick description (Creswell, 2013). Not all of these strategies, however, are appropriately applied to phenomenology. Member checking of results and triangulation, for example, are problematic (van Manen, 2014) as both assume a fixed reality; yet participants' experiences are varied (Dahlberg & Dahlberg,

2003). Participants may disagree with the researcher's interpretation, and triangulation "is as likely to result in inconsistent or contradictory evidence as in convergent findings" (Angen, 2000, p. 384). Both member checking of results and triangulation can introduce conflict as to whose interpretation will be retained in the event there is disagreement. Convergent findings are not an intended outcome of phenomenology of practice research (van Manen, 2014); rather, the focus is on crafting an interpretation that brings new understandings to the phenomenon under study (van Manen, 2011).

In this study, I incorporated the following elements to support trustworthiness:

1. **Alignment of research question, the approach, and the method.** The research question is one of learner experience of silence online. Because the research question focuses on lived human experience and does not delve into causal relationships or explanatory theories, it may be considered a "valid phenomenological question" (van Manen, 2014, p. 350). The method followed phenomenological analysis of participant interviews, with the main knowledge producers being the participants (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009). The research question, research approach, and research methods are articulated and in alignment.

2. **Trustworthiness of transcriptions.** As mentioned earlier, I deliberated about the approach to transcription (natural versus denaturalized) and used repeated checks to ensure transcription accuracy.

3. **Member checking of transcripts.** Being mindful of participant burden, and the fact that the participants were all busy graduate students, I chose not to require them to review their transcripts. I did give them the option of reviewing the transcripts if desired and five participants did choose to do so. Two of those five

participants suggested minor edits to their transcripts and I made these changes as requested.

4. **Peer review.** Peer review is a trustworthiness strategy that does not have the same meaning in interpretive research as it does in positivistic research (Angen, 2000). The researcher's peers typically are not immersed in the data to the same degree as the researcher, and consequently, they may not be informed enough to judge the validity of the researcher's findings. During this study, however, I was fortunate to be able engage in ongoing peer review with a fellow doctoral student who was also in the process of completing a phenomenological dissertation study. We remained in very similar stages of progress throughout our studies, and we met regularly by Skype to critically discuss issues related to using a phenomenological approach, challenges that arose, and plans for our next actions; as well as to share resources such as references to consider at each point in our decision-making processes. These regular and ongoing meetings were tremendously valuable to me as a time to discuss and defend choices I was making, as well as to hear her perspectives and thinking which inevitably helped to broaden and deepen my own. This intensive method of peer review was beneficial to the research process and the clarity, fidelity, and comprehensiveness of the final document.

5. **Dissident perspectives.** I was fortunate to have participants who offered what could be termed "outlier" or dissident experiences from those described by the majority of the other participants. These differing voices enabled me to become aware of some assumptions I had been unknowingly making. They added richness

to the data and added to the trustworthiness of the findings (Bazeley, 2009;

McPherson & Thorne, 2006).

6. **Transparent documentation.** I sought to establish trustworthiness by diligently

documenting the study's process and outcomes in a transparent manner. This

choice included writing in first person, to acknowledge my presence in the research

design process, data gathering, and interpretation of the findings. I also chose to

describe key decision points that I made during the process and resources I

consulted in determining a course of action (Appendix E).

7. **Careful crafting of the final manuscript.** Finally, as I wrote the findings and

discussion chapters of the study, I sought to include descriptive richness and

interpretive depth (van Manen 2014) and to write with clarity. The intent is that

the final manuscript will have what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) call

"invitational quality" in that it invites readers to share in the experiences described.

The manuscript should resonate for readers who have experienced the phenomenon

of silence online, and offer new understandings of what that experience is like to

readers who have not themselves experienced the phenomenon.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations of the study include limitations of the approach. By its nature,

phenomenology does not generate findings that are generalizable to a larger population, nor

is the intent to generate theory or conceptual models to explain the phenomena under study.

Delimitations are that the study does not include instructor perspectives on online silence,

although instructors are a key component of the online learning environment. The study also

excluded the experience of silence during massive open online courses (MOOCs) and other

non-cohort-based distance programs of study. The study also did not intentionally seek out voices of learners from demographic groups at risk of marginalization. These boundaries contain the scope of the proposed research and create opportunities for future research.

Summary

In this chapter, I addressed selection of participants, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and a global description of the characteristics of the 12 persons who participated. I also described my role as a researcher using an interpretive phenomenological approach. Next, I described processes for data gathering and interpretation, including the strategies I used to ensure trustworthiness. Finally, I addressed limitations and delimitations of the study. In the next chapter, I present the findings of the study. Findings include (a) the participants' experiences of the four phenomenological existentials of corporeality, spatiality, temporality, and relationality that serve as a background to understanding the phenomenon under investigation; and (b) two broad topical groupings that emerged from the iterative rounds of analysis of the interview transcripts.

Chapter 5 – Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the findings of the study. The findings are grouped into two sections. The first section addresses the phenomenological existentials of corporeality, spatiality, temporality and relationality that together serve as a background to understanding the participants' lifeworlds online. The second section addresses two broad topical groupings: experiencing silence online and engaging in dialogue online.

Existential Phenomenological Background

In order to situate the experience of silence online within the lifeworld of online learners, I analyzed the interview transcripts for participants' descriptions of their lived experiences and looked for descriptions of the four fundamental phenomenological themes that "pervade the lifeworlds of all human beings" (van Manen, 1990, p. 101). The four fundamental phenomenological themes are lived body (*corporeality*), lived space (*spatiality*), lived time (*temporality*), and lived relationships with others (*relationality*). To differentiate them from themes that emerge as the outcome of the whole-part-whole analysis of the data, the four fundamental phenomenological themes are referred to as the *four phenomenological existentials* (van Manen, 1990).   The four phenomenological existentials overlap each other at times, and together provide a structure to give contextual background to the phenomenon of learner experience of silence online.

The 12 learners who participated in the study (Becca, Frances, Jane, Jonathan, Karen, Katrina, Mandy, Mark, Nalini, Naomi, Tamara, and Thomas) represented a somewhat heterogeneous group. They were all distance learners in a cohort-based master's or doctoral

program. They ranged in age from 40 to 65 years, lived in North America or Europe, and came from differing professional backgrounds.

In hearing their stories and reflecting on their experiences, it became apparent that the online nature of their learning environment interacted with each of the four phenomenological existentials. In the following section, I present findings related to corporeality, spatiality, temporality and relationality in turn as a means of painting the existential phenomenological background of the learners' experiences of silence online.

Corporeality

"When we meet another person in his or her landscape or world, we meet that person first of all through his or her body" (van Manen, 1990, p. 103). This statement may be true when the setting of the meeting is a three dimensional one, but it is not the case for distance learners when they meet others in the virtual spaces of online classrooms. Some but not all of the participants had the opportunity to meet their fellow cohort members in person at some point in their studies together. Most of the participants' interactions occurred online, and many of the participants spoke, either directly or indirectly, to the experience of embodiment of their person and voice through written words on a screen.

Early in our first interview, Jonathan commented that he was intrigued by the phrase *silence online*. Jonathan noted that "we talk about having a voice online, and call it 'discussion,' which is speaking. But you don't do any speaking. You're typing. It's writing." Later in the interview, he related an anecdote that occurred during a face-to-face social gathering. At the time the incident occurred, Jonathan was spending a great deal of time online, teaching and taking classes. Jonathan recalled:

I remember my fingers were moving, and I realized I wasn't actually speaking. I realized that I was so used to typing out my thoughts, that now that I was actually with people in person, my fingers wanted to type out a reply to them. My typing was my voice.

Tamara also alluded to online corporeality in an experience that she described to me. Tamara said:

If I've gone to our online discussion board, and there has been a lot of chatter, or particularly verbose, to me it feels overwhelming. I feel like there's too much noise. I can't even tease out the various strands, and then I feel like I want to shut down.

Tamara's word choices are germane to the digital paradox between written word and sound. She referred to the written posts as "chatter" and described feeling overwhelmed by "too much noise" coming from their presence. An observer passing by while Tamara was at her computer would not hear noise coming from it, yet Tamara registered noise coming from the text on the screen loud enough to overwhelm her. Tamara gave another example of online embodiment while she told me about an experience when she wrote out a post, and then decided not to send it. Tamara explained:

It's almost akin to being in a classroom, and wanting to participate in the discussion, and raising your hand. And then someone ahead of you has said [the same thing] and, ugh! I'm going to put my hand down now. It's the digital version of participating in that physical class.

For Tamara, the kinetic gesture of raising your hand, with the meaning that you had an idea that you wanted to share with the group, was a corporeal metaphor to describe the time

in between writing a post and discovering that someone else had already expressed the same idea online.

When describing their actions of breaking silence by posting to discussion threads in the online forums, participants used language that implied physical movement and bodily presence. Naomi frequently used the kinetic verb "keyboarding" as a metaphor for talking online. Tamara described wanting to participate in a discussion thread that was particularly rich and complex, and said "I almost don't know where to insert myself. But the beauty is, you can insert yourself just about anywhere." Naomi's use of the term "keyboarding" and Tamara's description of joining online dialogue by "inserting herself" capture the idea of physical embodiment of the virtual space through the written word.

Mark used similar language, saying "You jump into one or two [discussion threads] that you are comfortable with the content, and just kind of watch the other ones." Mark used "jumping into" as a kinetic metaphor for participating in online dialogue and contrasts those discussion threads with ones that you "just kind of watch" but do not join with a written response.

Tamara summed the experience of embodying the virtual space in this way: "Online, when I'm not physically present, there is something that's happening physically. There is a feeling of like, okay, now I'm *in* this." At another point, Tamara used the phrase "walking into" the discussion as a metaphor for logging on.

Karen expressed excitement when logging on to the discussion forums. "I actually feel quite excited when I go in." Her choice of words "go in" imply that by logging on, she is entering a new physical space. Katrina also used the phrase "go in" to describe logging on, and Naomi described logging on as being "teleported" between her day-to-day world and the

online world. "Going in" and "being teleported" are both physical metaphors that imply making a physical appearance in the online space.

While participants used language of "in-ness" to describe going online, they used terms of "out-ness" to describe becoming silent online, such as "back out" (Becca), "zone out" (Jane), "jump out" (Frances), "dial out" (Mark), and "tune out" (Jane). These phrases connote leaving, departure, or diminishment as metaphors for becoming silent online; acts of fading corporeality.

Naomi and Becca used phrasings with similar imagery when discussing trying to work in group projects with classmates who fell silent. Becca said, "If you didn't hear back, that person wasn't present." Naomi's fellow group member was "never where he said he was going to be, at the time he said he was going to be there" and eventually he "just kind of disappeared." Naomi's use of the word "disappeared" has connotations of someone physically embodying a space, and then being physically gone.

Frances frequently talked about "watching" what was happening online. "It's visual. I'm watching the computer. And you are reading words. I'm watching what people say. But you're hearing their voices too." Frances watched and could hear the others' voices when she was reading their words. Other participants related that they, like Frances, heard their cohort members' voices when they read their posts online. Mark, who had met his cohort members face-to-face, related that when he goes to read posts in the online discussion forums, he "can hear the words coming from them in the tone and in the way that they would have spoken them."

Jonathan's experience of hearing the writer's voice in their written words was slightly different than Mark's. Jonathan reflected:

I actually feel that when I read a post, I do hear someone's voice in it. But I don't hear

the words voiced, if you see the distinction. I'll hear how the voice sounds, but I won't

hear the words actually voiced.

Jonathan tied the writer's spoken voice with their written words to get an overall

impression of their "voice" although, unlike Mark, Jonathan did not literally hear the written

words as spoken ones.

Becca and Tamara each described an experience where differing modes of corporeal

embodiment in the virtual classroom collided during a synchronous online session. In each

of their experiences, participants had a synchronous voice connection as well as a chat box

for typing written comments in real time. In Becca's experience:

People were madly typing [comments] instead of talking. The professor was

responding to them verbally, and the messages continued to come in writing. She said,

"It sure is hard to keep up with this chat." And then all of a sudden, people stopped

typing. I stopped typing stuff because I felt totally awkward. I don't know if you can

equate that to silence, but it was weird. And a couple of other people that I chat with

after class also mentioned the same thing. They thought it was weird.

Tamara related an anecdote about a time she used an emoticon to fill in a needed

emotional message during a synchronous online session:

Someone said something funny, and I laughed, but I realized my microphone was muted

and so no one can tell that I'm laughing! It was fascinating, because here I am giggling,

and no one can hear me. But were participating in this joke together. So it's like, okay,

I'm going to throw a smiley face in the chat box, because it's funny!

In that example, Tamara inserted an emoticon in the chat box as a quick method to remediate a recognized silence and confirm shared experience. The smiley-face emoticon served as a written symbol to visually embody Tamara's giggle in the disembodied environment of the synchronous online session.

Other participants described their experiences of choosing to use, or not use, emoticons to infuse emotion into text-based communication online. The participants described mixed feelings about using emoticons and their place in academic discourse. Many of the participants were in favour of using emoticons and enjoyed incorporating them in the online discussions. Mark related:

I really enjoy it when the teacher uses emoticons. You can be critical, but then you put a smiley face behind it to say, "I'm challenging you, but it's okay." So you feel different about it, because they're trying to eject some emotion into the post.

Like Mark, Frances found that emoticons softened potential abruptness in online posts. Frances found emoticons to be "an interesting way to bring emotion into, or humanize, the online environment."

Neither Jane nor Nalini's learning management systems supported emoticons, although their cohort members would use basic keyboard strokes to approximate them. Jane stated that some of her cohort members used "two dots and a little half-moon kind of thing. So then it looks like a typo on your page." Attempts by learners to clarify emotional aspects of corporeal embodiment in the discussion forums could be blunted by features of the specific learning management system used to support the interaction.

Other participants were reserved about emoticon use. Jonathan, Katrina, Mandy, and Thomas revealed that they do not use emoticons, with opinions of them that ranged from

somewhat neutral to dismissive. Jonathan told me, "I don't use emoticons or emojis, and they always look weird when I try. I know some people seem to be able to use them appropriately, I just haven't picked up on it." Katrina believed that emoticons lend themselves to a certain personality type, which is not her personality type. She said, "I'm a get-down-to-business kind of person. And so I don't use emoticons in my posts. I'm more professional."

Like Katrina, Mandy did not feel that using emoticons fits her own personality or way of presenting herself in the discussion forums. Mandy commented, "I'm not an emoticon person. I mean, it's still a professional degree, right?" Despite not using emoticons themselves, neither Katrina nor Mandy were bothered if others did use them. They viewed emoticons as a textual embodiment of personality, and felt that people should feel free to use them in a manner consistent with their personality and preferred mode of expression.

Of all the participants, Thomas had the most negative view of emoticons, calling them "weird, strange, avatar-ish emotions, that I find disruptive to the thought process. Sort of the lame fax machine of self-expression." In Thomas' experience, emoticons did not sufficiently bridge the gap between virtual and physical worlds. His phrase "lame fax machine" brings to mind imagery of a message being sent through intermediary technology and arriving at its destination distorted, unrecognizable, and unhelpful in clarifying the emotional intent of the sender.

Following the dialogue while not actively posting

Another interaction between corporeality and the online environment is that the disembodied nature of online learning allows students to enter and exit the online classroom environment without being noticed by others. As Thomas remarked, a benefit of being a

distance learner was that he could "leave the virtual room without disturbing anyone." In online classrooms, learners are able to slip away, unnoticed, when they want or need to.

At times, distance learners follow conversations in the online discussion forums without actively contributing to them. This sort of vicarious participation, an activity commonly known as "lurking," was a topic that came up in many of the interviews. Nalini and Naomi followed discussions without contributing to them as a means of staying engaged with the forums once they had met the required number of posts. Tamara and Frances described observing the unfolding dialogue until they located a place to insert their own voices.

Participants sometimes used the word "lurking" to describe this type of online behaviour, and sometimes did not. Thomas had strong and divergent opinions about the term lurking, a word that I had used in the cover letter of my recruitment e-mail. When Thomas initially contacted me to express interest in participating in the study, he informed me that he detested the word *lurker* and that it was a term that was "strongly offensive" to him. He indicated that he felt that it was a shaming and derogatory term, and offered *listener* as an alternate word to use instead.

Thomas' reaction to the word lurker is one that I considered to be an outlier perspective. His voice on this issue was a dissident one, in that it was not experienced as intensely by any of the other participants. Interviewing Thomas made me realize that I had unknowingly made a number of assumptions, including a belief that the term lurker was a neutral word. Clearly in Thomas' experience, this word was not neutral.

Participants described a number of aspects of corporeality online that set a backdrop for their silences and the way they express their voices online, including becoming embodied

online through writing words, hearing voices in written text, using emoticons as mediators of emotion in the online discussions, and lurking or listening to dialogue in process. From consideration of corporeality in the online environment, I move now to discuss the next phenomenological existential of "lived space" or spatiality.

Spatiality

Any time they accessed their online classrooms, distance learners did so while situated in an actual physical environment. Participants described logging in to the discussion forums from a variety of places, including their homes, their workplaces, and cafés.

Physical location was at times a factor in the participants' ability to connect and be heard online. On one occasion, Naomi was travelling and needed to get online to give a scheduled class presentation:

> We were in Istanbul. And I couldn't find a hotel that had Wi-Fi. And so we got an Internet stick and tried that, but it didn't have enough bandwidth. So we had to put the presentation off, and do it another week. It was frustrating, because I was ready to do it that week. And I wanted to get done and get on with other things.

Naomi recalled another time that she was away from home in a remote area and planning to use Internet from the local library to log on. She arrived at the library only to discover it was closed for a conference. She went next door to a convenience store to ask about other places where Wi-Fi was accessible. She was directed to a nearby grocery store, where she finally found Wi-Fi available in a small café area located behind the deli. Online learning is flexible, and learners can work around problems when they arise, but these were frustrating experiences for Naomi.

Jane observed how disruptions in some of her cohort members' physical worlds could impact their ability to log on and enter the virtual space, such as a time when a hurricane "knocked out all the power so they were not able to get online for a while." Without access to an Internet connection one is barred from entering virtual spaces; one's voice is prevented from being heard online.

Upon logging on, participants described experiences of entering the online space and perceiving various sensory features there. Tamara, who finds busy discussion forums "noisy," described her reaction to them: "I pull myself back when I feel like there's lots of voices, all the time. I need to have a little bit more space." Tamara's language in this excerpt incorporates imagery of the discussion forum as a physical space complete with sensory stimuli. She described the disagreeable sensation of being a loud environment and expressed a concomitant desire for "more space." In our second interview, I asked her to tell me more about that sensation of loudness and her reaction to it when she enters the asynchronous discussion forums. She reflected:

> It's funny to me that printed words in discussion threads feel loud. But that's how it feels. I come in, and it's just non-stop talking. When I walk into a space and I see all the words happening and going in so many different directions, and so many different layers, it tends to drive me into a personal silence.

Just as an introvert might want to retreat from a loud, crowded social gathering, Tamara's immersion into a busy, noisy discussion forum left her feeling overwhelmed and shut down.

Becca used a simile of physical space when she likened being online in the asynchronous discussion forum to being at a social event. Becca said, "It's like going into a

cocktail party, where you start a discussion with somebody, and then somebody else comes, and then they weigh in, and then all of a sudden you have a three- or four- way discussion." Becca's cocktail party simile illustrates the point that in the online forums, there are multiple conversations happening with multiple people. She also stated that when she enters that online space and sees a lot of messages, "it feels almost exciting, kind of exhilarating, woo hoo!" But that feeling might quickly dissipate "depending on who actually put up the post" and the tone and content of their written words. The party atmosphere quickly changed from excitement to disengagement if the behaviour of the other party-goers got out of line.

Mark offered a contrasting experience related to embodiment of online space. Mark told me that when he dials in to synchronous online seminars, he envisions everyone "sitting around in a board room, having a discussion, and everybody contributing in their own way." He added, "I don't think of it as a classroom. I see the classroom as a totally different experience." Mark visualizes the learners sitting together during their synchronous meeting, even though in reality, the cohort is geographically dispersed. Mark does not equate this imagined boardroom space to a classroom; the two spaces feel very different to him.

Frances described how communicating online felt like being in a "mystery novel." Her description of this experience included many spatial aspects. Frances elaborated:

> You're trying to get clues to guide your path. And if you get the wrong clue, you
> could walk in the room with the monster, right? "How did I get here? And how do I
> get out? Who's going to help me out of here?"

Other spatial aspects of distance learners' online lifeworlds included the physical layout of the learning management system and the appearance and ordering of the discussion threads contained within it. Jonathan was mindful about the structure of the discussion

forums and how it could be a cause of silence when the presence of a new discussion thread got missed. Jonathan and members of his cohort maintain a private Facebook group for one of their courses. Jonathan told me that in that private group, "sometimes somebody will post a public service announcement that there is a discussion forum open. And you will see a few people say, 'Thanks! I didn't even see that there.'" The cohort members were sometimes not aware that a new discussion thread had opened until it was pointed out on social media outside of the learning management system.

Jonathan further explained that in the learning management system, a variety of different content (for example, group activities, PDF documents, and assignments) were "jumbled" all together, intermixed with links to access the discussion forums. There was not a single point of entry into the discussion forums and in Jonathan's experience this caused new discussion threads to get missed at times.

Naomi described the navigation strategy she used as she reads posts in the asynchronous forum. She goes from "top to bottom" and when she finds one that she is "particularly interested in" she will stop reading and write out a response. The spatial layout of the discussion threads in Naomi's learning management system intersected with the temporal ordering of when each thread was posted, and therefore directly impacted Naomi's interaction with those posts. If she ran out of time, Naomi might not read posts that had been posted earlier and were therefore located further down the layers of the discussion threads.

Mandy described the spatial-temporal layout of her learning management system, in which the most recent posts appear first. Mandy told me that due to differences in time zones, she was often the last person in her cohort to post. She described how this might make it appear that she was more active in the forum than her classmates located on the east

coast, because her posts got stacked on top of ones made earlier. If a cohort member was going to reply to only two or three posts, they may only pay attention to the first ones they see, which likely included Mandy's posts. Mandy commented, "If my instructor comes in the next morning, it looks like I've been super-busy, whereas someone from Newfoundland's posts have been buried forever."

Spatiality in the digital learning environment also includes the idea of discussion threads developing in different patterns over time. Tamara observed that the spaces and silences in online dialogues allow for engagement at various levels. The unfolding dialogue might develop vertically, by going deeper and deeper into a topic, or it might develop horizontally, if the discussion expands into new directions. Tamara appreciated this multi-directional development of the online discourse, and stated, "that's the beauty and the richness of an online discussion, especially one where people are engaged in that deeper meaning and that deeper learning. And it can spread out. But depth also happens."

Tamara's description of discussion threads going deep or spreading out in new directions was echoed by Karen, who commented that she found it "interesting to think about the threads, and where they're going. And where did they come from? And where might they be leading to?" Karen's thoughts reinforced the spatial nature of developing online discourse. From their starting points, threaded online discussions head in different directions over time.

Spatiality in the lifeworld of online learners includes not only where the person is physically located at the time of logging on, but also the "felt" characteristics of the online space. Participants attributed characteristics of three-dimensional spaces to the online environments that they inhabited as learners. The spatial layout of the learning management

system and discussion threads as they develop over time are other features of lived space for online learners. From the discussion of the learners' experiences of spatiality, I turn now to the next phenomenological existential, temporality.

Temporality

Temporality, or "lived time," is a multifaceted phenomenological existential. It includes one's temporal orientation to the world (e.g., timeworn, youthfully optimistic), one's experiences of how time is passing, habits and patterns of time use, and if actions or responses seem to be taking more or less time that expected. Temporality also includes the idea that persons bring experiences from their past, as well as their hopes and plans for the future, into their current experiential states. Recognition that people's lived experience of a phenomenon may also change over time is another important aspect of temporality. The participants alluded to many aspects of temporality in their lived experience descriptions of silence online.

Temporal organization of online dialogue

The participants described navigating the mechanics of how conversations start, are continued, and then brought to conclusion in asynchronous, text-based formats online. Mark discussed how over time, he came to expect certain temporal rhythms from different individuals in the cohort. Mark noted, "you got to learn that there were certain people that you have continuous discussion with. And then certain people, if they jumped in to comment, you probably wouldn't hear from them for the rest of that week." This experience reflected temporal patterns of dialogue between cohort members.

Mark also highlighted another way that temporal disruption might be experienced in asynchronous online discussions, and that was in one's own personal thought trajectory.

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Mark remembered a time that he came back to follow up on a post he had made, but he was no longer in the same headspace that he had been in at the time he initially posted. At the time he was writing the post he thought it was really good, but when he came back to it a few days later, he no longer related to what he was thinking about at the time the post was written. In his words, he was "no longer on the same train of thought."

If a learner crafted a post during a moment of inspiration, that same level of intensity or line of thinking may not be present when the learner comes back to re-enter the dialogue and follow up on subsequent threads. Mark described how re-entering the dialogue at a different point in time requires energy, focus, and a re-orientation to the time the original post was written.

Frances described how the disrupted temporality of the asynchronous threads meant there were times that she went to post a reply, only to discover that the online dialogue had taken a different turn while she was composing her answer. When this happened, Frances had to decide what to do with the response she had crafted. Posting it in the thread no longer felt appropriate, because the dialogue had moved on to a different topic. Frances didn't feel that starting a new thread was a good option either, because it would leave the previous response hanging. Frances reflected that these situations "silence me lots of times, and I tend to go somewhere else or wait until somebody else has responded." During these times, Frances fell silent and did not start a new thread as it would have derailed the person's response, even at the cost of silencing her own response.

Trying to work across time zones

Several participants discussed experiences that arose from cohort members being located in different parts of the world and in different time zones. Jane described how

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logging in from one of the latest time zones meant that "if somebody who is a couple of

hours ahead of me posts very late, I'm the only one who can still respond to it."

Mandy also was in one of the later time zones in her cohort. She reflected being a later

poster meant that sometimes other learners posted ideas that she had planned to post. But in

Mandy's experience, this was not always a disadvantage. Mandy said:

> It just forced you to look in different areas. And if anything, it was probably better for

> you, too, to make sure that you crafted something different. Because sometimes you

> have something in your mind that you wanted to post. And going in first means you

> just dump what's on your brain right away. Whereas going in later on forced you to

> read everyone else's posts, and assimilate their thoughts, and try to get a response. So

> going first probably wasn't as helpful for your thinking, for your depth of

> understanding.

Tamara also spoke about the impact of online communication with cohort members

who live in different time zones. She explained having to think, "Okay, this is someone's

lunch time, this is someone's breakfast time," when trying to estimate when there might be

"a little bit more wait and a little bit more silence" in response to something she has posted.

Tamara filled in possible lifeworld contexts for her distant cohort members. This

helped her to estimate what expected wait times might be for their responses, based on where

they were physically located. Tamara considered what might be occurring in the other

cohort members' lives at that moment, how those activities might impact their receipt of her

message, and when (or if) she should expect a reply. Tamara described how reconciling

time zone differences when trying to meet synchronously on group projects also presented a

challenge. Confusion remained even once the meeting time had been set. "What time zone was that again? Was that my time zone? Your time? Or hers? I don't remember."

Habits and patterns of behavior

Participants described their typical routines and patterns of behaviour around logging on to the discussion forums. Jonathan, who teaches multiple classes online in addition to his doctoral studies, described his logging on behaviour as being driven by routine:

At any given time, I have four or five places to check discussion. I go through and I check each place. It kind of becomes a matter of a habit. I don't have to think much about it. I just know that I have this list of things that I have to check. To post, and respond, and see what is there and respond to it. And it's a lot easier if you don't think about it.

Naomi also described logging on to the online asynchronous course discussion as being a routine part of her daily activities, saying "It's part of the regular part of my day." Naomi recalled that several years earlier, her routines were shaped by the limitations of the dial-up Internet available in the rural setting where she was living as well as by the activities of her family members:

I couldn't go online between four o'clock and 10 o'clock at night, because the kids were online, and there just wasn't room. So I kind of switched things around, so I could get up at four o'clock in the morning, 'cause I knew they weren't up then. And I would do my work then.

Naomi also had to be mindful when she was online studying and reading other people's posts, as it was easy for her to "lose time" while she was doing these activities. She

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said, "You get online, and you think, 'I'll just read this.' And then you look, and three hours have gone! The time just goes."

Becca's routine for logging on to the virtual classroom was largely dictated by her weekly work schedule:

I am often on there early in the week, because I teach on Thursdays and Fridays. So I make a comment or two early in the week, and then I kind of just sit back and watch to see what's going to happen, and what people say. I've noticed that other people kind of weigh in on their schedules.

Learners fit time to log on to the discussion forums into their busy life routines. Becca is aware of her own temporal rhythms of online activity, as well as those of others in her cohort. This awareness was shared by Nalini, who told me that due to her work and family schedules, she often posted on the opening weekend of each discussion, as opposed to other cohort members who would post later in the week.

Not all of the participants reported following a set routine for logging in. Thomas told me that his timing of accessing the forums "is random and when I feel relaxed enough to visually endure the photons emanating from the computer display."

Respecting established timelines

Mandy raised the topic of cohort members needing to respect the timelines documented in the course schedule. She related an anecdote about a time she was working in a small group of three learners. The learners were to critique each other's research work in progress, and one of her group members repeatedly posted her work late, after the established due dates. Mandy and the other group member would review the content that she submitted, even if it was late. But their willingness to accommodate her lateness reached a

limit when the group member submitted content for them to review two weeks after the course had ended. Mandy consulted with the other group member about what they should do. That person told Mandy, "As far as I'm concerned, the course is done on this date, and we've done what we need to do." Mandy agreed, and they did not review the late content.

Changes over time

Some of the participants reflected on how their experience of silence online has changed over time. As an experienced online learner, Jane worries less now than she did earlier on about whether or not her cohort members respond to her posts. "What I've learned is there are people out there who will read [my post], and not everybody has a response to it." With time, and increased confidence and maturity as a learner, Jane has come to the realization that she does not need a response every time. As a new online learner, she hoped for responses to all of her posts, but over time, she has come to know that as long as there are some responses, that is enough. She reflected, "Maybe they don't post to my initial post, but they do respond to posts that I am participating in. I think that's all you can ask for. I am more comfortable with the silences now."

Like Jane, Mark also became less concerned over time about receiving responses to his posts. He recounted that when he first started the program, he looked for replies to his posts to come right away. His expectation for an instant reply has changed as he has learned that responses come when and if they do. Mark told me, "Today when I post, I don't get offended that I don't get a response." This change in Mark's perspective resulted in changed habits of logging on. Earlier in his learning process, he would log on frequently to see if he had received any responses to his posts. Over time, this impulsive approach to logging on became more methodical. Mark said that at the point he was in his studies now, he will

"wait until I'm ready to go back in and make some more contributions, and then I review any responses that came in." With time and experience, his approach to checking for responses became deliberate and restrained.

Karen described how over time, she became more confident in her ability to learn in a constructivist, teacher-as-guide-on-the-side online environment. She told me that when she was a new online learner, she didn't enjoy the experience. "I felt I needed the crutch of going to class, and having the teacher there. I felt I needed to be guided more in what I should be learning, and what I should be doing." But over time, Karen has come to "understand that [instructors] provide the question, and it's up to me to go find the answers." Karen's changed expectations regarding the role of the online instructor added to her enjoyment of online learning and an increased sense of self-efficacy.

Nalini described how her cohort built trust over time as they engaged in dialogue with each other. In Nalini's experience, this increased trust was evidenced by cohort members being more comfortable to offer a difference of opinion with each another. She explained, "As we're getting to know each other a bit more, people start feeling more comfortable engaging, and saying, 'I'm not sure if I agree with you on that.' " Trust that developed in the cohort over time allowed Nalini's cohort to enter into deeper dialogue rather than stay in the relative safety of non-confrontational silence.

Tamara found that over time, her motivation to participate in the online discussions moved from being extrinsically motivated to coming from a place of internal motivation. "I've gone from thinking this is something that I have to do, to something that I want to do."

Katrina described becoming more silent online as she progressed in her studies. "I would say that over time, I became more silent. The demands of the program were growing,

and so I was very selective in the conversations that I had in forums." Katrina became more silent as the program demands increased, and more selective about which conversations she would join.

Mandy's posting behaviour also changed over time. In the beginning, she felt a need to prove herself and make a good impression on the others in the learning environment. This need diminished over time. Mandy stated, "I put more effort into the beginning, trying to prove myself, and now I'm at the point where I'm doing my own research, and other people have fallen behind. I feel like I'm moving forward."

In Mandy's experience, the desire for continued interaction over time differed from learner to learner:

I think there's a lot of people in the cohort that need people to spur them on, and to help them. I am not that person. In the early times [online discussion] was very helpful to understand concepts and theory. But then once you're at a point, discussing what you've read on how to do research isn't helpful anymore. But I'm sure some people probably don't agree.

Unlike Mandy, Frances' desire for interaction has increased over time. Frances has been a distance learner for many years, beginning with learning by correspondence. She reflected on how her desire for interaction changed over time:

When I first started distance learning, nobody was out there. You did your work and sent it in. You didn't have those social connections. As I moved through into my graduate work, I started to really want that instructor or that social group to be there to help me, that support. As I got higher into my level of education, I was wanting it more.

Over time, Frances wanted increasing connection with others in her online classrooms. She also became more confident in her own abilities as a learner. She spoke about how in the beginning, she would get quite anxious about being able to write something of quality in her posts, a feeling that has changed over time. She explained that this anxiety "was worse when I first started. It's getting better now as I'm getting more into the forums."

Naomi discussed how over time, she has become more mindful of her use of certain words:

> As I'm getting closer to being finished, I'm much more careful about using words like "theory" and "model" interchangeably. I've got to make sure that it's a theory before I say it's a theory, because it might be a framework. That part of it has to be much more accurate now.

As Naomi got closer to finishing her studies, her voice needed to reflect the learning that she had done and the movement she had made towards joining the professional horizon of an academic. She reflected that once she became a doctoral candidate rather than a doctoral student, she felt "a responsibility or an obligation to express yourself in a way that reflects the training and education that other people have helped you with." She also became more "purposeful" in the way she structured her written posts, making sure that they have a main idea and were well organized. She reflected, "I'm probably more adept at doing that than I used to be. I've had lots of practice, but I am also more mindful." This structure enabled her to organize her own thoughts and, over time, to develop them further as her cohort members entered into dialogue with her about what she has written.

Benefits of asynchronous dialogue

Many of the participants acknowledged that the asynchronous nature of online learning had benefits as well as challenges. Tamara reflected that because the online dialogues extend over time, she can "breathe a little bit, and embrace the affordances of having a little space and being able to choose what I want to respond to." Jonathan revealed that he likes the asynchronous format of the online discussion forums "because you have that freedom to address something when you're ready to address it. You can think about what you want to say, and you can post it when you're ready to say it."

The participants experienced positive aspects of temporality afforded by the online space, including time for reflection and increased confidence over time. The asynchronous online environment also presented challenges for the participants, such as timing the posting of their responses and balancing the time required for studies, work, and home life.

Relationality

The fourth phenomenological existential is "lived relationships with others" or relationality. Participants described how they used written words to create, maintain, and deepen relationships with instructors and other cohort members online. Awareness of relationship to others was very prevalent in the participant's comments and reflections. Participants talked about sharing personal stories online, and disclosed strategies they used to avoid conflict and maintain civility online. Participants also were aware of the larger context of the lives of the other learners and instructors with whom they were interacting online.

Tamara talked about the importance of connection and being part of something larger than herself in terms of how she perceives the times of silence online. At different points in

her online studies she felt varying degrees of connection to the other learners. When Tamara felt less connected, the silences she experienced were "less comfortable and more isolating" for her, "more like I'm just doing this in my closet." When she felt connected, she experienced silence as "something that's natural and helpful and part of being involved in this networked learning environment."

Tamara's lived experience was that her connections with others meant that the online space was a safe one. She could be silent when she needed to be, and engage with others when she was ready to reach out.

Establishing connections with others

The participants described a variety of ways that they established initial connections with others. Mark recalled connecting with one particular cohort member over shared professional experiences:

He was a member of the Canadian Forces. And we had built up a rapport, because in the business that I'm in, we work with Canadian Forces people. So in the introductions and the dialogue, we got chatting. I found myself having conversations with him whenever we were in a particular group together.

Frances related that she found great relational value in a face-to-face meeting that her cohort attended at the start of their program. She stated, "It put faces to everybody, put personalities to everybody. They're not just a disembodied person. They actually have a connection with you, and I think that made a huge difference in decreasing anxiety."

Nalini, who typically posted on the opening weekend of discussions, reflected that this temporal rhythm brought her into frequent exchanges of dialogue with a subset of others in the cohort who posted at similar times:

Two other classmates and I kind of became the "early posters" and "early repliers."

We were always replying, and to each other. And so I felt like I established a really

strong relationship with those couple of colleagues, and the others, I just didn't so

much. And that was because of my own schedule, and my own needs to balance school

with life and kids and everything.

Nalini developed a strong online relationship with a subset of her cohort, because they

all tended to post fairly early on in the weekly online discussions. Their temporal patterns of

posting and responding synced in the online classroom. They approached each other often

online and engaged in online dialogue frequently with each other.

Frances told me of an experience she had when she started "off on the wrong foot"

during an elective course with a particular instructor. During a phone call with the

instructor, Frances came to learn that the instructor had preconceived ideas about people in

Frances' profession:

She called, and I was talking, and she goes, "Are you a nurse?" I said, "Yes." She

said, "Nurses don't usually do well in this program." I said, "What? Are you going to

fail me already? That really scares me that you already have that attitude when we're

starting out." And then every time I sent something in to her, I said, "I'm trying not to

be a nurse here." And we actually started developing a relationship through that, but it

didn't start off well. She had her own bias on nursing students.

Even though the relationship did not start well, Frances and this instructor were able

over time to develop a more trusting relationship. Frances valued good rapport with her

instructors. She reflected that "recognizing you as an individual, and a person with a life and

ideas, is quite different than just being the instructor." Mark echoed this sentiment when he

reflected on qualities that made an instructor "great." In Mark's experience, exceptional

instructors left him feeling that "somebody was listening to what you were doing, they were

having a discussion with you. It wasn't just a teacher sitting back and watching it."

Maintaining relationships with others

Once participants had established connections with others, they described a variety of

experiences related to maintaining, even deepening, those connections. Most of the

participants spoke to the value of the connections that are afforded through the cohort model,

and expressed interest in discovering what the others contributed as the dialogues unfolded.

Katrina stated, "There were times that I was excited to go in, because there was a really,

really good conversation going on between myself and a couple other people. I was just

really interested in their responses." Tamara described how working in a small group with a

few of her cohort members helped her to feel closer to them:

> I have relationships with various members in my cohort that are maybe a little bit
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> closer because we worked in a group project together. I know them a little bit better
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> and we can take the conversation in this direction or that direction. I think that helps
>
> me want to participate more.

Frances also discussed the value of connections made within the cohort, and how they

help to make the online learning environment a less silent place:

> There is a connection in the group. I do have some really go-to people that if I'm stuck,
>
> or I'm thinking about something that I can talk to them about. And the forums that
>
> we're on, sometimes people put in personal stories. You're getting all kinds of views.
>
> So that takes away the silence.

Frances' mention of sharing personal stories in the forums was a topic that other participants described as well. Sharing stories and anecdotes of a more personal nature was used a means of building personal connections as well as to illustrate pedagogical points. Jonathan described including personal anecdotes in his online posts:

We do relate to each other socially and we all have professional lives that we can draw on in our posts and our experiences. Everybody knows I have a family, they kind of know where I live. I don't really give it a second thought, although I do try to refer everything back to whatever we're learning at the time.

Like Jonathan, Becca reflected that she liked to share personal stories because she has relevant life experiences. But she was cautious about over-doing it, or sharing them too often:

I have experience, and I do like to share that experience. In some ways, I'm trying to keep a little lid on how much I weigh in on my current practice, because I don't want that to get old for people. I don't want them to say, "Oh, here's old so-and-so again, ranting on." But I also think that the experience I have is valid.

Becca wanted to share her knowledge and experiences with the others because she thought it may be helpful for them, but she rationed how often she shared so that doing so would not become "old".

While many of the participants were quite comfortable relating personal anecdotes online, some found that doing so made them feel vulnerable. Frances acknowledged that while some members of her cohort readily and easily told personal stories online, sharing her own personal experience was difficult for her. She told me an anecdote that occurred during an online leadership course. Frances had crafted a post about a personal experience with a

new leader at work, specifically about the contrast between her former leader's transformational leadership style and this new leader's transactional approach. Frances intended to illustrate differences in leadership styles by describing a challenging verbal exchange she had with the new leader. One of Frances' cohort members replied to the post by criticizing Frances' actions rather than focusing on the pedagogic point Frances was trying to make. Frances felt that this was somewhat of a personal attack, even if it was not intended to be such. She told me, "You see how if you go a little bit into that personal aspect, how the responses can also silence you? We can silence each other, without really trying." After being criticized by her cohort member, Frances felt much less comfortable to share personal stories. She stated that after that incident, her posts were "very academic" and that the "human piece" of them was missing. "I don't get very personal in it." Based on this experience of a cohort member being unsympathetic and criticizing her actions instead of addressing her larger point, Frances avoided sharing personal anecdotes online.

Although most of the participants were positive about building relationships with their online peers through the cohort model, Thomas challenged the value of it:

I am told constantly that there is value in [the cohort model]. I have yet to see any evidence of that. To me, it feels very 20th-century, that perspective. Because that simply doesn't exist on the Internet. And for people who are fluent with the Internet, this this idea of having been packaged together is very bizarre.

Thomas' feelings about interacting with the others and the cohort model were a divergent, yet important perspective in this participant group.

Avoiding Conflict

Maintaining a harmonious working relationship online is another aspect of relationality. The participants described experiences of using silence as a means of avoiding conflict, remaining neutral, and maintaining civility in the online discussion forums. Jane related an incident of how one of her cohort members made a post that made it apparent to Jane that he had misunderstood the intent of the instructor's question. Jane decided to give him some feedback via e-mail. She took the discussion of this sensitive matter off line to enable her fellow cohort member to save face. Jane recalled, "I was silent on the forum, but I tried to talk to him in a more personal type of way."

Jane contrasted her approach to the situation with that taken by another cohort member, who confronted the other learner in the forum. "He was almost berating him about it, which I found very unprofessional." She summed up this anecdote by saying, "I do think in these classes you have to work together and not against each other. That's just my philosophy." Pointing out his error was not an attempt by Jane to one-up the other student, but to try to help him, to work together, and to maintain harmonious relationality.

Like Jane, Mark was aware of how words posted in the forums had the potential to create or escalate conflict. Mark spoke to his own experience of remaining silent to avoid causing a conflict. He described becoming irritated with some of the cohort members in his MBA program, who would post about leadership even though they had "never left school, and never had a job." Mark would start to write what he called a "barking post", criticizing those learners for speaking out in a way that was not backed by experience. But in the end, he would not post those critiques. He said, "I would write them, and then not push the send

button. You just realize that that's not something you're going to put out there and put online."

Mark's description of writing "barking posts" that he didn't publish to the forum illustrated him choosing to be silent to avoid introducing unhelpful conflict, even though he found it "frustrating to hear the opinions of some people that you didn't value, because they didn't have the experience." Mark reflected that on the whole, his cohorts' discussions were respectful and civil. Mark believed that, like him, others in the cohort would "bite their tongue" when then felt irritated and not "lash out to a person individually."

Naomi told me of an experience that she had, similar to Mark's, of wanting to write reprimanding posts out of frustration with another learner, but not ending up doing so. The other learner was a member of a group project Naomi was in, who repeatedly didn't follow through with his responsibilities:

> There were several times where I'd start to post, "*If* you could get your work in on time. . ." or "*if* you would send it to us we could finish it. . ." but you just don't do it. Sometimes I just wrote it out and put it in the trash.

Naomi expressed her frustration in writing, but did not post these thoughts. She gave her thoughts voice by writing them out; she expressed them, but she didn't share or amplify them so that the others could hear them. Naomi also made the point that, although unhelpful conflict should be avoided, dissent could occur in the discussion forums if it was done with civility. She elaborated, "If they disagree with me, that's fine as long as they're thoughtful about it, and give me solid reasons." Naomi felt that if someone takes the time to craft a thoughtful, well-considered answer that had a difference of opinion, it was a sign of respect and a way to engage in a deeper exchange of information that was beneficial for learning.

She cautioned that the tight timeframes of the discussions do not always allow for respectful disagreement. "You don't have time in those courses to really hash things out if you have a difference with someone." The time structure of the discussion forum did not always allow time to work through disagreements.

Nalini also talked about her experiences of respectful discussions that included disagreement, and that differences of opinion could actually heighten interest in a discussion thread. She recalled a time that some of her cohort members had posted answers to a calculation, but she "didn't agree with how they calculated the answer." She posted an alternative answer, and how she had attained it. "And so when I logged on, I was curious to see what others thought. And if anyone had also voiced that similar opinion."

Tamara revealed that there were times she would be cautious about what she wrote online as a means of avoiding potential conflict, "Sometimes there are little clues that I get, that if I fully say something here, this might not be the best place to say this." Tamara's word choice of "little clues" illustrates that in the asynchronous environment, cues about how to proceed are subtle. Tamara paid careful attention to these slight clues and modified her posting accordingly to avert potential conflict.

Several participants described experiences of becoming silent online after observing other cohort members coming into conflict. Frances indicated that the only thing that made her disengage from a threaded discussion was if the dialogue started to get entrenched in conflict. She said,

Sometimes there's conflict that happens. I've seen that online, where somebody snapped back at somebody without thinking. And that's pretty silencing unless you

have a really strong personality. I'll back off if that's happening. I'll go to some other

forum.

Frances will leave a discussion thread if conflict develops in it, and focus on a different

thread instead. Karen has a similar response to conflict online. Karen told me:

When there's tension, that causes me to have silence. Especially when there's tension

in the forums where discussion is to take place. Then you're not really sure, how do

you continue on with that thread? I mean, what do you do?

Frances was mindful of how she expressed herself on the forums as she did not want to

stir up conflict. She recognized that the potential for discord is always present in the online

forums. Frances explained:

Everyone has their own place that they're at, and how they perceive what you say. It's

such a fireball, right? You could just say something that's going to set someone off and

make them mad. And then you feel badly, and the conversation is killed.

Naomi recounted an experience of being silent to avoid conflict with a cohort member

during a group assignment. He wanted to just do the minimum amount of work required for

the group assignment and get it done as efficiently as possible. In contrast, Naomi wanted to

put more effort into the assignment in order to get more out of it. She realized that they

would not reach agreement on this, so she decided to go along with his approach,

rationalizing, "I'll get as much quality in it as I can, and file my ideas and pursue them later."

Mandy didn't experience a lot of conflict online, although there was one person in her

cohort who interacted in a somewhat confrontational manner. Over time, Mandy came to

recognize that this person just enjoyed the challenge of a debate and that his style was "not a

personal attack. It's just a little game for them. And I didn't read too much into it." Mandy was able to let comments from that person go, that could have otherwise provoked conflict.

Several of the participants described experiences of conflict that arose between instructor and learner. Mandy described a disagreement with an instructor, who had asked the cohort to do some learning activities that did not have perceived value to Mandy and some of the other learners. The disagreement was addressed in the forum by one of those other learners. Mandy commented, "I was pretty impressed that [the learner] voiced it, because all of us were thinking it. I didn't have the guts to say it. Nobody else did." Voicing disagreement with an instructor's assignment took "guts" as Mandy put it, and only one of her cohort members was willing to do it, although others including Mandy felt the same way.

Awareness of the larger picture of others

Participants talked about having an awareness of the big picture of what others were doing, beyond just responding to individual discussion threads. Participants described being aware of other people's level of overall participation in the forums, and they were aware that their cohort members and instructors had lives outside of the online environment. Becca told me about a time when the instructor was away at the start of the course, and Becca was aware that only about half of the cohort was visibly participating in the discussion:

> The other half of the people in the cohort hadn't been posting or responding at all. And I was interested in that. My very first thought was that they didn't know that they were supposed to be doing it. The second thought was that they were reading the responses and were not sure how to respond. Their silence was making me feel concerned.

Becca was aware of the larger patterns of the group's activity, in that some were not posting, and she expressed interest in what was going on. Their absence made them present in her consciousness, and she created possible explanations for their silence. The instructor was away from her usual physical location and also away from the discussion forum. Becca e-mailed one of her classmates who was not participating, to clarify what was happening. She noticed their silence and felt a need to follow up, to check in and ensure that they were not having difficulties or misunderstanding the course expectations.

Frances told me that she tended "to watch what's happening online." In particular, she monitored posts on the forum that weren't getting answered. She described what she does when she sees posts that aren't getting responses:

> I tend to go in there and answer them, because I know what it feels like to have no one talk to online. And if that happened a lot to someone in particular, I tend to go in and do a brief response. You can always find something to talk about.

Frances was aware of the patterns of interaction that unfolded online over time and of classmates who were not getting responses. She sought to support those classmates in feelings of connection. Frances read all of the posts before she would post, "to see what's going on and the interactions that are happening." She was empathetic to those who were not being included.

Participants were aware of their own silences as well as those of their peers. Tamara reflected that when she is silent, it impacts other learners:

> Here's this conversation that is happening online, and *I've* been silent, how are those other people feeling about my silence? I have a responsibility, or a desire, to get involved in that conversation, as well. So it's seeing it from both sides.

Tamara was mindful of how her actions influenced the experience of the others and wanted to ensure that they were not negatively impacted by her lack of visible participation.

Expanding connections offline

Participants described how connecting with other cohort members outside of class through various forms of technology and social media was an effective means of maintaining connections with them. Jonathan told me that his cohort used social media to stay connected outside of the asynchronous discussion forums and weekly synchronous webinars. Jonathan found that having social media as a third means of connection was valuable:

> Having multiple ways of communicating means that you can have discussions on several different levels. It reinforces the idea of our cohort as a group. If you want to make a joke, you wouldn't make it in a formal discussion forum, you wouldn't make it in the weekly synchronous meetings. So if you can't relate to somebody on social media, you just wouldn't make the joke. It makes the interaction a little more impoverished if you don't have that additional element.

Mark's cohort also stays connected through social media. In Mark's experience, this method of connection started after his cohort had met face-to-face, which was midway through his program. Mark stated:

> After that face-to-face meeting, we really built connections that we actually spoke outside of the classroom. Most of it was connecting on things like LinkedIn, as people got new jobs and kind of moved around and updated people. And I still have many of those types of connections with the group.

Frances maintained similar offline connections with some of her cohort members following the week-long in-person meeting that occurred at the beginning of her program:

I formed some really good connections, which is really helping me with my learning

now. Sometimes we just phone or text each other to kind of confirm, talk about things,

what their ideas are, how they're doing, just discussions. There was about seven of us

that formed kind of a group. And they're are the ones I tend to talk to the most. I

know them. It took away the silence.

Tamara reflected on her experience with cohort support outside of the formal

requirements of classes. She told me that the cohort members "keep track of each other, of

what we're doing, of how we're feeling, what have we been learning. It enriches the entire

learning experience." Tamara related that she mostly contacted a subset of her cohort

members that she felt closer to, and that "those conversations enrich my learning experience

because I've felt more part of the community. I've felt a stronger tie. And then coming from

that position, it's easier for me then to interact with the whole group." The sense of

community that Tamara nurtured with selected members of her cohort made it feel easier for

her to interact with the group as a whole.

Nalini related a strategy employed by her instructor to introduce more offline

interaction in the cohort as an expectation of an online learning activity. The instructor

required the students to work in pairs to answer questions in the online discussion forum and

come up with a single written post in response. Nalini liked this strategy, and remarked:

[We're] actually having phone calls, more regular text communication, or emails back

and forth. I think it takes it to another level. There's something to be said when a post

is being made collectively by two people, versus when you're just making a post by

yourself. I think it's allowed for better discussion, and a culture of more teamwork.

Responsibility to others

Nalini's reference to a culture of teamwork echoes comments made by others about feeling responsible for contributing to a supportive learning culture within their cohort. Mandy noted that she is helpful when it is genuinely needed, but she keeps boundaries on how much time she puts in overall. She told me, "I will do what needs to be done to help people if they are genuinely needing help. But I also recognize that it can be a giant time suck if you get pulled into a lot of conversations."

Jane is aware of the need to reply to other learners' posts, so that they can continue to move forward:

> You have to look at, what your role is in an online classroom. Is your role only to
>
> consume? Or is your role also to offer some of the material that other people can work
>
> with again? Maybe not immediately to your benefit at that moment, but in the grander
>
> scheme, it might be to your benefit.

Jane's comment reflects an awareness of a need to take a long view, and that being part of a community of online learners is not only about what you can take from it. Jane emphasized the importance of contributing to that community, and recognized that if she put quality content into the forum, she may receive higher quality answers in return which would foster richer online dialogue.

Participants reported that the tight-knit cohort culture could at times be detrimental to interactions with newcomers. Mandy became mindful of her strong connection to members of her cohort when she contrasted how she responded to them compared to how she responded to someone new who came into the established group:

Occasionally we would do courses where people would be piped in, and you'd never

actually met them. And I have to admit that the online relationship was completely

different than with the people that I had met, and were in my cohort. And even if I

wasn't super connected to someone in my cohort, I felt almost a duty to put more into

ensuring that they could move forward. I knew the struggles of my cohort members,

of where they started, and all the changes that had happened from going through the

courses. So it was more of an emotional connection. I just had a deeper understanding

of where they were coming from.

Mark described a similar experience with newcomers who joined the program after the

initial cohort had been established:

If there was a new person in the group I didn't honestly discuss [with them] as often as

I would with someone that I had either some rapport with, or we had been with in a

class before, and we had had dialogue back and forth. I did sort of gravitate towards

the people that I knew, or had talked to in past courses.

Relationality for the distance learners in the online environment was a multi-faceted

and important part of the participants' lived experiences as online learners. Participants

described carefully cultivating online relationships and maintaining good working

relationships online.

Having described the background of the participants' online lifeworld in terms of the

four phenomenological existentials of corporeality, spatiality, temporality, and relationality,

I now turn to the second section of the findings, specifically, two broad topical groupings

that emerged from analysis of the participants' experiences. The two broad groupings cover

experiences of (a) silence online, and (b) engagement in online dialogue.

Experiences of Silence Online

The first broad grouping of participant experiences related to descriptions of participants either being silent themselves or feeling silence coming from others. Many of the participants discussed being silent on the forums as a means of setting priorities and putting boundaries on their workload and the number of responses they were posting. Katrina explained:

> In an online environment, because there can be so much happening, so many posts coming out, you have to choose what you're going to spend your time on. And so sometimes I selected to just observe some threads that were going off on a tangent.

Katrina would silently observe posts that were of lesser priority because they did not focus on the learning outcomes or because they had turned into tangential conversation. At other times, Katrina had to self-impose silence in situations where the posts captured her interest such that she might have spent too much time on one discussion. She remembered:

> There were times that I had to kind of say to myself, "You're not posting anymore, because you've already done enough." There were some posts, they could have just gone on for months and months, because they were just so engaging.

Katrina's silences in these times were a means of setting limits to her involvement in the online forums. Katrina used online silence as a method of prioritizing the heavy workload of readings, assignments and discussions: "Getting an assignment done is more important than the discussion forum activity, so then there's going to be silence." She also commented that if learners were being asked to make too many posts, then silence became a means of "survival."

Several participants described how they managed their time by typically doing the minimal required number of postings, then just following the ongoing online conversations without contributing further to them. Nalini commented, "Just because of time constraints, I usually do my two replies and that's usually about it. I will go on and follow other conversations that might be happening, but I might not participate in them." Nalini's busy schedule and the demands on her time outside of the classroom prevented her from posting as much as she might have liked to have done. She stated, "If I had all the time in the world, I probably would be making a lot more replies."

Naomi related her experience with juggling a busy work schedule with her studies. She employed a similar strategy as the one described by Nalini. Naomi recalled:

I was teaching full time, things were very busy. And so I would do minimal posts, but then do a lot of lurking. It was a way for me to keep up with what was going on, without having to put a lot of time into formulating my own posts.

Katrina, Nalini and Naomi balanced work, life, and school demands by meeting the minimum requirements for visual participation; their silence online after that was a means of prioritizing that enabled them to meet other demands on their time. After they had met the required number of postings, they continued to stay engaged with the discussions by following the subsequent dialogues without contributing further to them.

Mark also employed silence as a means of setting workload limits once he had met the participation requirements for a specific discussion. Mark explained, "If I had hit the mark in terms of my participation, a lot of times I would dial out or reduce the amount. And I wouldn't feel the stress to respond to any other posts that were in there."

Jane recalled a specific time that she chose to remain silent online as a means of managing her time. In the middle of a week's discussion, after Jane had already put a lot of time and effort into responding to posts, her instructor suddenly asked the cohort to respond to an additional and unexpected question. Jane recalled that if felt like the instructor took the dialogue into "a 180 – something completely different." She made the decision that the new question was "only a small amount of the grade" and felt that the time it would cost her to craft a response was not worth it in terms of benefit to her final marks for participation in the course. She did not craft a response to the instructor's additional question.

Mark described how he would silently watch some discussion threads unfold. According to Mark, these observations served two purposes for him. Watching the threads gave him an opportunity to identify his own learning needs, and was also a means of identifying what the instructor was looking for from an assessment standpoint.

The participants also described times that they chose to use silence as a means of maintaining civility in the online discussion forums. Naomi described choosing to be silent to prevent insensitive comments, made about members of certain professions, from escalating into a conflict. She stated, "Once in a while there'd be comments about teachers. Or nurses. Or healthcare professions. It was possibly from the person being frustrated with not understanding why [certain people] do certain things. You just let it go."

Naomi determined that these derogatory comments came from a place of misunderstanding or frustration. She decided to stay silent rather than to challenge the comments, even though they did recur over time in different courses. Frances described a similar experience. After several instances of having her profession denigrated by others in her courses, Frances told me, "I never tell them I'm a nurse, because for some reason it

always messes them up." Frances chooses to stay silent about this aspect of herself as a means of avoiding judgment being made about her based on potential stereotypes or biases held by others.

Karen described a time when she stayed silent after feeling that she had been spoken "for." A student in her cohort had lodged a complaint to the teacher, as if it were coming from the whole class. This student took "the liberty to make a blanket statement… indicating that they're representing the whole student body, when they haven't first ensured that the other students feel that way." Karen did not share the student's expressed views. She told me, "their views were not representative of the entire cohort. And so that caused me to feel silence." Underneath this self-appointed representative's voice was Karen's silence. She did not know how to proceed out of this silence without introducing further conflict into the learning environment.

Participants took advantage of the asynchronous temporality of the online environment as a means of making sure posts were crafted carefully. Becca commented, "if you don't have silence online, that's sometimes how things get started. People just continue to keep typing or keep responding to something and then it gets inappropriate. Some silence is necessary for thoughtful responses." Jane expressed a similar thought, "It's not always bad to be a little bit more reserved in posting. I have a lot of colleagues who shoot from the hip, and I'm not sure if that is always the right way of responding." Becca and Jane perceived there to be benefits of staying silent as a means of being thoughtful and considered when replying. Jane added, "If you're a little bit more reserved in posting, you often are a little bit more thoughtful in crafting your response. I do appreciate that."

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Tamara described instances where she used silence to buy some time, which prevented her posting ideas before they were completely formed, or did not accurately represent her views. Tamara stated:

Sometimes I start crafting out my thoughts and realize it's not really fleshed out yet. I don't want to put out an unfinished idea, or maybe I'm not able to take the time to fully flush it out at that moment. Or as I'm writing, I think, " I don't know if this is really what I think, or if I'm just saying it right now."

Tamara also indicated that she used silence to stop herself from posting ideas that are similar to ones already posted by someone else. "Sometimes if I have something in my thoughts, I look at [the forum], and somebody has already given the same response back. And so I don't want to say that again."

Becca reflected on times that she had written something to post, but didn't end up posting it. She realized that in those instances, she had used silence as a means of maintaining professional etiquette online and regulating her emotions:

There are times that I might scribe something based on my first instinct, but then after taking some time to read through what I've written and reflect on it, I choose not to post it. I think about is professional etiquette. I don't want to be seen as somebody who can't regulate their emotions. Especially if it is online because it is forever.

Becca was conscious of the permanency of words written and submitted online, and so she used the silence as a means of not posting words that might be perceived as overly emotional or unprofessional. Becca also told me that she used silence as a means of backing out of a dialogue when something she had posted was no longer getting responses. She explained:

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If there's no longer any attention given to a post that I'm writing, I might back out. And I might continue to read, but not contribute. It sounds a little self-centered, but you know, when you're having a face-to-face conversation with somebody, you always talk about yourself. And when other topics come up, you might listen, or that's your cue to go and get another drink. That's the way I would equate it.

Becca was one of several participants who talked about using silence as a time for reflection. She said, "Silence provides you with an opportunity to reflect, and the process of reflection is positive." Jane also spoke about using silence as a time for reflection. Jane remarked, "I see benefits of silence, of time maybe more than silence, to really digest what's being said and to come up with ideas around about the core of the message instead of that really quick response." Jane experienced having the time to contemplate the subject matter of a question before needing to respond as a benefit of distance education and the space for silence that it affords.

Some of the participants shared that they used silence as a time for research or reading. Becca told me, "There are times that I will wait to respond until I have had time to research something. I don't want to be giving inappropriate information if something is not researched properly." In a similar way, Katrina acknowledged that "there were times when I was the silent person online. I was busy doing the readings and I didn't really have time." Mark described silence as time that allowed him to take time to study what he needed to review before creating and posting responses that he felt were worthwhile. Mark said, " I would read something and I would sit back and at my own pace be able to respond. I could go and read and review and then come back with an intelligent response."

Frances described a similar experience of being silent while she took time to research and reflect. Frances stated pragmatically that she is silent at those times because at that moment, "I have nothing to say. I have to go away and reflect on what they are talking about and come back." Like many of the others, Frances used silence as a time to research and gather additional information to use in crafting her written response.

Tamara described online silence as a time she could think creatively about the content she was learning. For her, silence could be a time of:

> . . . holding some ideas in my head and playing with them. I have so many new things that I'm reading, and so many new ideas that are coming into play. I almost feel like my head might explode.

Tamara actively ruminated on many new ideas from her studies, taking time to mull them over in different ways. Although these were periods of time when she was visibly silent on the forums, she used those moments of silence to play with ideas, compare different topics, and consider how they relate to her own situation and experiences. She used silence online as a time to generatively interact with the content she was learning.

Participants also gave descriptions of being silent to allow time to observe what was happening online. Tamara used such periods of silence as a time to observe and listen to what was happening in the forums, saying "as an introvert, I like to pull back a little bit, and do more observing, and listening, and lurking to some degree." Tamara explained:

> When I see the vast numbers of postings, that does create some stress for me. It's like, I have to read this all, I have to think about it critically, and I have to respond to everything. But really, I don't. I can allow myself to have some space. And I can

allow myself to use that silence to choose to selectively engage with the things that really speak out to me.

Like Tamara, Frances described being silent while she watched what was happening in the forums and what the others were discussing, before committing to posting something herself:

I tend to watch a bit before I contribute. I'll read other posts. What are they saying? Are they thinking the same way I am? Before I put something up I sometimes will do that for a couple of days.

Frances' watchful silences were a time that she did surveillance of what the others were saying. She would gauge whether or not she was thinking along similar lines, to help her feel more secure in posting her own responses. Jane related that she sometimes enacted online silence for a similar reason. She sometimes held back on posting to ensure that her understanding of "that particular part of the course or content is somehow shared by the others, so you're not singling yourself out." Jane and Frances used periods of watchful silence as a time to ensure that they understood the direction the dialogue was headed. This observant time allowed them to then join the dialogue with harmonious voices.

Silence from other learners

In addition to sharing reflections on times of being silent themselves, the participants also described experiencing silence online coming from other people. For some participants, these feelings were negative and a source of uncertainty, anxiety, or self-doubt. Other participants were less perturbed when members of their online learning communities did not respond to their posts. Participant expectations for responses varied under differing dialogic contexts.

A number of participants spoke of experiencing silence that occurred after they had posted something, and were awaiting replies from other cohort members or the instructor. Naomi associated the phrase *silence online* with a feeling of not being heard after she had posted something that does not receive a response. "When it's silent, I wonder whether or not I've been heard. Or whether or not I said something that someone seriously disagrees with or is upset with and doesn't know how to respond to." Naomi added that for her, being on the receiving end of silence made her feel anxious. "There's some sort of problem or awkwardness when I hear silence."

Jane contrasted her experience of this type of silence to her experience when she is silent and reflecting. Jane said:

There is time that you can contemplate, and time that you're anxious. If you're contemplating, you look from all different angles; and if you're anxious, you're only looking at the screen for the answer that you want to receive.

Jane differentiates between anxiety-filled silences and silences that are times of contemplation by describing her state of mind. When silence is perceived as an anxious time, her mind is fixated on only one thing (the reply for which she is waiting), whereas during silent times of contemplation her mind is mobile and free to range among a variety of possibilities.

Like Jane who described anxious silence as a time of "only looking at the screen for the answer," others also described their experiences of online silence as a waiting time. As a self-described "quiet learner," Tamara was used to some silence during her studies, but admitted that she felt some tension during the waiting periods of online silence and that she was not always entirely comfortable with it. Frances described the deflating experience of

observing other people get responses to their posts, while her post did not receive any

replies:

> You put something up on the forums and people don't respond. You go on to one post,
>
> and they've got twelve, fifteen replies, and you're sitting out there all alone where
>
> nobody's responded to you. That's what silence does; it devalues what I contributed.

The silence from others online made Frances, who was watching and waiting for a

reply, feel that her contributions were not appreciated. She observed the numbers of

responses that other learners had received and compared those numbers to her own. She

describes the experience of getting no replies as leaving her feeling "all alone" and

"devalued."

Mark stated that for him, silences from others were a frustrating experience. "I do

remember having some really good discussions online and back and forth. But frustrating

was the timeline of response and no guarantee of response from someone else on the other

end." Mark likened the experience of not getting a reply to having a face-to-face

conversation with someone who suddenly just stops talking. Mark said, "that happens all the

time in the online environment." He was discouraged by the disrupted temporality of the

asynchronous online discussions. To Mark's disappointment, posts that he started and hoped

would evolve into dialogues often remained one-person monologues.

Becca described becoming frustrated with a specific group member who was silent

during discussions related to a group project. Her initial impressions of that person was that

he was "thoughtful intellectually and had more experience than I did." But she ultimately

felt let down by him due to his silence in the group process. Becca recalled:

Things were happening in the group and you didn't know what that group member's perspective was. I felt that all members needed to have a say, and so that person's lack of presence, or their silence, meant that they didn't have a say in what was going on. I felt frustrated because I wanted to have their input.

This person had the potential to be a valuable contributor to the group process, but Becca was disappointed and frustrated when he did not uphold the implicit and explicit expectations for regular and visible participation in the group.

The most common way that participants knew that their posts had been read was when those posts received a response from another person. As Mark commented, "It was assumed that they didn't read it unless they acknowledged or posted to it." Yet several participants described experiencing silence in response to posts they had made, only to find out later that their posts had indeed been read.

Jane told me that over time as a learner, she came to know that many people did read her posts, even though they did not respond to them. The way she learned this was that sometimes others cited an obscure reference that she had included in a post, or else they began to use a certain phrasing that Jane used first. Nalini also learned that some people had read a post of hers even though they hadn't written a response to it online. In Nalini's case, members of her cohort asked her questions about the post during a subsequent synchronous session. Nalini commented that she "did get the sense that they actually read it, and they had critically thought about some of my answers." The synchronous session offered the opportunity for her to get "validation" for her post, even if it hadn't come in written form on the online discussion forum.

Like Nalini, Tamara also received validation outside of the discussion forum in a subsequent synchronous session for something she had posted. Tamara said that at that moment, she thought, "Oh! Whatever I said did stick in someone's thoughts. I'm not just posting out into a void. There is someone receiving on the other end. It was like, okay, I've been heard." Frances described a similar experience when she told me that she frequently observed her cohort members bring an idea of hers from a previous thread into a new thread, and then build on the idea. Frances stated, "That makes me feel good, actually. That they recognize that I have something to say."

While many of the participants described feelings of uncertainty or frustration when they experienced silences from others, Jane had a unique insight. She revealed that even though she could get anxious when expected responses don't come, she realized that those silences could be a good learning experience. Jane reflected, "There will be those moments of silence, and I think they're not always bad. They also teach you a little bit more about being resilient."

Not all of the participants associated silence from others as being a negative experience. Mandy, Karen, and Thomas had a more neutral reaction to these types of online silences. Mandy explained that she does not "dwell" on silences from others that may be present online:

> I do not have time to worry about anything like that. I go into it, I do what I need to do, I get what I need out of it, then I go away and do everything else that I'm doing. So if there was silence, I certainly hadn't dwelled over it, or really noticed it, or paid much attention to it.

Karen stated that she did not mind if people didn't respond specifically to her posts, although she did believe that learners should be involved in the discussions:

There's an expectation to have people engage into the discussion and make it meaningful, and that they do post a reply. But I don't specifically have an issue if they don't specifically respond to me, or to my post. I know some students felt really less important, because people were responding to other peoples' posts. I don't get that way, or feel that way myself.

Karen went on to clarify that it doesn't bother her "at all" when she doesn't receive answers to her posts, as she knows that her peer cohort members are all "busy working professionals" with full and demanding lives outside of the requirements of the online discussion forums.

Similarly to Mandy and Karen, Thomas did not mind if people did not respond to his posts: Unlike the others, however, he did not acknowledge value in the asynchronous discussions:

If you don't get a response on forums, that's just normal. The usefulness of the digital environment came from e-books or other content on the Internet. Not in the forum itself. I look at posting as very much an exercise, that's all.

Silence from instructors

Many of the participants described a memorable experience of silence coming from an instructor, especially when comparing different instructors across a number of courses. Frances commented that "the largest silence" she experienced "was from teachers." Frances described feeling that she didn't really understand who her instructors were as people and what perspectives they held. Nalini, Mark, and Tamara contrasted experiences with

instructors who were very engaged with the online dialogues with other instructors who were less visible. All three participants expressed the opinion that instructors should be visibly present in the asynchronous discussions. Nalini commented:

> I actually think that instructors should participate in the discussions. And provide some thoughts of some things for us to consider. Because how you know if what you're putting down is on the right track? Or maybe they have some information that you didn't know about, and they should put it out there for you to consider.

Nalini wanted instructor input to deepen her understanding and to confirm that she was thinking along the right lines. Like Nalini, Mark also expressed the opinion that instructors should be present on the online forums, especially to address questions that were posed:

> Often I found myself questioning whether or not the teacher was even there. I remember almost getting offended to the point, because of anybody in the class, if you're asking a question, the teacher should be responding to that. I do remember getting upset at some points with some of the teachers.

Mark found that instructor absence on the forums left him wondering if that instructor was reading the posts, and he felt upset with instructors for lack of responsiveness. Tamara, too, reflected that she appreciated instructor involvement in the course, and that absent instructors left her with a sense of tension and dissatisfaction:

> Sometimes I feel like teachers have been a little bit more hands off. It's been more, "Here is the expectation, and then here's the readings that you do, and here is the project that you create." There hasn't been a teacher presence. I feel like that's created a little bit of tension. This kind of silence doesn't work for me as a learner.

Tamara's experience of instructor silence was as an imposed silence that was detrimental to her as a learner. Jane recounted a related anecdote that occurred early in her program. She made a post that was somewhat personal in nature and left her feeling vulnerable after she submitted it. Nobody responded to the post at first. Jane said:

> Two weeks after putting that initial post out, finally I heard back from the faculty that
> he had read the post, and he thought it was very well done. But just imagine that
> whole two weeks of uncertainty, of not knowing what people had thought about you as
> a writer, as a scholar, as a person, as a student. It was a bit of an unsettling experience,
> I have to say.

> The silence that Jane experienced from her instructor was a period of confusion,

vulnerability, and self-doubt. The period of silence left her questioning her self-worth and wondering if the ideas of a personal nature that she had shared were accepted by the others.

Jane had another experience of silence from an instructor, when she had asked the instructor a direct question and did not receive an answer. Jane described how, while she was waiting for the answer, she went on doing the work she needed to do and eventually found a way to work around the issue at question. About that experience, Jane reflected:

> What happens is that you move from anxiety to being not so interested in the answer
> anymore. So if you have another question later, you probably will not ask it. The
> answer didn't come the first time, so why would you expect an answer the second
> time?

> Jane also commented that holding back on asking questions could impact knowledge

acquisition and be a source of disengagement within that course.

Several participants related stories of times they wished the course facilitator had stepped in to the online dialogue as a needed voice of authority. For example, Becca described working on a group project during which other group members got into what she called an "e-fight." Becca said, "I backed out of the discussion. I didn't want to be part of it because I thought it was stupid. I was kind of waiting for the professor to jump in, but that didn't happen."

Becca gave another example of a time that she felt an instructor's voice was needed. In this experience, the instructor was travelling and so largely absent from the online discussion forum for the first few weeks of the course. Becca became concerned when she noticed that only about half of the cohort was participating in the online discussion. Becca recalled, "That's silence to them, because they are going to miss out a lot. You don't have their input, either, to help you continue the discussion. There is that silence and you don't really know what is going on." Becca was concerned by the silence of her cohort peers out of concern for what they were missing, as well as what she herself was missing out on by not having their input into the discussion.

Naomi described an experience she had during an internship when she was assisting an instructor to facilitate an online course. During this internship, Naomi came to solidify her beliefs about how visible an instructor should be online. Naomi's mentoring instructor directed Naomi to "say nothing, and not to intervene at all." Naomi complied with this request, but really disagreed with it. "Up until then, to me, being a guide on the side made sense. But I think that was taking it too far to one extreme." For her, it was a learning moment about what it meant for an online instructor to be a "guide on the side" rather than what she called a "silence on the side."

Naomi also described an experience of being silenced by boundary lines drawn by instructors. In Naomi's case, the lines were established when an instructor was not open to discussing different points of view:

If you challenge some professors with something that's super brand-new, or you bring in a different point of view that isn't part of their construct, they don't necessarily want to consider it. Which I find very disappointing. I've just kind of pulled back after I've gotten that response, and thought, well, if you're not open to considering this, then I'm not going to push it.

Naomi experienced that if an instructor was uncomfortable discussing a certain idea or point of view, that instructor might use silence to shut down further discussion of it. Naomi's response to this behaviour was to become silent herself. She deferred to the instructor's authority and backed down to avoid potential conflict. She did not try to cross that line again.

Frances gave an anecdote about a time early in her graduate studies that she wanted direction about an assignment. Grading rubrics for the assignment had not been provided to students, resulting in what Frances called "a real silence on expectations." Frances said:

If there's no guidelines or directions, you're in a free fall. The cohort helps a little bit with that, but not too much, because they're the not ones that are going to be your ultimate evaluator. And they don't know any more than me. We're all sort of out there in the dark.

In Frances' experience, the voice of authority that was needed around grading expectations did not come from her fellow cohort members, but rather from the instructor in the form of a wished-for grading rubric. She described the experience of turning in an

assignment without the rubric as being in a "free fall" and later as "throwing yourself over a cliff." These metaphors bring up an image of hurtling oneself into a void, not sure where you will land or whether or not you will come out unscathed. Frances was anxious about writing one of her first graduate-level papers without the grading rubric, so she emailed the instructor for clarification. This experience left Frances feeling silenced even though the instructor did reply to the email. Frances described the instructor's response:

> The instructor copied and pasted the syllabus and sent it to me. And that really hit me hard, because it was the very beginning of my course. I was actually questioning whether I should go on, because I couldn't even understand the first assignment. So that for me was the biggest silence. It was a response, but it was a silence.

> She summarized this experience by saying, "I experienced silence and I felt silenced.

Like, don't ask any more questions." She felt this way despite receiving an answer of sorts from the instructor. The answer did not address the question Frances was asking, and she received the response as a silence. It was if the instructor hadn't heard the question that Frances had asked. The instructor's answer was not an answer; Frances did not feel heard. She stated that she felt "silenced – like, don't ask any more questions."

Karen held a divergent perspective from the other participants about the role of the instructor in the online classroom. Karen's perspective developed over time as a distance learner. Karen stated:

> I used to think that it was the teacher's job to make me learn. And now I've identified the facilitator's only role is to provide a platform in which the students can do their own learning. If I post something, and somebody doesn't get back to me, even if it's the professor, I don't have any issue with that.

The participants varied in their wishes for instructor involvement, often wanting a voice of authority when needed, sometimes wanting validation, and for one participant (Karen) the only expectation was for the instructor to provide the structure for the students' own learning.

Expectations for responses

Some participants contrasted experiences when they anticipated responses with other times when they did not have expectations for responses. Katrina reflected that if she addressed a post to someone in particular, and that person didn't respond, it left her feeling "unsure." This feeling of uncertainty included not knowing whose role it was to follow up to prompt a response. Katrina stated, "I didn't feel as though it was my place to follow up with them. I think that's where the facilitator has to step up to the plate. Identify when there's silence, and try to coach and guide conversations."

Nalini offered her perspective on the experience of not getting a response during a focused group project, versus when she did not get responses in larger threaded discussions with the whole cohort. She related that small group work is done as a collective and the group aim is to come to a consensus. Nalini expected visible participation from all the members of her small groups. Nalini noted silences from members of small groups more than silences that occurred in a general, large-group discussion. Becca also had experiences of silence from others during a group project; her concern about that silence was the "immediacy to getting some answers, because we were presenting something in a short period of time and needed to have work completed."

Jonathan described a time when he was expected to post a literature review of his dissertation proposal in the discussion forum, and get feedback on it from his peers.

Following that period of written peer feedback, each student was to present their proposals orally to the others. Both the peer feedback and the oral presentation were graded activities. Jonathan told me that he "found that drafting the proposal, and deciding on a method and a research paradigm" to be the most "stressful and worrying" assignment he had experienced in his program to date. It was high stakes for him, and he was frustrated by the fact that his peers were not responding with the feedback that was expected as a part of the course grade. He ultimately felt he needed to move forward with his work without the benefit of his peers' critiques.

Participants met silences from the others in the learning community with mixed reactions. Some participants responded to silences from others online with anxiety, uncertainty, or frustration. Other participants stated that they did not dwell on online silences from others, or that over time, their expectations for responses from others diminished.

Participants also described experiences of silence being enacted as a means of enforcing social norms in the online space. Naomi described the online discussion forum as a space with "boundaries" that were sometimes crossed and sometimes pushed in the process of exploration. Participants described experiences of receiving or imposing silence when a "line had been crossed" related to suitable academic subject matter or appropriate decorum in the online learning community. At times, these boundary lines were drawn by instructors, but cohort members also imposed these boundary lines with each other.

Karen told an anecdote of observing a classmate in conflict with an instructor about the boundaries of appropriate behaviour within the discussion forum. In the discussion forum, the other student was responding to the instructors' comments in a manner that the instructor

felt was unprofessional and unacceptable. The instructor posted that she would be dealing with the offending student "outside of the forums." Karen said that the student's response was "I thought this was an environment where we could be free to voice our thoughts and opinions and not be stifled."

The environment of the online forum is not a free-for-all where any thought or opinion can be voiced. Karen's instructor's actions served to enforce that point, as well as to silence the student who had crossed the line. The instructor moved the discussion off of the forum to continue it in a different online geography, one that was private rather than a public. Karen added that the tension evident between the instructor and the student caused her to shut down and stop participating in that particular discussion thread. Even though the instructor's intent was to restore order, lingering feelings of awkwardness and discomfort extinguished further dialogue in that online discussion.

Becca related an anecdote that described her experience with an instructor who drew a line of decorum around the use of emoticons. This instructor told her students that she "deplored" emoticons and forbid the use of them in the discussion forums for her course. Becca thought that this expectation "took away from the online dialogue" and recalled:

> Somebody came in late to that class and didn't read that the professor had an expectation for no emoticons. So she got grilled for that, "You're not professional" or "You're not academic." So like if there was a shaming emoji. . .

Becca's professor silenced the use of emoticons, shaping expectations for maintaining an academic standard of propriety online. This boundary line had the unintended impact of causing participation in the discussion forums to be an emotionally impoverished experience for Becca, and a site of public shaming for one of her cohort members.

Some participants shared stories of wishing instructors would become more involved in shaping appropriate online discourse as it unfolded. Mark acknowledged that at times, if the instructor remained silent and did not call people back from tangential topics, "discussions often spiraled into just trivial and meaningless things that didn't really apply to the course." In Mark's experience, if shaping boundaries were not introduced when needed, the quality of the online dialogue suffered as a result.

Naomi described an anecdote of students and the instructor tussling over just exactly what appropriate content was in the discussion forums:

> Sometimes we got off on small tangents. We were exploring the boundaries. The professor didn't really think it was relevant at all, which I found kind of interesting, because we all thought it was relevant. A lot of the theory around discussion in online learning says that you need to get students to the point where they're taking ownership of the course. And they're ready to move it forward. And in our minds, we were moving it forward. In the professor's mind, we were off task and off on a tangent, and it had nothing to do with the course. It was a really interesting dichotomy between us taking ownership, and her calling it back and saying, "No, no, no! This isn't how we do this."

While most of the examples about establishing boundaries related to interactions between instructors and learners, several participants commented that they themselves would employ silence as a response to discussions that were going off on a tangent or to behaviours that they perceived as unprofessional or inappropriate in the online forums. At times, participants who were on the receiving end of silence from others wondered if it was because

they were off topic in their posts. Naomi, for example, disclosed that in her experience when she posts and nobody responds:

. . .it is kind of disappointing, but it also can help you know what you're getting too far from the main points, or looking at something too broadly. So silence can help in keeping me on track and defining what I should be looking at.

Having described findings related to the first broad topic of experiencing silence online, I now move to the second broad topic, which addresses participants' experiences of coming out of silence to engage in online dialogue.

Engaging in Online Dialogue

Speaking out online was an action that the participants described doing with mixed emotions and motivations. Tamara indicated that while she felt some "tension" getting ready to post, she also felt that the online space was a "safe" place for her to begin to start to explore her ideas with other people. Remarking about participating in the online discussion forums, Tamara said, "you have to start [dialogue] somewhere, and this is a safe place to start in." In Tamara's experience, the support of the cohort made speaking out less intimidating.

Frances admitted that she found writing posts to put up in the discussion forums to be a stressful process, mostly because she didn't know how they would be received by the others, or whether or not she would get a reply. Frances stated:

Every time you put a response up, you're a little bit on edge. Is this the right answer? How is this going to be perceived? Am I going to get a positive response? Am I going to get any response?

Frances' uncertainty about the reaction her posts would receive made the idea of speaking out online a daunting one for her.

Several participants expressed disagreement with mandatory requirements for participation in online discussions. Thomas had very strong feelings against such requirements:

Any time I try [to learn in silence], I get very negative feedback from the professor, saying, "You *will* participate! Start doing this, or else." So there is no chance to be a listener and to feel that I can be a participant simply by observing, and collecting notes for myself, and trying to understand things.

Thomas also told me that in his experience, mandatory participation in asynchronous discussion "is pushing the introverted learner into an uncomfortable situation." He likened this feeling of pressure to participate in online discussions to the academic idea of "publish or perish," saying "you have to continually publish in a forum, post to a forum, or you perish." Thomas elaborated that he felt that a requirement to make a certain number of posts:

. . . pushes people into participating even if they don't want to, and you are penalized for not participating. This is not me. This is not what I want. I don't want to have to be punished for the way I learn.

Later, he added "I think pushing people into a gregarious situation, who are not gregarious, is perhaps just as detrimental as it would be perceived as positive." Thomas frequently used the word "push" when he was describing his experience of being required to participate in online learning activities. The verb "push" implies exerting physical force to move something from one space into another. It connotes forcing people in a direction

contrary to where they want to be going. In Thomas' experience, this movement was done under duress and was motivated by external regulation. Thomas' statement, "This is not me" has implications of violation of personhood. He describes being "punished" for the way he wants to learn, a word that has punitive and corporeal overtones.

Thomas was unique among the participants because of the expressed strength of his convictions about required posts and other ideas. Talking with him about this topic made me aware of another false assumption I had been holding: that learners would acknowledge a benefit to online discourse with their peers, even if they did not always enjoy posting. Clearly, for Thomas, this was not the case.

Of the participants, Thomas' views against mandatory posting were the strongest, but he was not the only participant who indicated that they disliked being required to post. Early in our first interview, Mark commented,

> I remember being told *not* to be silent. It was an expectation in the online program that "silence" was in effect "absence" and that you had to be contributing. Even if I didn't have anything to offer on whatever the particular subject was, there was pressure to not be silent.

Unlike Thomas, Mark did find value in many of the online dialogues, but he did feel indignation at being required to post when he didn't feel he had anything of value to contribute. Mark described how the requirement to engage in regular online dialogue was especially challenging in maths-based courses such as quantitative economics and finance, where "the majority of the content was right or wrong. It was math formulas. So once you get the ratio, what else do you have to say?" In Mark's experience, topics that were too

black-and-white lacked sufficient nuances to explore in extended dialogue, and having extended discussions about the cut-and-dry content felt forced.

Mark was told not to be silent; speaking out was a requirement even if he felt he had nothing to offer at that particular moment. At the end of our first interview, I asked him if he had anything else to add, and he came back to the topic of not being allowed to be silent:

> . . .the biggest thing was this expectation that you *not* be silent. I think it's somewhat detrimental to the entire process. If you don't have something to say, there should be no need to say something.

Given a choice, Thomas, and to a lesser degree, Mark, would have preferred to remain in their silent learning spaces rather than being forced into the uninviting territory of the discussion forums. Mark did indicate that if the topic was one that he had experience with or knowledge about, he would not hesitate to post. He said, "If I felt that I had something to contribute either through an anecdotal story, an experience, something that I just knew academically about the subject, I would jump in right away." Mark did not mind posting when he felt he had something of value to contribute. Tamara echoed the experience of how the topic of the post influences the experience of speaking out. She said, "With a topic that is meaningful and rich, and something that I'm invested in, it's definitely easier for me to push through my own silence, because I have kind of that internal motivation and interest and engagement."

Frances found it rewarding to have dialogue online, but admitted that at times she found posting contributions to the forum to be daunting. "I do feel anxious sometimes putting comments up. On how I will be perceived and understood." Frances added that she also sometimes felt anxious because she feared she wouldn't "be able to put something out

there that's quality." Later in the interview she added, "If I feel insecure, I tend to watch a bit before I contribute. I'll read other posts before I put something up. What are they saying? Are they thinking the same way I am?" When Frances felt uncertain, she delayed engaging in visible participation until she had a chance to observe what others are saying in the online discussion forums.

Frances told me that one strategy she used to overcome this hesitancy is to make an effort to post the first response to a thread, "so that I've got what I thought up there, and I'm not driven by some of the other students' ideas." Frances finds it easier to speak out if her voice is the first to appear in the online discussion thread, and she doesn't have to factor other responses into the crafting of her post.

Even though Jane was posting from one of the latest time zones among her cohort, she did not feel extra responsibility to answer posts made late in the week by other learners. "I'm an early poster, and I'm really under the impression that if you had more than a week to post, and you wait until the last possible night, then it's not my responsibility to act." She did not take on the responsibility to address other learners' tardiness in posting.

Other learners relay positive experiences, even enjoyment, of posting in the discussion forums. Jonathan told me:

> I'm a pretty introverted person. When I was in a regular classroom, I was the kid at the back of the class who never spoke. Or very rarely. And that's all gone with online classes. I can post as much as I want.

Jonathan felt feel freer in the online classroom to speak up and have his voice be heard than he did in a bricks-and-mortar classroom. Karen also felt free to readily respond to posts, saying:

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I actually feel quite excited when I go in and see that people have posted things. I am anxious to read them, to see if I can offer any contributions that will make people also think in a different context. I quite enjoy that piece.

Jane enjoyed posting, but she was mindful of how cultural differences in her cohort impacted the nature of what she shared online. Jane lived in North America, and many of her cohort members came from African or Middle Eastern nations. Jane wanted to keep good working relationships with her cohort members, and so she sometimes was careful about what she posted in order to be mindful of cultural differences. When I asked for an example of this, she replied:

A specific example would be that I'm in a same-sex relationship and I would never post that online, because I'm not sure how that's received at the other end of the world. I am much less descriptive about gender pronouns, keeping that a little more nebulous. I won't show that part of myself in the online discussion.

Other participants echoed Jane's experience of purposively being vague or withholding information or opinions in posts. Frances, who has a nursing background, disclosed that she found that there was bias present against members of her profession and so she would often withhold that piece of personal information about herself. "It's interesting how I can just tell an instructor I'm a nurse, and I get shut down for that. Why am I afraid of a lot of people that are not in my field, letting them know I'm a nurse?" As discussed previously, evidence of bias against people in certain professions was something Naomi encountered as well.

Many of the participants described how they would mute their responses to persons who they knew held very strong opinions about certain issues. Tamara commented:

If I'm interacting with someone who I know holds very strong views, beliefs in a

certain direction, I almost purposely choose to be vague towards that belief, if it's

different than what I hold. I don't want to engage in any kind of online conflict.

Like Tamara, Naomi also indicated that she mutes her responses to people who hold

strong views that differ from her own. Naomi made this decision based on her belief that

expressing her opinion would not be effective in persuading the person to change their

stance:

They're not going to change their mind. And so you acknowledge the fact that they

made a comment, but you don't engage them in any sort of further inquiry, because

there's really no purpose to it. I usually come up with something noncommittal.

Something just to indicate that I've read the posts, but not necessarily agreeing or

disagreeing with what they've said.

Participants gave other examples of being vague in online discussions when the topic

came around to their lives outside of the classroom. Mandy described becoming quite vague

in her later coursework when responding to the introductory "tell us something about

yourself" discussion threads. Mandy had spent several years already with her cohort, they

knew each other and had already made connections. She did not feel the need to reintroduce

herself, and so she gave minimal details in those posts. Referencing corporeality, Mark

reflected that there were times when he was "present, but not present" online. He

summarized that he felt he wasn't as present in the course when he was not "up-to-date on

the materials, and the workload, and the discussions."

Tamara indicated that she might be intentionally noncommittal during times that she

was still weighing out how she felt about a topic. "Sometimes I use vagueness to look for

other ideas so that I can grow in my understanding. I'm trying to see, where do I fall in this, and what am I going to hold on to?" Her uncommitted responses enable her to be visibly engaged, while still biding her time to gather information and solidify her opinion on the topic.

Katrina shared that she might use nonspecific language while writing an academic post if she did not have access to relevant, specific details at the time. She gave an example, "If I couldn't remember if Gagné had nine principles or 13 principles, I would say, 'Gagné's work' or 'Gagné's principles' because I couldn't remember how many." She did not want to misquote an author or give out inaccurate information in a post.

Jonathan described withholding content with the intent of fostering better dialogue. He reflected that he might remove words he had written in the draft of a post under certain circumstances:

> If I'm writing something in a post that is from personal experience and I'm getting too detailed, nobody wants to read all that. I might just erase it and start over with something much more succinct. I'll try to focus my point.

Jonathan is mindful of keeping his posts concise and focused, free of extraneous details, to make them easier for his colleagues to read.

Number of posts

Several of the participants acknowledged that due to time pressures and competing demands in their busy daily lives they would generally meet, but not exceed, the required number of posts. The participants were mindful of course expectations, and expressed frustration with courses that did not have clear expectations on the number of posts laid out clearly at the beginning.

Both Katrina and Nalini described often deciding to make only the minimum number of posts. Katrina stated she needed to maintain work/life balance, and made the practical acknowledgement that "you're not going to be penalized if you're not posting everyday." Nalini stated, "I do what I need to do, but not more than that, because I just don't have the time." She was aware that this resulted in her being "probably a little bit more silent than others."

Posting behaviours described by some of the other participants were less directed by quantitative requirements, and more focused on qualitative concerns. For example, Jane would post more than the required number of posts, with the rationale that she would "like to get as much is possible" out of her program. Mark commented that participation in and of itself didn't necessarily mean quality participation and that the number of posts a learner makes is not a good indicator of the amount of learning that has occurred.

Selecting posts to which to respond

Several of the participants described connecting with certain participants more strongly or frequently than others. Mandy told me that the people she connected with most strongly were those who took time to thoughtfully review others' comments and whose opinions she respected. She would "make a stronger effort to go through their posts" and sought their opinions out more frequently than she would with others with whom she did not feel such a strong connection. Katrina echoed similar thoughts, stating that she would initiate conversations with people who provided her "with really deep, critical thinking." Katrina would read the posts first that were written by people she viewed as being deep thinkers, people from whom she could learn.

Mark acknowledged that he "felt more obligated to respond to" posts that were written by someone he "had a dialogue with, built a relationship with before." He contrasted that feeling of obligation to his online interactions with students he didn't know as well, such as someone who was new to the cohort. "If there is a new person in the group, I didn't, honestly, discuss with them as often as I would with someone that I had some rapport with. I did gravitate towards the people that I knew." If the newcomer made an effort to be responsive, Mark would engage in dialogue back. "If they've put the effort to put in something, then I remember being re-engaged, and want to continue the discussion." In Mark's experience, discussion was prolonged when conversational partners made an effort to extend the conversation.

Instructors were frequently named as persons whose voices carried authority, and many of the participants described anecdotes about online interactions with instructors. Becca, for example, said that she paid particular attention when instructors replied to posts in the forum, and she felt "reaffirmed" when instructors asked for clarification on comments from other students that Becca had also found to be confusing. Becca added that when instructors posted, she felt there was an element of assessment in those posts. Content that the instructor emphasized was especially important to know.

Like Becca, other participants listened for instructors' voices, and gave similar examples of being appreciative of times that an instructor had come into the discussion as a needed voice of authority. Nalini expressed gratitude for an instructor who intervened to "clarify expectations and process" when a peer facilitator of one of her groups had started the next week's discussion before the current week was due to wrap up, causing some confusion in the group. The instructor "responded immediately, so that was really helpful."

Tamara offered a perspective of being grateful for instructors who speak up to bring clarity after a students have spent a period of time wrestling with ideas in the discussion forum. Tamara described instructors coming in to make a focused comment that is "like a lens we can look through the issue with." Tamara appreciated these clarifying comments and felt they assisted in her learning.

Mark described posting a question when he didn't understand something about an assignment. In his experience, frequently other students would respond to those questions rather than the instructor. The students would state how they were thinking about the assignment and the approach they were taking. Mark indicated that he "would value the teacher's interpretation and direction more" than input that came from his fellow students.

Frances' experience of seeking information from the course instructor changed after she received an unhelpful response from one instructor. Frances stopped contacting that instructor with questions, and instead would seek out her peers. Tamara also listened for and sought out the voices of her peers, but for a different reason. Tamara gave an example from her current course on leadership, and told me that she "wants to hear from" classmates who have "leadership skills and gifts" as they "bring a whole lot of credence to the conversations and the discussions." Tamara emphasized that she looks forward to hearing those credible peer voices, saying, "those voices shine through."

Tamara valued and sought out the voices of her peers who had experience and expertise in the subject matter being discussed. Along similar lines, Mark contrasted his experience hearing from peers who have life experience, those "in business and leadership roles" versus those "that had never left school and never had a job." Mark admitted that he found it "frustrating to hear the opinions of some people that you didn't value their opinions,

because they didn't have the experience." The participants respected and valued the relevant life experiences of their peers.

Cohort members also took on voices of leadership and authority when they had a vision for how a group project should get underway. Frances found that those voices gave her group a starting direction. She was grateful for that vision, as at that moment in the group process, she herself did not have a strong idea of how the final product should look.

Jane, whose cohort contained many globally-diverse students, related an anecdote of a particular online dialogue in which she felt that the voices of her male cohort peers carried more authority than the female voices. Some of the male classmates had posted comments that "were actually quite degrading towards women, in the sense that 'even women' could do certain jobs." Jane stated that she was "very grateful" when another male cohort member stepped in to say that the comments were not appropriate and needed to stop. Jane stated that it "was just so much more effective" that the first voice to address the issue "came from a male instead of a female." In Jane's experience of the situation, the fact that a male classmate was the one to initiate confronting the offending classmates gave the objection more worth, and opened a door for Jane to then add her own voice of disagreement.

Participants monitored the online dialogue as it unfolded, paying attention to voices of authority, as well as keeping an eye out for posts that were going unanswered. Several participants indicated that if there was a post that had not had a response after a period of time, they would intervene and reply to that post. Mandy described her response when she came across one of these posts:

I would just pop on, just to read it, just to help them out in a way. And leave a quick note, just to let them know that I had been there. Nobody wants to put an effort into something and not have it recognized.

Mandy worked full time and was raising a young family in addition to completing her doctorate. Even though she was very busy, she was aware of what was happening with other learners in the course, and took time to be courteous and help them feel that someone was listening to them. Frances described taking similar actions when she saw that no one was answering a specific post.

Jane also commented about being aware of classmates' "lonely posts," but over time, her response to them diverged from the response described by Mandy and Frances. Jane told me that initially, she would try to answer those posts because she "felt sorry" for the people who had written them. But she came to believe that responses to individual posts were not as important as whether or not someone was involved in "a meaningful way" in the discussions as a whole. Jane was mindful that even though one post may not have received an answer, the author of that post may be engaged in other discussion threads, and so was engaged in the dialogue in a larger sense.

Karen identified that the length and structure of a post impacted her decision of whether or not to respond to that post. Karen's reading load was heavy. She had many assigned readings for her courses, and many of her cohort members would add links to articles in their posts which added to the reading load. Karen stated:

I want to give each person the time and merit that they deserve. When I get a post that's more than 750 words, I find myself disengaging from that, because I get annoyed

that it is so long. I try to reply back to people that post somewhere between 200 and

400 words. I really focus on giving them a good response.

Karen had many demands on her time and a number of competing priorities, yet she

wanted to give adequate time and thought to posts to which she was responding.

Crafting the content and tone of posts

Participants spoke of being mindful of the tone of their writing and wanted to maintain

professional demeanor online. Frances described how for her, crafting posts was a complex

and nerve-racking process. She explained that there were many factors that made her feel

this way. She said, "You don't want to look stupid. You want to look like you're

participating. You don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. You want to sound knowledgeable."

Frances took care to craft her posts in a manner that addressed each of these concerns.

In contrast, Mandy, Naomi and Jonathan described how they feel more comfortable

speaking online than in person. Mandy appreciated the time that the asynchronous

environment allowed her to prepare her response. Naomi commented that she finds it

"easier to write five or six paragraphs, than to say the same thing verbally." Jonathan, a self-

described introvert, shared that he readily joined online discussions and contrasted his

participatory behaviour online with his tendency toward silence in face-to-face classrooms.

Some participants described being aware of the permanency of the written word;

responses were not just in the present moment, but had potentially lasting implications.

Katrina noted, "If you put it in writing, there's a record of it, right? And so I always wanted

to be careful that what I put into writing was accurate." Katrina was also aware of how the

permanence of the written word meant that people needed to be very mindful of how they

were crafting words of critique. She observed, "In print format, critique often leaves a more

indelible mark. They could go back time and time again, and read that, as opposed to only hearing a person say it once in a face-to-face setting."

Naomi reflected that she was aware of the structure of posts she read online. She stated,

> People have very distinct voices when they're writing. In some ways, it's like listening to a very well prepared seminar. So it's a very well thought out argument. And good posts are like that. They've got a main idea, and then it's supported. And so it's a way to get other peoples' points of view, and look at aspects of a question that I might not have considered.

Nalini felt it was challenging to sustain dialogue asynchronously online. She stated that she always tried to end her posts with "a thought, or a curiosity point, or a question that lends itself to somebody else making a reply" and she appreciated it when others did this in their posts also to facilitate her making a reply. Nalini recognized that sustaining the online dialogue is a two-way process.

Jonathan described a time of experiencing silence from the others about a post he had made, which caused him to recognize that he was not responding to their posts, either. For Jonathan, this silence was a manifestation of him not holding up his end of the dialogue. He stated, "I realize I'm as much a part of the problem as anything. It could also be my role to jump in and reply to somebody else's post."

In Jane's experience, "people are more willing to respond if you post one post at a time." Jane selectively regulates the timing and length of her posts, to facilitate responses from others. She avoided "bombarding them with your thoughts all in one session" by posting content one post at a time, one topic at a time. Jonathan was also conscious of how

his posts were received by others. He described how he made efforts to keep his posts succinct, organize them with topic headings, and add hyperlinks to references that others may find useful.

Some of the participants described feeling frustrated when their attempts to extend dialogue were unsuccessful. Jane enjoyed the learning and the exploration involved in online dialogue. She found that her cohort members expressed their appreciation of her thoughtful posts, but "then they fail to write a post of the same quality." Jane got frustrated when she sensed that her efforts were not matched by the others in the dialogue. This frustration was shared by Mark, who described times that he felt that people in dialogue with him were "not on the same track" as he was. He described writing carefully researched, value-added posts, only to find that the response was "going off in a different direction. And what you thought was going to be a meaningful discussion ends up being not that meaningful."

If the respondent made only anecdotal comments in reply, Mark expressed that he felt disappointment. Such replies didn't "help to validate the research, or pose any meaningful questions about it, in forms of real challenges" and the quality of the discussion suffered as a result. Other participants indicated agreement with Mark. Jonathan stated that he valued responses that promote academic discussion rather than ones that only contain social chatter, and Katrina said she valued online discussions that were "on task discussions."

Mandy shared that even after she had made the required number of posts, she would sometimes read additional posts about topics that interested her. When she did this, it was important for her to "leave a quick comment, just to let them know that I'd been there. I

usually left a mark that I was appreciative of whatever their comments were." For Mandy, this was an important social courtesy and a gesture of her appreciation.

The participants described a number of practical decisions they had to navigate when they were preparing to share their voices online. These decisions included the number of posts that they would write, how they selected the posts to which they would respond, how they crafted the tone and content of their responses, and how dialogues came to an end.

Drawing dialogue to a close

Several participants described their experiences of online dialogues ending prematurely. Frances stated, "Online, you don't know what's happening out there. Do you walk away? Are they thinking? Are they reflecting? What's going on?" Frances described being unsure of what to do in those situations. She told me that she did not want to seem uncaring or disinterested if she leaves the conversation. She would post queries to try to fill in the unknowns, questions such as: "Is everybody done? Any other comments? Nobody's talked for a while, it is everybody gone? Hello?" These questions were an attempt to determine status of online conversation and confirm whether or not everyone had said what they wanted to say.

Jonathan described his realization that there were times that the online dialogues did not continue on as deeply or thoroughly as he would like them to. Jonathan enjoyed online dialogue, but found that when each week ended, there was "a different set of new readings" and he wanted to get started on them instead of continuing the previous week's dialogue. Jonathan realized, "when the discussion has moved on to the next discussion forum, the previous discussion kind of winds down whether everybody is ready for it to or not."

Becca noted that she will withdraw her participation with individuals who are going on "rants." She notes that such rants are usually tied to certain individuals, and over time, you learn who those individuals are within the cohort. In contrast, Katrina disclosed that she had never suddenly withdrawn from a dialogue. She remarked that she thought that would be "really rude." Katrina did say that in her experience, online dialogues usually come to a natural close when people begin to repeat the same ideas and discussion on the topic has been exhausted.

Katrina identified what she called "stop points" that came up sometimes in the online dialogue, bringing the discussion to a premature halt. She related an anecdote about how the skilled intervention of a cohort member prevented an online dialogue from ending prematurely when someone posted a response to an active discussion thread "pulled energy in another direction". One of her classmates responded to that post by acknowledging it, but then bringing the discussion back to the original topic. Without this thoughtful re-direction of the cohort member, Katrina believed that the discussion thread would have come to a halt. The student's response to the off-topic post effectively brought the discussion back on task, and the dialogue was able to continue.

Dialogue in community

Participants described their relationships with their peers as generally positive and supportive. Jonathan commented, "there's a sense that we are trying to help each other through, and looking out for each other." Tamara reflected on the importance of community, a reciprocal and supportive ongoing relationship between learning peers, in building dialogue. Tamara shared:

I feel like I've been part of a community that's learning together, and we're interacting

with each other. I can receive input from others and then I can give input to others.

And I can ask around, there's always someone to interact with.

Tamara's experience highlighted that dialogue cannot be built and sustained by one

person; interaction is required, along with a sense of "learning together" and "interacting

with each other."

Frances contrasted her early online learning through correspondence courses, which

she described being "completely silent" without dialogue or connection, and her current

experience being a distance learner with a cohort, where there is "connection in the group."

She described having "go-to people" that she could contact if she was feeling stuck or like

she wanted to discuss something with them. Frances stated that she appreciated the

discussion forums because they provide a multitude of different opinions. She said that

seeing multiple viewpoints and being connected with the cohort "takes away the silence."

Jane described one faculty member who was very proficient using Blackboard in an

interactive manner. When the instructor posted a new message, an email would

automatically be sent to the students, and in Jane's experience this caused there to be "almost

a buzz in the class." Frances also described a time when there was a sense of spontaneity and

playfulness in the asynchronous discussion forum. One of Frances' cohort peers made a

comment online that some instructors do not like emoticons. Frances recalled that in

response to that comment, "a whole bunch of students started putting up emoticons. It was

very fun. It was like we stopped being serious for a moment, and we all put up our feelings."

This experience was memorable for Frances as a jocular and lightheartedly subversive break

from the seriousness of the usual academic discourse in the discussion forum.

Nalini described some strategies one of her professors used to bring energy and a humanizing element to the asynchronous online discussion forums. She appreciated the efforts he made to be engaged with the course:

> He's put up some videos, real time, of him talking and things. Maybe just a one-minute clip. He's trying to reach out to us, we get to see his face, he is talking to us in real time, he just made it that day. And then he gets on the chats, following the discussion. He's really engaged in the discussions. And it actually does provide a different feeling to the overall experience if the instructors are more engaged.

The instructor's efforts to have an engaged, interactive voice in the online discussion has added an energy and a humanizing element that Nalini felt was beneficial to her learning and overall experience. These efforts by the instructor added an element of excitement to the online classroom, and helped to prevent the "discussion post fatigue" that Nalini felt was a source of silence sometimes in her online courses.

Jonathan related a contrasting example of an instructor, whose interaction with the learners was not only delayed, but also done "in a very formulaic way, at very certain times. And the discussions were kind of weak as a result." Jonathan added that these interactions "didn't feel like something that you would engage back with. Like that naturally flowing or naturally evolving dialogue -- it didn't feel that way at all." In comparison to Nalini's instructor's timely and engaged participation, Jonathan's instructor's interaction did not seem natural nor did it create the feeling of a freely flowing conversation.

Other participants described experiences of certain topics that brought a spiritedness and energy to the asynchronous discussion. Naomi recalled a lively discussion about "women on the prairies, and perceptions that women can't do physical work, and they're not

as good as men." She added, "we got into quite a discussion about that." Jonathan reflected

that he felt "glad when you post something and it really seems to strike a chord." He

described such an exchange, a enjoyable discussion during which Jonathan said that he "put

a little more of myself into that one than I usually do" and that "it was really good to see a

good discussion come out of the topic, and to get some new perspectives that I hadn't had

before."

Like Jonathan, Tamara found herself very engaged in a conversation about a specific

topic that was something she had experience with and was interested in:

I realized it wasn't just me seeing the topic, but I needed other eyes and other

viewpoints in order to see it a little bit more holistically. The nature of the topic was

so interesting to me, that that kind of overrode my tendency to be a little bit more silent

and to kind of absorb. And I had personal experience to share.

Tamara's personal experience in the topic made her feel engaged and invested in the

dialogue. She was able to bring her own view points into the discussion, and also looked

forward to hearing what the others could add to her own experience. In the anecdotes they

shared, both Jonathan and Tamara were appreciative of the new perspectives that their

classmates provided on topics of particular interest to them.

Frances found that over time, the asynchronous online dialogues became more

enjoyable and more natural. She observed:

It's not as stilted as it was in the beginning. People are putting more of their person on

now. It's a more human interaction. It seems to be more of a conversation now than it

was in the beginning.

Karen expressed that in her experience, the high-energy times for asynchronous discussion were at the beginning of courses, around assignment time, and right after synchronous conferences. Nalini experienced a lot of chatter and high spirits at the beginning of the first course when the students were "posting their bios and making connections." Mandy felt the asynchronous discussion became more like a face-to-face conversation when the responses came more quickly and were less formulaic:

When the answers get shorter, and quicker back-and-forth, even though it is asynchronous, it starts to resemble a conversation more. And that's when it starts feeling more representative of a discussion where people are saying what's on their mind right away.

In Mandy's experience, as students moved away from the initial post (that had to be of a certain academic tone and cover specific points) the discussion became more natural in tone and timing. The content of the posts moved from being very considered to being less filtered, more like day-to-day discourse.

Frances described feeling energy in dialogues where most of the cohort is focused on one discussion thread:

We're all focused on that question, and everybody's interested in what everybody has to say, and they're all contributing. You can jump in there, and you feel a part of the community. You get that feeling that they want to hear what you have to say.

Participants also described times that the structure of the responses helped to make the asynchronous dialogue flow more naturally. Nalini liked it when responses began with an opening sentence that synthesized a key point she had made, and then built the dialogue from there. "It just allows for that kind of flow of conversation, even though it's not real time

conversation." When respondents built on a point that Nalini had made, she felt that she had been heard, and that the person had taken time to thoughtfully consider what she had written and craft a response.

Naomi also valued thoughtful exchanges, even if the person responding disagreed with a point she had made. Naomi said:

> If they disagree with me, that's fine as long as they're thoughtful about it, and give me solid reasons. That thoughtfulness to me indicates a certain respect, and a willingness to take the time to formulate an answer that is actually an answer. So there's been an exchange, rather than just a pat answer.

Karen stated that she gets a "real sense of community online" that comes from how the online dialogue makes her feel. Karen felt an emotional connection with her cohort when they validated her professional background and area of expertise. She acknowledged that she liked being addressed by name in responses to her posts. She appreciated respondents who write that they "got something" out of one of her posts, then "say what they got out of it, and then they ask you to explain it even further. It makes me feel like they're interested." She also expressed that visual elements in the posts, such as clip art and emoticons, "add a little colour" and reinforce an emotional connection.

Participants valued responses that showed that the writer had considered what they had written, thought about it in a meaningful way, and contributed something back to help move the conversation to a deeper level. Jonathan commented that he felt heard when people who reply to his posts "have responded to specific content, ideas, information, and either asked questions, or responded with a different perspective, or added information."

Thomas felt he had not experienced meaningful dialogues on the discussion forums. He said that his participation there was "playing to a tune and feeding the professor, giving them what they want. It has nothing to do with your own learning, or your own inspirations, just give them what they want."

Despite the occasional conflicts that arose in the online discussion forums, the participants on the whole described the discussion forms as places where they felt safe. Mark told me that he felt safe right from the very beginning, as expectations for confidentiality and privacy were made clear. The online forum was a "closed environment" – what was discussed there stayed there. Mark reflected that the feeling of safety grew over time, as trust was established within the cohort and with the instructor:

Feeling safer and safer, the more you would actually reveal. You start talking about real things that happen in the workplace, that you would never talk about publicly. The more I worked in the online environment, the safer I felt to be able to put all that out there. It is safe, it's respectful, and even the teachers would share some very personal experiences that would help to foster that idea of safety.

Other participants described a similar experience of the online classroom feeling like a safe space to be. Nalini stated, "I feel like everyone's quite respectful, and open to ideas. I've never felt that I've been silenced. I feel safe, and I also think it's just me as a person. I feel confident in sharing my thoughts and feelings." Tamara reflected that a feeling of safety in her online community provided her with a feeling of increased confidence to be a reflective learner as well as to contribute to the online dialogue:

When I feel like I'm in a safe place within my community, it's easier for me to sit with that silence and engage in my own silence. But then also, it's easier for me to break

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through the silence and feel confident to share, because I know eventually my community is going to interact and engage and come alongside me as we're all learning together.

Although Frances remarked that she feels safe overall online, she described an anecdote of sharing a personal experience online that received an unsympathetic, seemingly critical response. This experience left Frances feeling silenced, and that it was not safe for her to share personal stories online. Frances described how she appreciates the support of her colleagues at the college where she works. "I have a lot of support here at the college. Like, if I have really big questions that I don't feel safe enough to ask online, I can kind of hunt out [my colleagues] in my facility."

Frances' experience, of not having trust happening quite yet in the online world, but having people in her day-to-day, face-to-face world whom she did trust, is in direct contrast to Naomi's experience. Naomi found that her work colleagues were not interested in discussing the academic ideas that she was eager to explore:

No one's interested in talking about it. And if you do start to talk about it, their eyes kind of glaze over and they change the subject. And so when I could go online, there'd be people who were expressing interest in the same kinds of things. It was very affirming. Being able to associate with people just affirms the fact that there are people like that out there. And that this whole other world exists! That doesn't exist where you have to be physically located.

In Naomi's experience, being able to go online opened up opportunities to be able to talk about things that interested her with people who were also interested. Entering online discussion with her cohort allowed her to "get into things, and grab the meat of it, and take a

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good chew." Although her voice was silenced in her face-to-face work life, the online discussion allowed Naomi to find opportunities to discuss the meaty topics she wanted to explore. Getting online gave Naomi her voice for these topics. For Frances, the face-to-face world felt like a safer place to explore ideas, but Naomi felt safer talking about scholarly topics online than she did with people with whom she regularly interacts face-to-face.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings of the interpretation of the data, clustered by the four phenomenological existentials of corporeality, spatiality, temporality, and relationality; and two broad topical groupings identified during the interpretation of the data that capture the participants' lived experiences of silence online and engagement in dialogue online. In the next chapter, I discuss the four phenomenological existentials, present themes that emerged from the data, link the findings to those of other scholars, make recommendations for future research, and suggest implications for online educators.

Chapter 6 – Discussion

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of the study that were presented in the previous chapter. The first section contains reflections about the participants' lived experiences of corporeality, spatiality, temporality and relationality in the context of being silent and speaking out online. The second section addresses six themes that emerged from the interpretation of the data: (1) Learners enact purposeful silence; (2) Learners absorb silence from others; (3) Learners perceive, and use, silence as demarcation; (4) Learners experience silence within voice; (5) Learners use deliberate, complex strategies while engaging in online discourse; and (6) Learners hear each other in trusted community. I then propose new understandings of learner experience of silence that emerged from the interpretation of the data. This discussion is then followed by a section that places the findings in context of the Community of Inquiry framework. Finally, I end the chapter with suggestions for further research and implications for members of distance education communities, including instructors, learners, curriculum developers, and instructional designers.

Four Phenomenological Existentials

During the interviews and interpretation of the data, I explored the four phenomenological existentials by considering answers to question such as: What did it mean for learners to have corporeal and spatial experiences of the world, when they were not present in a bricks and mortar classroom, but appeared via their keystrokes in the form of written words posted in the discussion forum? How did the asynchronous nature of

discussion forum dialogue impact learners' experiences of lived time? How did learners maintain relationships with their peer distance learners and their instructors?

The participant interviews made it evident that all four existentials (lived body, lived space, lived time and lived relationship with others) were impacted and refracted by the online setting of the phenomenon. In their descriptions of lived experiences online, learners disclosed how they enter online spaces and make their presence, thoughts, and feelings known there; how those spaces have sensations and emotions associated with them, the frustrations (and advantages) of asynchronous communication, and the conscious efforts they made to maintain and enhance relationships with other learners and instructors.

Corporeality

In the virtual spaces of online classrooms, embodiment is achieved through the appearance of words on a screen. Learners describe entering the online space with language that infers physical movement. Keystrokes and written text become corporeal embodiment, as elucidated by van Manen and Adams (2009):

> In online text spaces—discussion-boards, email, blogs—we come to know the other through writing alone. Relation is not perturbed or infected by visuality or orality, physical presence or vocal discourse. We do not meet the other's eyes; rather, we read and are read by the other's text. We move and are moved by word alone. Online, we have no access or visceral response to the pre-reflective, tacit understandings of another's bodily being, voice and gesture, smell and presence. We come to know the other through a single modality: text. Here, textuality is the sole interstitial site of meaning, presence, contact, and touch. (p. 17)

Scott (2015) describes "a riddle worthy of Gollum: . . . What creature has ears in its eyes, and mouths in its fingertips?" (p. 47). Scott argues that one result of humans being increasingly digitally networked is an "aural paradox" (p. 47) between sight and sound; where words are spoken not with mouths, but with fingers, and words are heard with eyes rather than ears. Other people present themselves to us in the online environment by the lingering presence of their written words. If too many words are present at once, or a barrage of text meets ones' eyes when one enters the online environment, the resulting perception may be one of loud, unpleasant noise and a space that is overcrowded. These sensory perceptions may make the one entering that space want to retreat away from it, in effect, to disappear.

If one enters the online space and finds an absence of written words, the lack of text is perceived as silence. Then silence itself becomes "flesh" that is met in the online space as a physical presence. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* (2016) defines the verb *meet* as "to come into the presence of." To meet silence online is to literally make its acquaintance. Silence itself takes on a corporeal form when it is met in the online environment.

Distance learners can also be silently present in the online forum, watching the unfolding discussion, without leaving a footprint of posted words. This activity is done without nefarious intent; learners describe it as a practical means of listening to the discussion to stay connected once the required number of postings for that discussion thread have been met, or to locate the right place to insert one's voice and become embodied through the writing and subsequent posting of words.

Spatiality

There is overlap between corporeality and spatiality; to embody a space is to show up and be present in that space. The participants occupied a physical space from which they accessed the Internet. Perhaps one learner was located in a home office, surrounded by familiar and chosen items. Ambient sound may come from the activities of other people at home or the comings and goings of neighbours outside. Another learner might be found in a coffee shop, with a low hum of conversation punctuated by the noise of orders being taken, drinks being made, and the movements of wait staff, patrons, and passers-by. The coffee shop may be a familiar location – a favourite neighbourhood haunt – or be in an unfamiliar city during a trip away from home. The physical location did impact the participants' abilities to make their voices heard online, especially when they were unable to connect to the Internet. This is consistent with findings of Kahu, Stephens, Zepke, and Leach (2014), who studied how mature distance learners carve out space and time for learning, and noted that for their participants, "an important requirement for a quality space was access to a computer and Internet" (p. 529).

Physical location is just one component of lived space to consider when reflecting on the lifeworlds of online learners. Van Manen (1990) defines spatiality as "felt space" (p. 102), a concept that resonates when we acknowledge that from their physical locations, online learners log on to enter a fourth dimension (Scott, 2015). In the fourth dimension, learners occupy the virtual space of the online environment.

Entering and inhabiting the online environment is evocative being in a space with physical features and a palpable atmosphere. Inhabitants of that digital location are aware of being in a different space than where they are located physically. The digital space evoked

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in the participants sensations reminiscent of a range of different physical locations and their associated behaviours and emotions: from the socializing and mixing of a cocktail party; to the more task-focused activity of a board room; to the mix of uncertainty, curiosity, and sense of danger found within a mystery novel. Being an academic space, the online classroom elicits its inhabitants to appear there primarily as scholars. An erudite tone of voice is expected and topics of discussion should be focused on learning rather than socializing. Written posts that further knowledge-building are valued and rewarded with responses in kind. Not everyone believes that the online classroom is an appropriate place for emotion or it's digital approximation: emoticons.

People look for landmarks to help them make sense of their surroundings, a behaviour that occurs both in three-dimensional environments and when online. Discussion forums will be silent if learners can't locate them; not being able to find places one wants to be online is analogous to getting lost in the three-dimensional world. Depending on the layout of the learning management system, early posts might get "buried" by later posts, making the earlier ones more difficult to find. The example of earlier posts getting buried by later ones highlights that spatiality online overlaps with temporality, which I discuss in the next section.

Temporality

Temporality relates to "subjective time as opposed to clock time or objective time" (van Manen, 1990, p. 104). Online temporality includes making sense of the discontinuous reciprocal rhythms of silence and voice as they unfold in asynchronous discussion forums. Familiar back-and-forth patterns of face-to-face conversation are disrupted in the distorted temporal pacing of unfolding text-based asynchronous dialogue.

In asynchronous online discussions, there are times that spatiality intersects with temporality. Physical location impacts the timing of when learners enter the digital space relative to their other cohort members. Temporality online also includes factors such as patterns of behaviour in managing the daily demands of work, family, and studies. At times, the participants described maintaining this temporal balance by creating only the required number of posts. This strategy mirrors that of participants in a study of distance learners by Selwyn (2011). Many of Selwyn's participants described how they were selective about engaging in course activities and would do so only as required. Their distance learning activities needed to fit in around the temporal patterns of work demands and family members' schedules. Participants in the study by Kahu et al. (2014) described similar challenges in carving out needed time for studies.

Timelines that are imposed on the asynchronous discussion by the course schedule also impact the temporal experience of silence. A scheduled start of a new discussion thread tends to halt discussion on the current thread, even if the dialogue on the first thread was not yet concluded. Tight timelines also may silence dissenting opinions in the discussion forums as there is insufficient time for a robust debate that is carried through to resolution.

Temporality also considers how the experience of the phenomenon changes over time. The participants' experiences of speaking out and being silent, and expectations for responses from others, changed over time and with experience. The participants found ways to contextualize and understand responses to their posts in the online discussion forums. Over time, many of the participants described becoming less anxious as to how others will react to their posts, and about the numbers of individual responses that their posts receive. The practice and experience that builds over time also helped participants to feel more

confident interacting in the asynchronous discussion forums the further along they were in their studies. Experienced learners may feel increasing pressure to be deliberate in their word choices to accentuate progression in their online embodiment as a scholar. Xin and Feenberg's (2006) description of knowledge acquisition as "the fusion of one's own horizon with that of others. . . to encompass elements of a disciplinary tradition" (p. 7) seems to capture this scholarly journey from novice to academic.

The participants were aware of the temporal rhythms of the other learners and the instructor. They consider variations in time zones as a factor when estimating how long it might take for a response from a particular individual. Online learning gives learners time to reflectively collect their thoughts before they commit them in writing by posting them online. This finding aligns with Zembylas and Vrasidas' (2007) conclusion that "for some participants . . . online silence can work as a way to reflect and, as such, it may be an important part of personal growth" (p. 19).

Relationality

Van Manen (1990) describes relationality as "the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them" (p. 104). Van Manen's description of relationality goes on to explain the confluence of corporeality, spatiality and relationality in the three-dimensional world: "As we meet the other, we approach the other in a corporeal way: through a handshake or by gaining an impression of the other in the way that he or she is physically present to us" (pp. 104-105).   In the asynchronous online classroom, the interpersonal space is the discussion forum; we approach others through posting disembodied, written words. Text replace our physical beings as we present ourselves to others and interact with them.

Relationality in the online environment included many facets: establishing and maintaining connections with the others within the academic confines of the discussion forum and on social media, avoiding conflict online, recognizing cohort members and instructors as living lives outside of the online classroom, being aware of patterns of participation in the online environment, and being mindful of how one's own actions impact others in the online classroom.

Connections with others in the online environment helped some participants to experience the online space as a safe one, where they could be silent when they needed to be, and could engage with others when they were ready to reach out. This described feeling of safety suggests the online development of a "conversational relation which allows us to transcend ourselves" (van Manen, 1990, p. 105). Connections with others online are established and maintained through shared experiences, temporal synchronicity in posting and responding, sharing personal stories, and communicating on social media outside of the forum.

The participants were largely diligent in preventing conflict from emerging within the online forums. Silence was employed as a strategy to avoid escalation of conflict. Although the time structure of the discussion forum did not always allow time to work through disagreements to come to convergence of opinion and shared understanding, the participants were not adverse to differing opinions being voiced online as long as the tone of those dissenting voices was respectful. At times, online relationships got off on the wrong foot or experienced discord arising along the way. For distance learners in an online discussion to maintain common ground, they must "not only repair any trouble they encounter but also

take positive steps to establish understanding and avoid trouble in the first place" (Xin and Feenberg, 2006, p. 11), a discursive subprocess that Xin and Feenberg call "repair" (p. 11).

The participants described being aware of how their actions affect others and strove to maintain collaborative relationships. They were mindful that cohort members and instructors have lives outside of the forum, and made efforts to contextualize their posts and expectations for a response based on what might be going on in the others' lives at the time. The majority of the participants valued feelings of connection and collegiality with their cohort peers. Rovai (2002) describes the need that distance learners have to feel a sense of connectedness to the group.

Having considered the four phenomenological existentials, I turn now to identify six themes that emerged from the interpretation of the data. The six themes encapsulate Zembylas and Vrasidas' (2007) observation that "online silence can be richly expressive of a variety of meanings and forms" (p. 6).

Six Themes of Learner Experience of Silence Online

After the iterative process of repeated rounds of whole-part-whole transcript analysis as described in Chapter 4, six themes emerged regarding the distance learners' experiences of silence online. The six themes are: (1) Learners enact purposeful silence; (2) Learners absorb silence from others; (3) Learners perceive, and use, silence as demarcation; (4) Learners experience silence within voice; (5) Learners use deliberate, complex strategies while engaging in online discourse; and (6) Learners hear each other in trusted community. These six themes reflect the complex, sometimes nuanced, aspects of the participants' experiences of silence and voice online.

The first two themes emerged from participants' experiences of silence itself. The third and fourth themes address areas of transition between voice and silence. Finally, as silence and voice are counterpoints to each other, and one does not exist without the other, the last two themes address participants' experiences of speaking out online. Consideration of speaking out online is an integral part of investigating the phenomenon of silence online as silence only exists in counterpoint to voice. As noted by Merleau-Ponty, "To have lost one's voice is not to keep silence: one keeps silent only when one can speak" (1962, p. 142). The six themes together capture descriptions of the participants' rich lived experiences of being silent themselves, receiving silence from others, and speaking out online either in muted or full voices.

Theme 1: Learners enact purposeful silence

Thematic interpretations of participant interviews revealed that when participants enacted silence, they did so intentionally, with purpose. These silent times were not quiet or passive times, they were times during which participants described being busy in thought or action. The focus of this theme is on times when the participants themselves were the ones being silent online, similar to the focus of Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007).

Participants frequently enacted silence for one of two distinct, but overlapping reasons, which I have labeled *silence as means of* and *silence as time for*. When participants enacted silence online as *means of*, they employed silence as an intentional method of achieving an aim, or as an action used to bring about a desired result. Being silent online was the "means of" attaining that result. During other times, participants enacted silence online in order to allow *time for* other things to happen. The silences in these instances were the right moment for another action to occur; speaking out online took a back seat to some other action or

activity that needed to occur at that moment. Each of these manifestations of personal silence are described in more detail, below.

Enacting silence as "means of"

Participants described online silences as being a means of attaining a variety of ends including balancing priorities, identifying learning needs, preventing poorly-thought out ideas from being posted, avoiding redundancy in the discussion threads, maintaining professional etiquette, and regulating their emotions. Enacting silence online was also at times a means of "biting one's tongue" to prevent conflict from escalating. This use of silence in the presence of conflict is similar to that identified by Conrad (2002a).

Enacting silence as "time for"

Some of the anecdotes that the participants shared described online silence as being a time that they used for doing course-related activities not visible on the forum. Participants described being silent online while they took time to do research, play with ideas, craft responses, read course materials, and observe and listen.   In keeping with Neruda's advice to "keep your silence until the words ripen in you" (2016, p. 94), participants also described silence as a time that they used to let ideas mature as they digested and reflected on content before posting.

The participants described their online silences as times of action rather than inaction. For example, the silent activity of reflection was not a passive activity, but rather a process in which the participants were engaged. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* (2016) defines the word *process* as a "series of actions taken toward a particular end." Reflection was a time of action, although it was non-visible online. Merleau-Ponty's observed that "in reality this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner language" (1962,

p. 163). The silence of the participants was alive with words as they played with ideas, contemplated, looked at things from multiple perspectives, and fleshed out nascent ideas.

Silence online was also a time for participants to be watchful and ensure understanding of the direction the dialogue was headed before they embodied the online space by posting – to ensure that the voice they were adding was a harmonious one. This behaviour parallels Gradinaru's (2016) observation that silences occur in online communities when members are disinclined to express a viewpoint that does not align with the majority.

The participants described times of being silent themselves as a different experience than meeting silence coming from others in the learning community.   Online silence coming from oneself was commonly initiated by the participants for a variety of purposes, whereas silence coming from others was imposed by those others. These two kinds of online silences echo Solnit's (2017) distinction between quiet (which is sought out) and silence (which is imposed). Online silence coming from others is captured in the next theme.

Theme 2: Learners absorb silence from others

Participants described a wide variety of feelings they experienced when met silence online that came from other people. These feelings ranged from anxiety for some of the participants to nonchalance for some of the others. My choice of the verb "absorb" in the name of this theme is meant to capture these experiential differences. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* (2016) definition of *absorb* includes the idea of taking something in and then either soaking it up or reducing the effect or intensity of it. Many of the participants described taking in silence from others as being an unpleasant and lingering experience (soaking it up), while a few other participants acknowledged the silence but dismissed the effect of it on them (reducing the effect of it).

Silence coming from others online was often a time of awkwardness and uncertainty. When some of the participants experienced others falling silent online, they wondered if it is because they had said something that caused offense. These times of meeting silence from others may be unsettled times spent in tense waiting and a source of feeling devalued, isolated, frustrated, or discouraged. Silences from others were particularly noted during small group work and when the discussion related to high-stakes assignments. Participants in other studies have also described online silences as being particularly problematic during group projects, or when the timeliness of the response was a factor (Mattsson et al., 2008; Mico-Wentworth, 2014).

Not all online silences from others were met with negativity. Some participants described feeling neutral about silences online, that the silence was either expected or of no consequence. Silences coming from others online were also noted to be a source of building resilience. The benefit of resilience was investigated by Kemp (2002), who found that high resilience was an indicator of persistence in study for undergraduate online students.

Many of the participants described experiences of silence from instructors as being particularly memorable. Instructors were generally held in high regard as persons of authority by the participants. That regard was sometimes lost if the instructor failed to answer a direct question, or answered it in a manner that left the learner feeling unheard and effectively silenced.

During periods of learner conflict online, participants spoke of wanting instructors to step in to mediate. Participants valued clarity on expectations for the number of posts, and expressed appreciation for when instructors would speak out to keep the dialogue on-task and offer additional ideas or references for the group to consider. Bates (2015) supports that

the role of the instructor includes setting a respectful tone of dialogue online, defining clear expectations, and maintaining a regular presence in the learning environment to encourage learners and redirect dialogue when needed. A qualitative study on teaching roles for online instructors echoed the importance of careful structure and attention to detail for course materials for online courses (Coppola et al., 2002). Xin and Feenberg (2006) add that instructors "must be sensitive to the dynamic of the conversation, inject expert knowledge when appropriate, and connect students' contributions to the field" (p. 18).

Gorsky and Blau (2009) found that the timeliness of instructor response was significantly correlated to learner satisfaction with the quality of the course instruction. The authors gave an example of a post from a student who had previously posed a question to an instructor that went unanswered. The student's follow-up post read, "Why isn't anyone answering? Is anyone here? Should I turn the lights off?" (Findings, para. 11). The importance of instructor interaction in establishing and maintaining course momentum was also supported by Weaver and Albion (2005).

When instructors did not respond to direct questions, participants described working around the question to try to find the answer on their own, or consulting their peers in search of answers. The experience of having a question unanswered by the instructor may leave learners not caring so much about the answer anymore and less likely to pose future questions to that instructor.

Theme 3: Learners perceive, and use, silence as demarcation

The third theme that emerged from the participant interviews was one of silence being experienced as a border; a demarcation between distinct spaces. This theme manifest in two ways: one that was experienced as participants prepared to speak out, and another that came

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into play as the online discussion unfolded. Participants described experiencing silence as something that needed to be crossed over as a means to embody the online space and enter the discussion. Once participants were engaged in the discussion, they described silence as a boundary that defined and contained appropriate decorum and content within the online forums; a responsive action to others who crossed lines of acceptable behaviour. I will discuss both aspects of silence as demarcation, below.

Silence as a border to cross

Participants indicated through their shared experiences that silence could at times be a border or a barrier that they must pass through in the process of becoming visible in the online discussion. This aspect of silence has both corporeal and spatial overtones. In order to become embodied in the online discussion, learners must come out of a state of personal silence to post online. There is a silent, but felt, border separating the space inhabited when one is being silent and the space now occupied when one has spoken out. Speaking out online is an act of breaking through silence. This embodiment of silence as a border, a geographical edge or boundary that needs to be "crossed," reinforces that spatiality online is experienced as tangible, and that one enters a different space when coming online. Speaking out online is a physical act that moves a learner from a place of silence to another place of visible participation in a discussion forum. Crossing this border from silence to voice is done through the disembodied corporeality of the written word.

Participants made decisions to cross the borders of silence into zones of participation for different reasons, and with varied motivations and differing levels of willingness behind them. They expressed differing feelings brought on while making this crossing. Some participants felt safe doing this. Some revealed that they felt more comfortable speaking out

in the online classroom than in a bricks-and-mortar one. Several of the participants described how familiarity with the discussion topic eased the crossing out of silence and made it feel easier to participate, a finding supported in other research (Hew et al., 2010; Tu & McIsaac, 2002).

Participants described certain border crossings as being effortful, intimidating, or daunting. Some participants emphasized that they would have preferred not to have to cross that border at all, but felt "pushed" to do so by course requirements mandating a certain number of posts. These participants wanted to be able to interact with course content without being required to interact with other participants. The idea that students do learn by reading messages posted by others, even if they do not respond to them, is corroborated by Antonacci (2011). Sutton (2001) supports that vicarious interaction "is well suited for motivated students who are apprehensive about directly interacting" (p. 239).

The learners who were reluctant to cross the border from silence into visible participation felt that mandatory requirements to post were contrary to their learning style, or forced them to invent something out of nothing when they didn't feel they had anything of value to contribute to a particular discussion. In these instances, their words were present as embodiment to fill space, but the sound the words made was not meaningful or enjoyable. The sound of those words could be likened to static or white noise, as opposed to voice and dialogue. This feeling was particularly memorable in objectivist courses such as math. Bates (2015) concurs that such objectivist courses of study may be an awkward fit to social constructivist models of learning.

Silence as boundary enforcement

In addition to silence being a border to cross, silence was also used to demarcate boundary lines within the online discourse. This manifestation of silence is a variation on silence as *means of* as discussed in the first theme, specifically, that participants enacted silence online as a means of enforcing norms of social and academic behaviour in the discussion forums.

Silence was used in the online discussion forum as a means of containing conversation and behaviour, and this use of silence was implicitly recognized and understood by the participants. It was in essence an online version of giving people "the silent treatment." Boundary lines of silence were put up by both instructors and learners to maintain appropriate academic behaviour and discourse.

At times, instructors would use silence as a means of steering the discussion away from particular topics or tangents, a strategy that was sometimes contested. Many online courses are designed following social constructivist principles, which encourage learners to become co-creators of knowledge (Bates, 2015; Rovai, 2004). The aim is a transition from the instructor's voice being the one of authority to the learners finding their own voices in a process of "negotiation at the boundaries between members of knowledge communities and students who wish to join" (Xin & Feenberg, 2006, p. 7). At times, this negotiation between instructor and learners unfolds in awkward, rough movement patterns between those whose voices will be silenced and whose vices will be allowed to prevail.

Silence as demarcation was experienced both as a border to cross and a boundary to contain the unfolding online dialogue. The next theme addresses variations in the timbre of voice once participants crossed the border from silence into visible participation.

Theme 4: Learners experience silence within voice

During the hermeneutic reduction, I came to the realization that, at the outset of the study, I had at some level been conceptualizing "silence" and "voice" as two distinct and opposing entities. What the lived experience of the participants brought to light is that this binary conceptualization was an oversimplification and that it is possible for silence to exist *within* voice online.

As I reviewed the transcripts, silence within voice emerged as a theme. I found repeated examples of participants describing instances of holding some things back, obfuscating details, or being ambiguous. Participants shared anecdotes about times that they deliberately left certain details out of their posts, or were intentionally vague about some details. Like musicians who use mutes to change the timbre of their instruments, participants at times muted their voices online by changing the timbre of their posts. During these moments of altered voice, participants muffled their voices by being deliberately vague in their word choices, or by intentionally leaving certain things left unsaid. Participants also described scenarios when they felt the presence of silence lingering despite having received responses from others.

These participant experiences were betwixt and between silence and voice online, and considered together, highlight that silence and voice are not binary opposites. Silence and voice can coexist; silence can be present within voice online. Muñoz (2014) reflected that "what we experience and describe as 'silence' is often, in fact, written or spoken activity that leaves something relevant unsaid" (p. 15). This aspect of online silence manifest in participants being non-specific about personal details that may be criticized by others, glossing over topics that might be controversial or spark strong reactions from others, or not

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wanting yet to commit to a firm position on a topic. Yet it was also present when an unhelpful response from an instructor made the participant feel that they had not truly been listened to, or "heard." This duality of silence and voice contained within incomplete and unhelpful responses was also reported by Mico-Wentworth (2014), whose participants described getting answers from an instructor that did not match the question that had been asked. Participants in Mico-Wentworth's study felt silenced by the mismatching answers and felt unsure about how to follow up without seeming "pushy" (p. 33).

Silence exists within voice also when learners experience the words of another person being put into their mouths that do not reflect how they are feeling or thinking. When a self-appointed representative speaks as if on behalf of the whole group, when in fact not everyone in the group is of the same opinion, the voices of the dissenting others may be drowned out or silenced by the words of one.

Collectively, these examples contributed to the theme of lived experiences that are neither fully silence or voice. To the casual reader, a dialogue may appear to be occurring in the discussion threads that are unfolding, but silence is present, concealed by the visible written words. Important experiences, significant thoughts, dissent, and other strong emotions may be masked, and therefore, go undetected. Participants kept silent about some things even as they spoke; they heard silence sometimes in unsatisfactory answers that came and left them feeling that they had not been heard.

Theme 5: Learners use deliberate, complex strategies while engaging in online discourse

In talking with the participants, and reflecting on the experiences they shared with me, it became evident that coming out of silence to engage in online discourse was not

something done lightly. The participants shared with me a number of decisions they made about the process of engaging in threaded online discussions – carefully considered choices about the numbers of posts they should make, selecting threads to which they would reply, crafting the content of their response, and bringing discussions to a close. This theme relates to experiences with the mechanics of entering, sustaining, and terminating online discourse. Participants deliberated on a variety of factors in the process of composing posts, including maintaining professionalism, offering content of value, and using strategies to engage their peers and further the dialogue.

As they monitored the dialogue that unfolded, participants were aware of which of their cohort members met only the minimum expectations for participation, and which ones tended to make more than the minimum required number of posts. Some described meeting the targets for the minimal number of posts as a way of managing the competing priorities of the demands of their courses, work, and home life.

For dialogue to occur online, participants must enter the discussion threads by posting, and also respond to posts in turn. While some of the participants described writing posts as a stressful process, others found composing their thoughts in writing to be easier than speaking them out loud. Consistent with the findings of Tu and McIsaac (2010), participants were more motivated to post when the topics were familiar. They also readily responded when they felt passionate about a topic and when they felt they could add a meaningful contribution to the discussion.

Participants described how they went about selecting discussion threads to which to respond. The level of connection they had with the other person posting, the amount of authority that a certain voice carried, social courtesy, and the length and format of the post

awaiting a reply all contributed to decisions the participants made about whether or not to reply to a specific post.

In describing which voices they tend to listen to online, many participants explicitly or implicitly spoke of voices that they perceived as carrying authority in the online discussions. Some voices carried more authority and perceived value in the online dialogue than others, and participants described listening more closely to those respected voices that "shone through". Authoritative voices could be those of the instructor or of peer cohort members, especially those peers with relevant life experience or a clear vision of how a group project might unfold. At times, whether one was male or female also influenced perceived authority to speak out in particular discussions online.

Participants described making considered deliberations in crafting the content and tone of their posts. They recounted efforts to maintain a professional tone in their posts, use strategies intended to encourage responses from others, and write content that would add value to the dialogue. In her study of strategies distance learners used to establish group cohesion online, Lapadat (2007) similarly found that her participants "had a sophisticated set of discursive strategies that they employed to accomplish their ends (p. 349). Speaking out, or becoming present in the online discussion, was more comfortable for some participants than others. Participants were also aware that, unlike the ephemeral spoken dialogue of the three-dimensional environment, words written online linger long after they are posted. This perceived permanency of the written comments shaped awareness of how posts were crafted. Learners did not want to be perceived as overly emotional or insensitive when offering criticism.

Participants also described strategies they used, or observed being used, to extend dialogue in the discussion threads. Continuation of dialogue was important for the participants to feel that the online discussion was a beneficial one. Comments that merely stated agreement, or shared a phatic anecdote, did not sufficiently continue or further the discussion. Participants appreciated responses that built on points that they had raised and contained one or two new ideas for consideration. They described being disinclined to respond to rambling and overly-lengthy posts, a finding that Conrad (2002a) also reported.

Once dialogues had been initiated, they needed to come to a close. The participants shared that often this termination happened abruptly. The timeline for the discussion had ended, and a new discussion thread was beginning that now required attention, leaving the participants feeling dissatisfied and wishing for a deeper discussion. Bollnow (1982) describes how when a dialogue comes to a close with a feeling of satisfaction that a state of truth has been achieved through the conversation, the people involved in the dialogue experience a genuine fulfilled silence. None of the participants in this study described an experience of fulfilled silence occurring at the completion of their online discourses. They did describe feeling time pressure to abandon the current topic and move on to the new readings and topics of the next scheduled discussion thread.

Theme 6: Learners hear each other in trusted community

Participants described the asynchronous online dialogue as feeling stilted and awkward at times, yet they also described moments that the discourse transcended temporal and spatial disruption to feel more natural, even spirited and playful at times. In these transcendent moments, participants felt that their voices had been truly heard online. These moments occurred when the online learning community was functioning well and its members were

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supporting each other and contributing to the dialogue, as well as when learners could talk about subjects online that they could not talk about in their day-to-day lives because no one was interested.

The word "buzz" is an apt one for the idea of how disparate spaces and asynchronicity can be transcended in the online dialogues. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* (2016) defines *buzz* as "an atmosphere of excitement and activity." Buzz also is associated with bees and beehives, places of intense communal activity and cooperation. The word buzz onomatopoetically evokes a recognizable sound, another counterpoint to silence. Considered as both activity and noise, the concept of buzz online seems to represent a directly contrasting phenomenon to silence online.

Participants described experiences they had in the asynchronous discussion that gave them an energized, connected feeling. These experiences were memorable ones for the participants, who described them as times of spontaneity, fun, and excitement that felt less stilted and more like a real-time conversation. Sometimes these moments involved a topic that was energizing and interesting to the participants. Other times, instructors elicited these moments through the skilled use of technology, such as by posting short, recently-made videos that added immediacy and personality to the online environment. Weaver and Albion (2005) found that online learners placed great importance on the role of the instructor in getting momentum going in online discussions. They suggest that once momentum is established in a discussion, it is relatively easy to maintain.

Participants described feeling heard online when people responding to them built on specific points they had raised, addressed them by name in the forum, recognized their expertise, and wrote replies that were thoughtful and respectful. Some participants described

their efforts to attend to posts that had not received any replies, out of concern for the

feelings of the author of the post. Participants felt an overall feeling of safety in the online

environment of the discussion forums. This feeling of connection, of being safe and feeling

heard, and of being in community is captured by Solnit's (2017) reflection that:

> Words bring us together, and silence separates us. . . Some species of trees spread root
>
> systems underground that interconnect the individual trunks and weave the individual
>
> trees into a more stable whole that can't so easily be blown down in the wind. . .
>
> Conversations are like those roots. (p. 18)

When the online spaces have dialogue that feels spontaneous, natural, spirited, and

open; and the online environment feels like a safe communal place where you can share

ideas and be heard, online silence can be transcended.

New Insights into Learner Experience of Silence Online

Phenomenology of practice is intended to enable human science practitioners, such as

those working in education and health care, to gain thoughtful understandings of meaningful

aspects of lived human experience. The aim of this phenomenology of practice study was to

gain new insights into, and a more thoughtful understanding of, distance learners'

experiences of silence online. The four existential phenomenological themes and six

emergent themes described in this study reinforce that silence online is a complex and

polymorphous entity. Silence online is not merely the absence of visible participation.

When distance learners enact and encounter silence online, they experience a dynamic and

shape-shifting phenomenon.   At times, online learners may *be* silent, but they also *use*

silence, they *break through* silence, and having broken through it, they may *meet* it again on

the other side. Times of silence online may be accompanied by feelings of awkwardness or

of being kept waiting. Online silence may be a means of deferring action in order to do something else, or a time of observing and listening. Online silences may also be acknowledged and then let go. Learners experience silence as both a means and an end for enforcing decorum and appropriate speech in the discussion forums.

Silence and voice are not binary opposites. Silence can linger in textual voice; written words may mask the silence of truths left unspoken. Learners may use vague or imprecise words to tread between silence and voice, saying certain carefully-selected words or thoughts and keeping others left unsaid. Poorly-chosen words that are spoken in an inattentive response can sting their recipient as silence. Yet despite its polymorphous properties, online silence can be transcended by strength of connection, responsiveness, and a feeling of safety in the online environment.

From discussion of the four existential themes, six emergent themes, and new understandings of the phenomenon of learner experiences of silences online, I now place the findings of the study into the context of the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 1999), which is focused on the process of creating worthwhile, social constructivist online learning experiences.

Linking the Findings to the Community of Inquiry Theoretical Framework

The Community of Inquiry theoretical framework (Garrison et al., 1999) posits that there are three interdependent elements that contribute to the educational experience in online learning communities: *social presence, cognitive presence,* and *teaching presence.* Social presence is the ability of community members to express their individual personalities within the learning community by communicating openly, expressing emotion, and developing interpersonal relationships and group cohesion (Garrison et al., 1999) such that

they come across as "real people" in the online learning environment (Community of Inquiry, n.d.). Cognitive presence relates to learners constructing meaning through moving through periods of triggering events, to exploration, then integration, and finally to resolution (Garrison et al., 1999). Finally, teaching presence is comprised of managing instructional content, fostering understanding, and providing direct instruction (Garrison et al., 1999). Both instructors and learners contribute to teaching presence in constructivist learning communities.

The findings related to distance learners' experiences of online silences in this study can be considered under each of the three presences – social, cognitive, and teaching. I will discuss each in turn.

Online silence and social presence

Social presence includes self-disclosure, expression of emotion and personality, and other steps made to come across as a "real person" in the online community and to foster open and respectful dialogue and a sense of group cohesion (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). In a community of inquiry, relationships built through social presence are purposeful ones that advance attainment of the learning objectives (Garrison, 2007; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Additionally, social presence is "a mediating variable between teaching and cognitive presence" (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 7). Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007) argued that learner engagement in silence could be viewed as a key component of social presence. In the words of Smith (2017), "silence, ... in its welcome form, is yet an extension of conversation" (para. 8).

The learners in this study described experiences that align with social presence, and that also have a secondary impact on the experience of cognitive presence. Some described

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how feeling connected to a cohort of learners (social presence) was a factor that supported online silences to feel natural, but silences that occurred during periods of less connection to a cohort felt uncomfortable, isolating, and as a barrier to engaging in discourse (impacting cognitive presence). Participants acknowledged feeling an increased obligation to respond to posts that had been written by someone with whom they were in dialogue with already.

Many learners described attempts to bring their personalities and experiences into the learning environment as a means of illustrating pedagogic points, a finding that was echoed in other studies (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Swan, 2002). In a study of the social development of learning communities in 73 online university courses, Swan (2002) found that "self-disclosure seemed to evoke the greatest number and depth of response from other participants" (p. 39). These findings align with lived experience descriptions of many of the participants in this study, who valued sharing their own experience and learning from the experiences of respected peers.

Swan (2002) noted a high prevalence of use of paralanguage such as emoticons, which are used to indicate social presence. Some of the participants in the present study would use emoticons as a way bringing emotion into the dialogue; others did not use emoticons, either because they felt emoticons did not reflect their personalities, or they wondered about the appropriateness of their use in academic settings. Some participants expressed that emoticon use by instructors was appreciated as a means of softening the impact of written critical feedback .

Respectful dialogue was a topic that recurred in many of the participant interviews. Several participants discussed how, done tactfully, points of dissent and counter arguments could be raised in a manner that sparked further dialogue and interest in the topic. However,

participants described experiencing dialogues becoming disrespectful as a source of conflict that would cause the participant to withdraw from that discussion. Van Schie (2008) illustrates that a feeling of safety is a part of social presence. When the forums felt safe, learners felt freer to speak openly and honestly. At times, the participants described picking up on clues that it might not be safe to discuss certain topics, such as their professional background, personal relationships, or topics of a political nature. Participants at times chose to speak with muted voices when those unsafe or sensitive topics arose in the discussions.

In the discussion forums, certain voices carried more authority than others, including the voice of the instructor and voices of cohort members who had life experience with the topic under discussion. The participants in this study did not appreciate an overuse of phatic or non-academic discussion that did not further learning. Several participants spoke of using social media outside of the learning management systems to maintain the non-academic aspects of their relationships, including using humor that would not be appropriate to use in the online forums.

Elements of temporality were also woven into participant experiences that related to social presence. Learners who have a temporal rhythm of being an "early poster" might more frequently interacting with a subset of peers who are also early posters. Participants described the learning community as feeling safer, more conversational, and more human over time, descriptions that echo Swan's (2002) findings that affective (for example, emotion, personal stories, humour, self-disclosure) and interactive (for example, greetings, group-references, social sharing) indicators of social presence increased in later course modules. In contrast, Akyol and Garrison (2008) reported that in their study of the

progression of a nine-week graduate course, affective expression indicators of social interaction decreased over the nine weeks, but group cohesion indicators increased. Participants in this study described how feelings of trust developed in the cohort over time, making it easier for cohort members to raise intellectual disagreements with each other, thus deepening their learning.

The passing of time, not just over one course but over a program of study, may affect social presence and how learners choose to present themselves online. Participants described feeling that they needed to prove themselves as being worthy of being in their programs early in their course of studies, and that as they got closer to being finished they felt more conscious of expressing themselves as academics.

The construct of social presence came under scrutiny by Annand (2011), who argued that, "the recurring suggestion of recent [Community of Inquiry]-based empirical research is that social presence is of questionable value in the online higher education learning experience because it does not appear to have an important effect on cognitive presence." While the majority of the learners did describe lived experiences of effective social presence improving their cognitive presence, one participant questioned the value of the cohort model and the requirement for learner-to-learner interaction. This divergent view aligns with Annand's concern that such interactions are not necessary to achieve higher learning outcomes. Garrison (2007) acknowledged that "social presence is less important if the learning activities are knowledge acquisition and there are no collaborative assignments where students can benefit from the perspectives of others" (p. 63). This brings us to consider cognitive presence, the next element in the Community of Inquiry framework.

Online silence and cognitive presence

Within the Community of Inquiry framework, cognitive presence focuses on the development of critical thinking, through a process called the Practical Inquiry Model (Garrison, 2007). This model describes higher level learning as occurring through a four-stage process: a triggering event, followed by periods of exploration and integration, and culminating with resolution. In this process, some of the work is personal and reflective, and some is done through shared dialogue with the community of inquiry as community members work towards resolution (Garrison et al., 1999).

Participants in this study described times of being silent online while they were busy doing research, reading course materials, and letting ideas mature as they digested the content they were learning. Using the Practical Inquiry Model, it could be reasoned that these learners were using silence as a time to integrate course content. Several of the participants noted that they would become silent on discussion threads when the allotted time to discuss that topic was up, regardless of whether or not the question had been fully explored, meaning that the dialogue may have terminated before resolution occurred.

A study by Garrison et al. (2001) echoes these participant experiences. The authors used content analysis to explore the frequency of each of the four components of the Practical Inquiry Model in a week-long transcript of dialogue from a graduate-level health promotions course. They found of the four phases, exploration occurred with the highest frequency (42%), the integration phase was represented in 13% of the coded responses in the transcript, and resolution occurred with the lowest frequency at 4%. Subsequent studies have found similar results, with online dialogue rarely moving past the exploration phase (Garrison, 2007; Swan, Garrison & Richardson, 2009).

Building on the theme of silence within voice, participants were sometimes vague in their posts when they were still forming ideas and opinions. This observation could indicate that learners may speak with muted voices at times during the exploration stage, prior to moving towards integration and resolution.

Participants also experienced professors silencing dialogue if it contained newer ideas or a point of view that differed from the professor's own point of view. Edwards, Perry, and Janzen (2011) investigated qualities of exemplary online educators, and found some evidence that learners valued the sense that instructors were also learning during their online course together. The authors identified "learning with" as an emerging theme in the exemplary instructor-learner relationship. Edwards et al. (2011) note that reciprocity between instructor and learner is missing in the construct of cognitive presence as it is currently articulated in the Community of Inquiry. Schön (1983) describes competent professionals being confronted with unfamiliar, complex, and changing situations and quandaries that require them to use reflection-in-action to construct new ways to frame their thinking.

Finally, the participants' experiences of asynchronous online discussions spreading out horizontally and vertically brings an element of spatiality into cognitive presence. Framing this description in terms of cognitive presence, it could be that horizontal thread development that spreads out over a wider variety of subtopics is more closely linked to the exploration phase, and vertical thread development that goes deep into a single topic is more closely linked to the integration and resolution phases.

Online silence and teaching presence

In the Community of Inquiry framework, teaching presence is "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001, p. 5). Teaching presence also includes focusing the discussion, providing direct feedback, and injecting new knowledge (van Schie, 2008) and is critical for optimization of social and cognitive presence (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2001). As learners are often more comfortable remaining in an exploration mode, teaching presence is necessary to advance the learners towards integration and resolution (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Gorsky & Blau, 2009).

The participants described wanting clear expectations for forum participation and grading rubrics for assignments available. Distance learners' desire for clear expectations was also highlighted by participants in a study by Coppola et al. (2002) that explored pedagogical roles of online instructors using asynchronous course delivery. Coppola et al. found that when teaching online, their participants had a greater need for "precision and a certain formality in laying out expectations for students" (p. 186) than when they were teaching face-to-face.

In the social constructivist learning environment of the Community of Inquiry, both learners and instructors enact the functions of teaching presence. Although Swan (2001) concluded that "interaction with instructors seemed to have a much larger effect on satisfaction and perceived learning than interaction with peers" (pp. 322–323), many of the participants in the present study spoke to experiences of learning from the contributions of their peers, especially those peers who shared relevant life experiences that furthered

relevant pedagogic points. Participants also described taking responsibility for furthering online dialogues, recognizing that when they take the effort to construct careful, well-thought out posts, it makes it easier for the others to respond in kind such that both learners can move forward. Hew et al. (2010) refer to this give-and-take in helping others by contributing ideas as "reciprocity."

At times, peer interactions online can bring about situations of distress and anger; what Xie, Lu, Cheng, and Izmirli (2017) label *conflictual presence* that "involves tension, conflicts, and normalizations to resolve conflicts" (p. 230). Participants in the present study described moving into silence rather than trying to resolve online conflicts that occurred between other learners. The presence of online conflict was a common reason that participants gave for disengaging from the forum. Many spoke to their desire for the instructor to intervene in conflict situations, and they did feel that it was their role as learners to be the intermediary when discord persists online.

Participants appreciated timely responses from their instructors, as well as interactions that felt spontaneous and genuine, findings that reinforce the link between social presence and teaching presence. Delayed and formulaic responses from instructors weaken and sap energy from the online discussion. Participants expressed appreciation of instructors who make efforts to be visibly engaged with the course in dynamic and timely ways. Some participants stated that they liked it when instructors used emoticons, as it added a human element and made it easier to receive the instructor's written constructive feedback. A smiling emoticon accompanying an instructor's critical feedback may help the learner to realize that although the instructor is challenging them, the challenge is not being made in an angry, harsh, or punitive way.

Many of the participants expressed a desire for timely interaction from the instructor, a finding that is consistent with previous research (Gorski & Blau, 2009; Rovai, 2004; Swan, 2002; Thomas et al., 2004; Tu & McIssac, 2002). Effective instructor participation does not need to only happen in the discussion forums; it can also occur in other places such as question-and-answer boards or private emails (Shea, Hayes, & Vickers, 2010). Garrison (2007) states that there is a growing body of evidence that, considered together, strongly supports that "teaching presence is a significant determinate of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community" (p. 67).

From this discussion of the findings in relation to the Community of Inquiry framework, I turn now to present recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

In the process of conducting this study, I became curious about a number of other issues that could become topics for future research. First, one of the voices that was missing from this research was the voice of online instructors. What is their lived experience of silence online? Granger (2011) describes teachers who are accustomed to face-to-face classrooms feeling "silenced" by technology and a social constructivist approach to learning. How else is silence experienced online by distance educators?

Another group that was excluded from this study were distance learners who were not in cohort-based programs. Many of the participants in this study spoke of how connections to members of their cohort helped them through periods of silence and made them feel a greater sense of trust in the learning environment, findings which may have been influenced by the fact that all of the participants had chosen to study in a cohort-based graduate program. What is the experience of silence online like for learners who are not learning in a

cohort structure? As many distance education programs are not based on cohort delivery models, this could be a worthy topic of research.

Another topic for future research is exploration of strategies for terminating online discussions and discussion threads in a way that promotes deep and meaningful learning and learner satisfaction. Participants described being frustrated by online dialogues that ended before a topic was fully explored, often due to impositions of the course schedule and timeline. Research could explore specific instructional design strategies and instructor interventions to promote learner experience of a "genuine fulfilled silence" (Bollnow, 1982, p. 3). Such dialogues would end with the learners feeling satisfied that new insights have emerged from that discourse, or, in Community of Inquiry language, with the attainment of resolution and deep and meaningful learning.

Two topics for future research focus specifically on the Community of Inquiry framework. First, the nature of reciprocity between instructors and learners in the realm of cognitive presence could be explored in more depth. Fruitful topics for further research could be instructor reflection-in-action in distance education, and whether or not instructors should be considered participants in the Community of Inquiry framework's Practical Inquiry Model. Second, how do social, cognitive, and teaching presences change over a program of study such as a masters or doctoral degree? Much of the Community of Inquiry research that examines changes over time has focused only on the timespan of a single course. Given the participants' reflections on how their own experiences of silence and speaking out online have changed as they have progressed from being novice to more seasoned distance learners, it could be worthwhile to investigate if and how the three presences change over a culmination of several courses in a longer program of study.

Finally, as the present study was based on a phenomenological approach, the intent was not to develop a theory or a model to explain or predict learner experience of silence online. However, as such a theory could be beneficial to online instructors and distance learners, another possibility for future research would be to explore online silences with a grounded theory approach to begin to develop a conceptual understanding of this phenomenon. Due to the multi-faceted nature of silence online, conceptualizing it schematically would be a complex undertaking. In the words of Bollnow, "Silence is not one thing at all, but something existing in different forms, of which it is doubtful whether they could be grouped together at all" (1982, p. 1). Despite Bollnow's warning, research on silence that employed a grounded theory approach could be valuable towards conceptualizing the nature of online silence.

Implications for Distance Education

While the findings of a phenomenological study are not meant to be generalized, van Manen argues that they should "foster and strengthen . . . thoughtful and tactful action" (2014, p. 15) in the human science professions. Some of this study's findings may be helpful for those in the distance education community, including educators, learners, instructional designers, and curriculum developers.

A strong message from the findings is that participants valued hearing the instructor's voice, especially when the interactions were timely and helped to further the learning. Participants looked for instructor intervention when conflict emerged online. They appreciated instructor proficiency with the learning management system and instructor innovations that added immediacy to the dialogue, such as posting just-in-time videos that clarified teaching points or offered encouragement.

Another key message for instructors and learners is to be aware that learners described silent times as busy times. Even though these silent times may appear as non-participation, participants described a great deal of course-related activity occurring during those silences. The learners in this study did not criticize "lurking" behaviour in others and offered reasons for why they might elect to watch or listen without posting. Members of distance learning communities should be mindful that the word *lurking*, while commonly used, is not a neutral word. Indeed, the word has negative connotations in its *New Oxford American English Dictionary* (2016) definition, including one who is waiting "in ambush for something" or one who is present in a barely discernable, but "unpleasant" and "threatening" manner. Recognizing the negative undercurrent in the word *lurking*, members of distance learning communities may choose to use words such as *listening* or *vicarious interacting* that have more positive implications.

The theme of silence being present within voice raises several recommendations for distance instructors and learners. Instructors and learners should ensure they have "heard" the intent of questions that are being asked them, and that answers given address the intended question. Learners may feel unintentionally silenced by answers they receive that do not specifically address the questions they asked. Instructors and learners who are contributing to teaching presence need to be mindful to listen for silences online – to pay attention to things that may be "unsaid" and reflect on whether or not some action is needed to allow learners to speak with full voices. Related to this is a recommendation for online instructors to watch for vagueness in learner posts, which could be an indicator that they are in the exploration phase. Learners speaking in vague terms may need some guidance towards integration and resolution, especially if there are time constraints imposed on the

discussion. Garrison (2007) cites evidence that the pervasiveness of exploration (rather than integration and resolution) in learners' posts "may have to do more with aspects of teaching presence, than it is to the other possible factors" (p. 65). Garrison (2007) adds that, while it is important to avoid dominating the discussion, facilitators must "be prepared to provide crucial input to ensure that the community moves towards resolution" (p. 66). If peer facilitators are not providing that crucial input, the instructor may need to step in.

Finally, the theme of silence as demarcation invites members of distance learning communities to reflect on when they have intentionally or unintentionally drawn "boundary lines" in online classrooms. What norms are being enforced by those boundaries? When instructors and facilitators shape discourse online, are there certain ideas or voices that are being silenced, that perhaps do not need to be silenced? These are not easy questions to answer, but will require ongoing reflection. The challenging work involved in understanding learner silences is summarized by Schultz (2010):

> Listening to silence is difficult. It is far easier to . . . read or understand a student's participation through her words. If we think about a student's silence at all, we usually make assumptions . . . without probing the depths of what that silence might mean for that student at that particular time. (p. 2846)

Given the relational nature of silence and participation, and the importance of embodiment within the discussion forum, the implications of this study are perhaps most directly actionable for members of the learning community who are engaged in online discourse. However, the results do have implications also for instructional designers and curriculum developers of online graduate programs. Consideration of temporality informs how courses might be designed to best target where graduate learners are in the trajectory of

their online studies. Distance students who are new to online learning need to learn

strategies for effective embodiment in the digital classroom. Some of this knowledge comes

from instructor modeling (Xin & Feenberg, 2001), but imparting knowledge in this way

takes time. Strategies for effective online communication, such as respecting timelines,

keeping posts succinct, limiting phatic content, and the importance of follow through in

small group activities, should be presented to new online learners early in the program of

study. Questions designed to be answered as introductory first posts in courses that come

later in cohort-based programs should focus more on learning outcomes for the course and

less on establishing personal relationships. Learners should also be encouraged to interact in

other types of social media platforms to foster relationality and experience of the others as

real people, outside of the discussion forums, where people do not need to be present as their

"scholarly" selves.

Curriculum developers should consider ways that online dialogues can continue until

the topic has been explored in a full and meaningful way. Ideally at the conclusion of an

online discourse, learners should feel a sense of satisfaction and that they have developed

new insights from the discourse that have resulted in deep and meaningful learning. Many

online course discussion schedules are set to a week-to-week discussion pattern. Structuring

dialogues to extend horizontally and vertically – in breadth and depth – and to allow time for

disagreements to be respectfully discussed and worked through without tight time pressure to

begin a new topic might foster richness in the dialogue and deter premature cessation. This

goal may require flexibility in the timelines allotted to each discussion.

Curriculum designers may also need to re-think mandatory requirements for posting.

Several of the learners in this study felt pressure at times to speak out even when they had

nothing to contribute. At times they felt that they were not allowed to learn just by following the dialogue and listening. Creative curriculum design should allow learners choice in which dialogues they will engage, allow for them to discuss topics that are both meaningful and relevant to their learning needs and context, and allow for times of learning through listening and vicarious interaction.

Lastly, the learning management system used should notify learners of new discussion threads and allow learners to find discussion forums, and the threaded postings contained in them, easily.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of the study in sections. The first section discussed how the four phenomenological existentials of corporeality, spatiality, temporality and relationality are manifest in asynchronous, text-based interactions. The second section presented the six themes that emerged from the iterative whole-part-whole interpretation of the participants' interviews. I concluded the chapter by summarizing new understandings of learner experience of silence online that emerged from the study, linking the findings to the Community of Inquiry framework, presenting opportunities for future research, and suggesting practical applications for members of online learning communities. In the next chapter, I draw the study to a close with a summary of the research and some final reflections.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

This chapter brings the study to conclusion with a summary of the research and some final reflections on the process of doing the research and writing the dissertation.

Summary of Research

In this study, my intent was to investigate the nature of online silences for distance learners who were undertaking graduate studies in a cohort-based, online program. This topic was of interest to me due to my own experiences as a distance learner and distance educator. The main research question – *What are the lived experiences of online silence for learners who are members of distance learning communities?* – led my exploration of how distance learners experience the phenomenon of silence online.

In line with a social constructivist world view, I used phenomenology of practice, an interpretive and applied phenomenological approach, to guide my research methodology. Using a semi-structured format, I interviewed 12 post-secondary distance learners about their lived experiences of silence online. The participants were forthcoming in their interviews and generous in sharing their experiences with me. I interviewed most of the participants twice, and from the final 22 interviews I obtained thick, richly descriptive data about lived experiences of the phenomenon of silence online.

I carefully transcribed each interview and used iterative rounds of a whole-part-whole interpretive process to identify key features of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as examples of participant descriptions of each of the four phenomenological existentials: lived body (corporeality), lived space (spatiality), lived time (temporality), and lived relationship with others (relationality).

Following each interview, and during each iterative round of interpretation, I engaged in intensive journaling to reflect on my developing understanding of the phenomenon of online silence as well as various aspects of the unfolding research process.

For this group of participants, online silence was a complex, shape-shifting phenomenon, one that the participants both enacted (by being silent) and received (by experiencing silence from others). When participants did speak out online, their posts were deliberate, carefully crafted in tone, and composed with consideration of how they might be received by others. Speaking out online was done sometimes in muted voice, as participants chose at times to leave some things unsaid in their responses. At times, the online dialogues felt stilted and formal, but there were moments that the online discussions became more playful and spontaneous in nature. Most of the participants described feeling connected to their cohort. They related to their cohort members as people and had established trust with them. Some participants noted that this feeling of connection helped to abate negative feelings that might otherwise arise in response to experiencing silence from others.

Participants readily gave detailed descriptions of how they experienced corporeality, spatiality, temporality, and relationality in the online learning environment. Participants used language that implied physical embodiment though words in the discussion forum and described how online spaces had characteristics of physical spaces. They described experiences of working together asynchronously from different time zones and told me how their experiences of silence online had changed over time. The majority of the participants spoke to the importance of maintaining harmonious working relationships with others in the distance learning community.

Following the iterative process of interpreting the data, six themes emerged: (1) Learners enact purposeful silence; (2) Learners absorb silence from others; (3) Learners perceive, and use, silence as demarcation; (4) Learners experience silence within voice; (5) Learners use deliberate, complex strategies while engaging in online discourse; and (6) Learners hear each other in trusted community. These six themes reflect the multi-faceted and polymorphous nature of the participants' experiences of silence online.

Final Reflections

I arrive at this section of the dissertation with mixed emotions that include excitement, fatigue, and gratitude. The process of completing this dissertation has been a long one, with unexpected turns and many discoveries along the way. Having considered the lived experiences of the participants, I turn now to reflect on my own lived experience of completing this doctoral research study. Foremost in my mind is an awareness of lived time. At the study's outset, I was an experienced distance learner and online instructor. I had conducted quantitative research, but was aware that my own ontological and epistemological leanings were more in line with social constructivist approaches. I wanted to conduct qualitative research for my doctoral research and was excited about learning about this form of inquiry. I was eager to hear the individual voices behind the data and to be able to use repeated interviews and an iterative process of interpreting the data to go both broad and deep in my exploration of the phenomenon.

Sitting now in the sunshine of summer, I think back to the passing of the seasons as I have been conducting this research. This study has been a constant companion from last autumn, when I was immersed in gathering data while leaves fell from the trees and the days grew noticeably shorter, through the dreary dampness of a Vancouver Island winter when

my favourite writing and reflecting spot was in front of the woodstove, to springtime when I was delighted to be distracted by the arrival of the first hummingbirds at the feeder. My 50th birthday was spent conducting participant interviews and working on transcriptions; on my 51st birthday I was immersed in writing revisions to the manuscript. Working part-time allowed me several long days during the week to focus on writing and research. The rhythm of those days was dictated by moments of inspiration punctuated by times of writer's block, during which I would do household chores or make another pot of coffee and wait for the insights to flow again. Switching between journaling on my laptop and journaling by hand in a paper notebook could also induce new insights into the interpretive process. This time of thinking, writing, and reflection has been precious to me.

I reflect, too, on how the process of conducting this research influenced my experience of lived relationship to others. I have appreciated the support of my family, my supervisor, my colleague who worked with me as a peer reviewer, and my cohort of doctoral students. I have become more cognizant of how my online interactions might influence connections maintained by distance. I have also been mindful of the importance of nurturing relationships with my family and friends closer to home. There have been moments that I knew it was time to put the books and computer away, and spend time focused on the important people around me.

When one reads a well-written qualitative study, the research seems "easy." As when watching skilled dancers waltz or when listening to an accomplished musician play, a reader who has not conducted qualitative research can underestimate the amount of planning, determination, and plain hard work that is required. Elements of the research process that seemed straightforward before I actually tried to do them, such as assigning pseudonyms and

identifying themes, proved to be more challenging than I had initially anticipated. The work

has also been fulfilling and enjoyable. It was immensely satisfying to be able to dig deeply

into the lived experience of online learners and to give context and add individual voices to

the phenomenon under study. I am tremendously grateful for having had the opportunity to

do this work, and for the people who supported me along the way.

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Appendix A: Office of Research Ethics Letter of Approval

From: gleicht@athabascau.ca
Subject: **Support from the AVPSAS for access to participants**
Date: July 18, 2016 at 7:31:35 AM PDT
To: "Ms. Leslie Duran (Principal Investigator)" <lesliejduran@gmail.com>
Cc: "Dr. Dianne Conrad (Supervisor)" <diannec@athabascau.ca>, gleicht@athabascau.ca

Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

July 18, 2016

Ms. Leslie Duran
Centre for Distance Education\Doctor of Education in Distance Education
Athabasca University

File # 22256
Project Title: Learner Experience of Silence in the Online Classroom

Dear Leslie Duran,

Thank you for forwarding Dr. May's email support for your research project. You may proceed with your data collection. We wish you well as you complete your research.

Sincerely,

Gail

Gail Leicht
Research Ethics Officer
Office of Research Ethics
Athabasca University

Email: rebsec@athabascau.ca
Phone: 1.800.788.9041, ext. 6718

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flyer

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

I am looking for volunteers who are cohort-based distance learners to take part in a study of the experience of silence in online classrooms.

As a participant in this study, you would be interviewed about your experiences of silence as a learner during an online course or courses.

Your participation is **entirely voluntary** and would take a total of approximately 90 minutes of your time, spread over two sessions. By participating in this study you will help us to better understand how distance learners experience silence in online classrooms where the instructor and other learners are not visible to you and not present at the same time as you.

To learn more about this study, or to participate in this study, please contact:

Principal Investigator:

Leslie Duran

email: leslie.duran@shaw.ca

phone: 250-334-0031

This study is supervised by:

Dianne Conrad, PhD

Email: diannec@athabascau.ca

This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board.

Athabasca University

Appendix C: Letter of Information/ Informed Consent Form

LETTER OF INFORMATION / INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Learner Experience of Silence in the Online Classroom

March 14, 2016

Principal Investigator (Researcher):	**Supervisor:**
Leslie Duran, M.S.	Dianne Conrad, PhD
6354 Treherne Road	Centre for Distance Education
Courtenay, BC V9J 1V5	Athabasca University
lesliejduran@gmail.com	1 University Drive
	Athabasca AB T9S 3A3
	diannec@athabascau.ca

Dear Distance Education Learner,

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled *Learner Experience of Silence in the Online Classroom.*

My name is Leslie Duran and I am a doctoral student at Athabasca University. As a requirement to complete my degree, I am conducting a research project about students' experiences of silence in online classrooms where non-verbal cues such as body position and facial expression are missing. I am conducting this project under the supervision of Dianne Conrad.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. The information presented should tell you what this research is about and what your participation will involve, should you choose to participate. Take time to read this carefully as it is important that you understand what I am asking of you. Please contact the principal investigator, Leslie Duran, if you have any questions about the project or would like more information before you consent to participate. You may also contact my research supervisor Dianne Conrad if you have questions.

If you choose not to take part, or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you now, or in the future, and any data collected from you will immediately be destroyed.

Why are you being asked to take part in this research project?
You are being invited to participate in this project because you have been identified as someone who is a post-secondary student in a cohort-based distance education course or program of study.

What is the purpose of this research project?
This is a qualitative research project investigating learner experiences of silence in online classrooms. The topic of silence in traditional face-to-face classrooms has received considerable attention from researchers, but much less is known about the experience of silence in virtual classrooms where communication is often text-based and asynchronous.

The purpose of this research is to explore the experience and meaning of online silence as a phenomenon lived by online learners.

The main research question in the project is, "What are the lived experiences of online silence for learners who are members of distance learning communities?" The project will also explore the following related issues:

1. How do learners know when they are experiencing silence, either from themselves or others, in an online learning community?
2. In what ways do learners experience silence as beneficial in an online learning community?
3. In what ways do learners experience silence as detrimental in an online learning community?

What will you be asked to do?
If you agree to participate, I will interview you, ideally in person at a location you use when you are accessing the online course, such as your home, office, or a coffee shop. The interview will be loosely structured, more like a conversation than a formal question-and-answer session. The interview should last approximately 60 minutes.

After the in-person interview, I would like to conduct a shorter (up to 30 minutes) follow up interview with you two to four weeks later at a time that is convenient for you. This follow up interview could occur in person or by phone, computer-mediated video call, or asynchronously by email, whichever is most convenient for you. If the follow-up interview occurs by phone, I will cover the cost of any long-distance fees incurred for the call.

Oral interviews will be audio- recorded and I will make a written transcript of the interview afterwards. You may review the transcripts of your interview(s) to check for accuracy and to correct transcription errors and clarify your comments if needed.

I will also ask you for a limited amount of demographic data, including your age, gender, whether or not English is your first language, the length of time you have been enrolled in distance education, your field or discipline of study, the number of people in your cohort, and the intended outcome of your study (for example, master's degree or professional certification). You may choose to not answer any of these demographic questions if you do not wish to provide that information.

What are the risks and benefits?
As a participant in this study, you can choose what information you wish to disclose or not disclose. The research questions will be focused on experiences you have had of being silent or of feeling silence from others during your online coursework. It is not my intent as the researcher to evoke negative feelings during the interview and I will be mindful of this during the interview. The benefits of this project are to improve understanding of silence in online classroom environments to improve the experience of teaching and learning online.

Do you have to take part in this project?
Involvement in this project is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your consent to participate, including the right to stop the interview at any point, or to request that a certain comment or discussion not be included in the transcript or used in the analysis. If you decide to stop your interview, you may also request that data gathered from you prior to that point not be used in the research.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected?
As a participant in this project, your privacy and confidentiality will be protected in the following ways:
- You will not be identified by name in the project.
- Your location and the institution at which you are studying will not be identified in the project.

How will confidentiality be maintained?
Confidentiality refers to the ethical obligation for researchers to safeguard participants' identifying information, such as name or description of physical appearance, from unauthorized access and misuse. Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure confidentiality.   You will not be identified in publications. All participants will be given a pseudonym that will be used if there is a need to refer to a specific participant in the written version of the final project.

How will the data collected be stored?
All data, both audio and written, will be stored safely in a locked cabinet. I will be the only person with access to data.

At this point there are no plans for future secondary use of the data. In the event that the researcher proposes a subsequent later project, any secondary use of this data will require further Research and Ethics Board approval. Additionally, any secondary use of this data would be in accordance with the guidelines set out by the Tri-Council Policy statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, available at
http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/default.aspx

Who will receive the results of the research project?
The research will be listed in an abstract posted online at the Athabasca University Library's Digital Thesis and Project Room and the final research paper will be publicly available at
https://dt.athabascau.ca/jspui/

Who can you contact for more information or to indicate your interest in participating in the research project?
Thank you for considering this invitation. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me at leslie.duran@gmail.com or by phone at 250-334-0031; or my supervisor at diannec@athabascau.ca. If you are ready to participate in this project, please complete and sign the attached Consent Form and return it by scanning it and emailing it to me at lesliejduran@gmail.com or by mail to this address:

    Leslie Duran
    6354 Treherne Road
    Courtenay, BC V9J 1V5

Thank you,

Leslie Duran

This project has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this project, please contact the Research Ethics Office by e-mail at rebsec@athabascau.ca or by telephone at 1-800-788-9041, ext. 6718.

Informed Consent:
Your signature on this form means that:
- You have read the information about the research project.
- You have been able to ask questions about this project.
- You are satisfied with the answers to any questions you may have had.
- You understand what the research project is about and what you will be asked to do.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw your participation in the research project without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now, or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end your participation **during** data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be retained by the researcher, unless you indicate otherwise.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw **after** data collection has ended, your data can be removed from the project at your request, up to midnight on November 31, 2016.

	YES	NO
I agree to be audio-recorded	◯	◯
I agree to the use of direct anonymous quotations	◯	◯
I would like to review the transcripts of my interview(s) to make sure my comments were accurately transcribed.	◯	◯

Your signature confirms:
- You have read what this research project is about and understood the risks and benefits. You have had time to think about participating in the project and had the opportunity to ask questions and have those questions answered to your satisfaction.

- You understand that participating in the project is entirely voluntary and that you may end your participation at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.

- You have been given a copy of this Informed Consent form for your records; and

- You agree to participate in this research project.

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

Principal Investigator's Signature:
  I have explained this project to the best of my ability. I invited questions and responded to any that were asked. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in participating in the research project, any potential risks and that he or she has freely chosen to participate.

_____   _____
Signature of Principal Investigator   Date

Appendix D: Sample Interview Prompts

Describe (tell me a story about) a time when you felt you were experiencing silence online.

What did that experience feel like?

Tell me about a time when you thought about posting something online, but didn't end up
doing so.

Tell me about a time when you had prepared or written something to post, but deliberately
waited for a period of time before you did so.

Describe (tell me a story about) a time when you felt that someone else (an instructor, a
learner) was being silent online.

Can you describe (tell me a story about) a time that you did not initiate or reply to a post,
even though you felt you "should?"

Can you tell me about a time that a certain topic influenced your decision to speak out, or to
remain silent?

Probes into lifeworld (spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality/communality):

Where were you? What did being in that space, at that moment, feel like?

Did you notice any physical or emotional reactions during this experience?

Did you notice that you experience time differently while this event was happening?

During the experience, how were you feeling about the other person(s) involved?

Appendix E: Decision Points During Data Interpretation, and References Consulted

Decision point	References consulted
Location and interface of interviews (face-to-face, phone, web meeting)	Herzog, 2012
Transcribing interviews	Corden & Sainsbury, 2006 Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005 Poland, 1995
"Outlier" participant perspectives in qualitative research	Bazeley, 2009 McPherson & Thorne, 2006
Order of reading line-by-line: Iterations by individual interview or sequential over the whole group?	Vagle, 2014
Assigning pseudonyms	Allen & Wiles, 2016 Corden & Sainsbury, 2006 Lahman et al., 2015
Selecting, editing, and formatting participant quotes	Corden & Sainsbury, 2006 van Manen, 2014

Appendix F: Definition of Terms

Amotivation: Absence of motivation

Bridling: From reflective lifeworld phenomenology, a strategy remaining open by reining-in, but not completely closing off, researcher judgements, interpretations, and pre-conceived ideas about a phenomenon being explored

Cognitive presence: Construct of the Community of Inquiry framework. The extent to which learners are able to construct deep and meaningful learning through sustained interaction.

Corporeality: One of the four phenomenological existentials. Addresses how the phenomenon is sensed, perceived, and felt in one's body. Also known as *lived body*

Epoché: From Husserlian phenomenology, a means of purposively turning away from conceptualizations and pre-conceived ideas about the phenomena in question: also known as *reduction* or *bracketing.*

Eidetic reduction: (also known as eidos or essence) phenomenological researcher's method of reflectively becoming aware of aspects of a phenomenon that are invariant and make it unique from other experiences

External regulation: A type of external motivation where learners compliant due to rewards or punishments

Four phenomenological existentials: Corporeality, Relationality, Spatiality, and Temporality. The contexts through which people experience phenomena

Free-rider effect: Little motivation to participate in a group discussion when members

believe that the group's efforts are sufficient without their input

Hermeneutic reduction: reflective method used by phenomenological researchers to give

attention to any assumptions that emerge when writing the manuscript

Heuristic reduction: method used by phenomenological researchers to maintain a sense of

openness and wonder towards the phenomenon under investigation, including

bringing that sense of wonder to the reader in the final manuscript

Identified regulation: A type of external motivation where learners are compliant with a task

as a means to an end

Imposter syndrome: A feeling of intellectual inferiority or incompetence, or of not being

truly qualified to perform a certain role or task, despite evidence to the contrary

Integration: An autonomous type of extrinsic motivation, where learners are engaged

because the activity has significance to their self-identity

Intentionality: The phenomenological construct that there is a connectedness between

subjects and objects

Intrinsic motivation: Self-directed, autonomous motivation

Introjection: A type of external motivation where learners comply to demands because of the

expectations of others

Phenomenology of practice: Phenomenological inquiry geared towards professional

practitioners such as those in education and the applied human sciences. Also known

as *applied phenomenology*

Reductio: a means of purposively turning away from conceptualizations and pre-conceived

ideas about the phenomena in question: also known as *epoché* or *bracketing.*

Relationality: One of the four phenomenological existentials. Human experience as we

encounter others; the relational aspects of human experience. Also known as *lived*

relationship to others, *communality*, or *lived self-other*

Social loafing: Occurs when a group member feels anonymous within the group and tries to

benefit from the group while minimizing their own participation

Social presence: From the Community of Inquiry framework; ability of members of the

community of inquiry to express their personalities and personhood in the online

environment

Spatiality: One of the four phenomenological existentials. Human experience that considers

how environment interacts with the experience of the phenomenon. Also known as

lived space

Sucker effect: Occurs when active group participants reduce their participation to avoid being

exploited by group members who are not contributing (see *free-rider effect*)

Teaching presence: From the Community of Inquiry framework; design and facilitation of

the online educational experience

Temporality: One of the four phenomenological existentials. Human experience that reflects

how different aspects of time relate to the phenomenon. Also known as *lived time*

Vicarious interaction: Participating in a group by observing and internally processing the

interactions of others

Vocatio: carefully crafted writing that gives voice to the pre-reflective experience of the

phenomenon

Witness learners: Distance students who do not actively contribute to online discussions, but

who work behind the scenes on course activities and do learn as a result.