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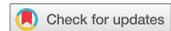
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Students' perceptions of learning about qualitative inquiry in online contexts

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a 2-year study of online coursework in a graduate certificate program in qualitative research methods in the USA. Thirty-four interviews with students enrolled in coursework offered over a 2-year period were analyzed to explore their perceptions of engagement with the course content and one another. Findings are related to student perceptions of their learning to (1) value the course design and structure, (2) make authentic connections in the absence of physical proximity, and (3) appreciate feedback from others.

These themes are considered in light of principles of qualitative pedagogy outlined by scholars of qualitative methods, and the community of inquiry (CoI) model, in which social, cognitive, and teacher presence support student learning. Findings provide insight into the processes by which students' engagement with course content and interactions with instructor and peers contribute to the development of a CoI involving cognitive, social, and teacher presence. Although the learning context described in this study pertains to teaching graduate-level qualitative research methods, findings are relevant to teachers of other subject areas.

Studies of student perceptions of online coursework report contradictory findings. Some students deliberately avoid taking online courses (Pope & Rahmatian, 2013), due to the perception that online courses are of lesser quality (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011; Platt, Raile, & Yu, 2014) or are more challenging (Chou, 2013; Otter et al., 2013). Other studies indicate some students prefer online classes with the belief they are more convenient and flexible, or offer a better learning environment (Burns, 2013; Jorissen, Keen, & Riedel, 2015). Success in online programs has been related to a variety of student characteristics, including high levels of internal motivation (Bekele, 2010), self-control, metacognitive skills, and ability to self-regulate (Lee, Choi, & Kim, 2013), self-direct, and follow course guidelines (Chou, 2013). Consistent and strong course design was found to impact student success (Fayer, 2014; Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Young & Norgard, 2006), with students rating online courses with greater "findability" higher in quality (Simunich, Robins, & Kelly, 2015).

As they gain experience, students become more comfortable in online environments (Young & Norgard, 2006). Student presence, achievement, satisfaction, and motivation

have been positively impacted when podcasts (Bolliger, Supanakorn, & Boggs, 2010), audio, and video (Borup, West, & Graham, 2013; Borup, West, Thomas, & Graham, 2014; Draus, Curran, & Trempus, 2014; Han, 2013) are integrated into the courses. Students express higher degrees of satisfaction when they receive timely, consistent communication from the instructor (Fayer, 2014; Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Young & Norgard, 2006), and sufficient technical and instructional support (Fayer, 2014; Young & Norgard, 2006).

Online courses still rely primarily on asynchronous discussion forums for inter-action to enable students and instructors to participate when most convenient. Research has investigated best practices for building community in such spaces, finding that focused effort and time is needed for students to generate intellectually and socially attractive posts (Beth, Jordan, Schallert, Reed, & Kim, 2015). Researchers found that students perceive the quantity and quality of online discussions to be of higher quality than face-to-face discussions (e.g., Barnett-Queen, Blair, & Merrick, 2005). Consistency in course structure, instructor communication, and learning from the diverse opinions of other students has been found to foster a sense of community (Deale & White, 2012).

Teaching qualitative research methods online

The literature on teaching qualitative research methods reflects interdisciplinary perspectives (for a review, see Cooper, Chenail, & Fleming, 2012). While scholars have outlined different approaches to teaching qualitative inquiry (Hammersley, 2004; Lather, 2006) and proposed innovative pedagogical approaches (Hsiung, 2016; Kuby et al., 2016; Wolgemuth, 2015), face-to-face delivery of instruction is typically assumed.

A growing number of articles report how qualitative research methods have been taught online (Bender & Hill, 2016; Hunter, Ortloff, & Winkle-Wagner, 2014; Maggio, Chenail, & Todd, 2001; Miskovic & Lyutykh, 2017; Ryen, 2009) but are typically descrip-tive accounts of practice and the challenges encountered, rather than data-driven studies. While these studies contribute models for practice, they are often limited to instructors' perspectives.

A well-organized course with frequent opportunities for interaction, timely instruc-tor feedback, and familiar technologies has been found to lead to positive experiences. If students experience technical difficulties, feel isolated, or perceive that the online course is less rigorous, a course will typically be perceived as less rewarding. As a contribution to the body of descriptive accounts of online courses, this article reports findings from a qualitative study examining students' perspectives of the online delivery of qualitative coursework over a 2-year period in a graduate qualitative certificate program in the USA.

Conceptual framework

The community of inquiry (CoI) model, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000, 2001) and later extended by Garrison and Vaughan (2008), describes how social,

teaching, and cognitive presence work together to create effective online instruction. Armellini and De Stefani (2016) argued that social presence is the *central* construct of the CoI framework, serving as the key link between teaching presence and cognitive presence in the delivery of online coursework. Informed by this adapted CoI framework, this study examined students' perceptions of their learning in online qualitative research method courses.

Pedagogical approach

Hunter et al. (2014, p. 2) assert that the teaching of qualitative research methods online "*should not* fundamentally differ by format because the epistemological (way of knowing) and ontological (body of knowledge) suppositions of qualitative research require a format that is interactive, engaging, and reflective." To this end, we have adopted the concept of *qualitative pedagogy* (Preissle & deMarrais, 2011) to guide the instructional design of online courses. Qualitative pedagogy aims to be responsive, reflexive, recursive, reflective, and contextual to mirror ways of being needed to conduct qualitative research. In teaching qualitative inquiry, *being responsive* means facilitating the development of a community in which students are in relationship as they engage in activities to prepare, practice, and critique qualitative research tasks. *Being recursive* means using multiple tools and strategies in an interactive way throughout the life of the course. To develop a mind-set of *being reflexive* entails using activities that require students and instructors to examine their assumptions, experiences, and worldviews related to both the course content and one another. *Being reflective* in teaching qualitative inquiry means the practices as an instructor or a student of performing selves that are authentic, reflective, and open to learning about other points of view that may challenge one's own. To *be contextual*, the content and delivery of a particular course takes into account what is going on in the lives of students, instructors, and the larger world.

Context of the study

Fully online coursework in our graduate certificate program began in 2014. The university's learning management system (LMS, Desire2Learn) used to share course materials and engage in asynchronous discussions was supplemented with virtual meetings in Adobe Connect for instruction, office hours, guest presentations, and small group discussions. The research team included three faculty members involved in the design, development, and teaching of courses and doctoral students who assisted with interviewing, analysis, and transcription.

Research design and methods

Guided by a constructivist epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 2013), this study used an embedded case study design (Yin, 2009) to examine the experiences of students in the first 2 years of program implementation. Data included faculty interviews (Roulston, deMarrais, & Paulus, 2017), student interviews, asynchronous discussion posts, and course materials. This study was guided by the following research

Table 1. Summary of courses and participants for student interviews.

Semester	Course	Abbreviation used	No. of participants
Fall 2014	Qualitative Research Traditions	QRT	5
Spring 2015	Qualitative Research Design	QRD	5
Summer 2015	Case Study Research	CSR	6
Fall 2015	Qualitative Data Analysis	QDA	4
Spring 2016	Teaching Qualitative Research	TQR	4
Summer 2016	Digital Tools and Technologies	DTT	10

question: What are student perceptions of learning while engaged in fully online modes for delivery of coursework in qualitative research methods? Findings report on analysis of 34 semi-structured interviews with 31 students across six courses (see Table 1).

Interviews were conducted after the conclusion of each course by a member of the research team not affiliated with that course. Although the intended audience for the online program was students at a distance, all but two participants were enrolled in on-campus programs. All but three participants were doctoral students from nine colleges and schools across campus. Seven men and 24 women were interviewed. One woman volunteered to be interviewed after every course and provided insights across the courses that were useful in our analysis. Participants had a range of experience with online courses —10 were taking a fully online course for the first time while 8 had online teaching experience. Students chose to take online courses for a variety of reasons—reduced travel time to campus, the desire to study under a particular instructor, perceived convenience, and a desire to work at their own pace.

The first author began data analysis by defining preliminary codes (Saldaña, 2013) for the transcripts of interviews conducted with students in the first two courses. Preliminary codes were distributed to the research team for review. Subsequent interviews were distributed among members of the research team for coding. As additional codes were created, the first author tracked the analysis using a master project file in NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software. The first and second authors took responsibility for coding the remainder of the data. Themes were developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), discussed, and revised by team members. The data were searched for negative or discrepant cases.

Findings

Students perceived their experiences of the online courses as learning to (1) value the course design and structure, (2) make authentic connections in the absence of physical proximity, and (3) appreciate feedback from others.

Learning to value the course design and structure

Students valued these online courses because they were well organized and helped them to understand instructor expectations through well-defined instructions with clearly stated assessment criteria. Only one student reported negative perceptions of online delivery, asserting that she learned better face to face. Students reported it was easy to feel overwhelmed by the pace and volume of readings and discussions,

especially if the course was offered in a short summer session. These challenges were minimized when materials to fulfill course requirements were easily located (i.e., "findability"). Since the LMS served as a persistent repository of communication and shared resources, students appreciated being able to revisit material posted earlier in the course. Laura[1] (QDA) mentioned how the format allowed her to keep track of additional resources she would likely miss in face-to-face discussions: "you actually have … a whole boatload of information that you can refer back to the conversation which I thought was pretty important." Jackie (QRD) appreciated the organization of the course, explaining: "… once I got in the routine of that structure, it stayed with me. And I think it was a good thing that deadlines were consistent within that.[2] … I really liked that it was highly organized and structured." Where most students appreciated a consistent weekly format, two felt that the repetition was "tedious." This points to the need to vary activities within the consistent structure to counter what some perceive to be tiresome repetition.

Although students' management of their weekly schedules was largely guided by the course design, students reported getting off track when something unexpected occurred personally or professionally, or if they missed or misinterpreted weekly directions. Students described instructors' use of multiple methods for providing guidance and reminders (e.g., video, audio, text, with updates in news items or email) as helpful.

The online courses were designed so that each activity was directly connected to the final cumulative assignment in the course. Rowena (DQR) described how the structure of the course enabled her to apply weekly tasks toward the final paper requirements:

> the structure of building towards the final paper was really good …. the final paper was long, and might have seemed really overwhelming, but it was really great how the modules structured us towards that, and when it came time to write the final paper …. we were able to put all those components together.

Students expressed satisfaction that the coursework prepared them for thesis and dissertation work. Some students even felt better prepared to teach online themselves. For example, Alice (QRT) reported that she realized what a "really well-designed online learning experience can be."

Learning to make authentic connections

The courses required students to interact regularly with peers and the instructor in asynchronous formats. Students noted that they desired these authentic interactions. Students who expressed a need to be known in an embodied way reported visiting their instructors in person and meeting with classmates in person for group work assignments.

Synchronous meetings were provided, but optional, for all but one course. Students who did not attend synchronous meetings cited reasons such as scheduling conflicts, the

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[1]Pseudonyms are used throughout.
[2]Excerpts have been edited for clarity. Three periods (…) indicate one word omitted; four periods (….) indicate several words omitted; and words such as "you know" and "um" have been omitted.

lengthy time commitment, the ability to view the recorded sessions later, and the belief that the sessions were not critical. Several students who attended the synchronous meetings said they simulated face-to-face experiences effectively. For example, Erin (CSR) noted that "I loved that part of it because I heard what the other person was …. thinking …. and, that was very valuable," while Samantha (DTT) commented the synchronous meetings brought a lot of accountability to the class, and she felt "left out" when she missed two of the meetings. James (DTT) commented:

> The weekly … lectures we attended, the face-to-face and small group work we did in that class — all through online with webcams and audio really blew my mind. I had, before this course, not even really understood some of the advances that we have with technology and how … you can create these very intimate …. communities of inquiry, no matter where you are just through the use of these digital tools.

Attending synchronous meetings enabled James to "have a sense of familiarity with [my] peers in the class. I think it really helped to cement my learning to be able to do these small groups."

Whatever preference students expressed for engaging in synchronous meetings, they had to learn how to authentically engage in the asynchronous discussion forums. For active engagement to occur asynchronously, students needed to encourage others to make a personal connection with them (e.g., by adding photos, sharing personal information, or posting in unique ways). Students followed guidelines to craft "memorable headers" to encourage their classmates to read their posts and utilized emoticons to help others interpret posts and avoid misunderstandings. Still, Gloria (TQR) mentioned:

> There were misunderstandings in the class …. Because we didn't actually know if we were joking or what tone of voice we would read a post …. So that was …. a bit challenging I guess. There were moments of panic and worry that whatever you wrote could be misconstrued.

Writing in online spaces involved demonstrating one's understanding and application of the course concepts and crafting sensitive responses to others' work. Being able to engage constructively with others required what Ryan (QDA) described as an "empathetic stance"—being able to "read things through other people's eyes."

Some students commented that online discussions and peer reviews of others' work pushed them to think at a deeper level. Laura (QDA) commented: "There is a skill that you learn in an online environment that you actually have to think about it before you start communicating and writing." Students recognized the accountability involved in writing in discussion forums—since these became part of the permanent class record. Students described this as challenging, since they feared they would be perceived differently than they were face to face. For example, Rebecca (DTT) noted she was reluctant to post her ideas, since "I feel like now there's a record and I could be … held to this idea that maybe… wasn't well thought out." James (DTT) explained it was a "hard lesson" for him to learn how to communicate asynchronously: "sometimes I would be anxious to actually respond to people's posts because I didn't want to offend anyone, or I wanted to say the right thing, or I wanted to sound like an intelligent person."

Two students discussed how they perceived discussions as plagued by a sense of inauthenticity when students failed to read others' work carefully or take time and effort to craft thoughtful posts. For example, Carol (CSR) observed:

> I think it was a little easier in some cases to sort of fake your response to the other person and …. as we went on I could sense that the responses were a little more surface level as everybody was getting stressed and deadlines were happening.

If posts were seen as lacking in authenticity or if students did not adequately respond to others' questions and comments, participants reported that they stopped engaging with that student.

Students who did not engage authentically in the discussions expressed frustration. For example, Harper (TQR) routinely posted close to the deadlines and felt overwhelmed by the number of unread messages. She described how she was able to "deceive people" by opening posts to ensure that they showed up in the tracking system available to the instructor as "read," although she had not actually read them. Harper acknowledged this strategy did not help her manage or enjoy the discussions. Carol (CSR) talked about searching through the discussion threads with an intent only to read the instructor's posts, admitting that "I wouldn't read all the other stuff, but I would look for [the professor's posts] because generally what she said could be extracted beyond that particular person." Her classmate, Tiffany, quickly abandoned a similar approach, since "it didn't make any sense" to read the instructor responses without first reading other students' posts. When students failed to engage authentically in reading and responding to others' work, learning opportunities were missed.

The ways in which synchronous and asynchronous communications were integrated into the course design provided the context in which students were encouraged to develop a sense of community. Yet, for this to occur, students had to engage with one another in authentic ways for that community to develop.

Learning to appreciate feedback from others

Students wanted instructors to let them know that they were "on the right track" with respect to the course expectations. Interviewees expressed gratitude for the degree of involvement and feedback provided by the instructors, emphasizing instructor responsiveness as essential, and criticizing other online courses that lacked instructor presence. In most cases, students felt comfortable asking questions of the instructor, and appreciated discussion forums designated for asking questions about content or technical issues. Some students noted that it was difficult to ask questions in this context. Students' tolerance for delays in answers to questions posed to the instructor was low. When asked what a reasonable time would be, two said, "within 24 hours," while recognizing that instructors have other responsibilities.

Students appreciated feedback from their peers. Gemma (QDA) said: "I felt like they had real conversations going too, not just a required minimum post and maybe a response, 'Hey thanks for the comment' and that kind of thing." Gloria (TQR) reported: "I got really good encouraging feedback which was awesome because that gets me inspired to be creative and innovative." Several students expressed some anxiety in monitoring others' responses to their posts. For example, Emily (QRD) commented:

> that's another part [of the LMS] where you could look at [the number of views], "Oh my goodness, no one is looking at my stuff." Or you could look at it and say, "Wow, a lot of

people have read this, but nobody has commented." So that puts your mind frame in a totally different place.[3]

Students experienced self-doubt when their posts received few or no responses. For example, Hannah (QDA) questioned herself: "I felt like, am I wrong to write something or was my idea not good to this course? My idea[s are] not clear to others?"

Bethany appreciated that the CSR instructor did not "take over in giving feedback," but rather "let people say what they need[ed] to." This viewpoint was shared by others. Although students appreciated instructor feedback, they did not rely solely on the instructor and expressed appreciation when students' discussions developed "organically." For example, Paige (DTT) commented: "I felt like [the instructor] was accessible, but I felt like I should ask my peers first"; and Paul (QRT) appreciated the "wide variety of both interests and background in the class and so I think that …. each of us had a great deal of things to offer; but also a great deal of things to learn from the other people." Dawn (TQR) perceived interaction with peers positively, commenting that "[the instructor] put the … tools in place for that [discussions that happen organically] to happen, but we [students] kind of jumped on board and made it our own space if you will."

Thus, students responded positively to both instructor and peer feedback in the online courses and expressed negative perceptions of coursework in which instructors were not as actively involved. Students came to appreciate peer feedback and did not rely solely on instructors to provide responses.

Discussion

We next discuss our findings in light of Preissle and deMarrais' (2011, 2015) principles of qualitative pedagogy and Garrison et al.'s (2000, 2001) CoI model, revised by Armellini and De Stefani (2016) (see Table 2).

The principle of *being responsive* is the idea of "being in relationship" with others. This is important not only for conducting qualitative research, but for online learning. We see being responsive as aligned with Garrison et al.'s (2000, 2001) CoI model writ large—in which social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence work together to create optimal conditions for leaning online—and by extension, for being present in doing qualitative research. This aspect aligns with the centrality of social presence proposed by Armellini and De Stefani (2016) in their revised CoI model.

Students are oriented to others' online presence and some wanted to be known by instructors and peers in an embodied way. In *being responsive*, the instructor should both model and encourage students to be authentic in how they represent themselves online. This could entail posting personal photos and/or videos, use of synchronous meetings, and sharing personal details in order to display presence. This always entails risk-taking as there is the potential to be misunderstood—especially when engaging around sensitive topics which can generate disagreement. Further research concerning how these kinds of conversations might be facilitated is warranted.

The course design, structure, and instructor feedback all functioned as a type of teaching presence. Research, like learning, is *recursive*. Thus, the cycles inherent in these online courses

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[3]Here, the interviewee is referring to the number of "views" and the number of "replies" that are visible on each discussion thread in the LMS.

Table 2. Students' perceptions in relation to the principles of qualitative pedagogy and the CoI model.

Principles of qualitative pedagogy (Preissle & deMarrais, 2011, 2015)	Community of inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000, 2001, Garrison & Vaughn, 2008)	This study's findings
Being responsive	The overall sense of community as part of the community of inquiry model	Learning to make authentic connections
Being reflective	Social presence	Learning to make authentic connections
Being recursive	Teaching presence	Learning to value the course design and structure
Being contextual	Teaching presence	Learning to value the course design and structure
Being reflexive	Cognitive presence	Learning to appreciate feedback from others. Learning to make authentic connections

model this for new researchers. The spiraling back and forth was evident in how both the instructor and students navigated between course content, activities, readings, and discussions. Success in navigating and engaging in course content relied on instructors providing clear pointers on how to navigate the online course environments. Instructors should structure activities in ways that build upon one another across the course. Reminders conveyed in multiple modes (e.g., email, text alerts, videos, news items, etc.) assist students in *being recursive*.

Being contextual focuses on the ways in which settings, time, participants, and place are all integral to our understanding of one another. The course design was contextual, modeling for students how there can be little understanding of the human experience in the absence of understanding the specific moment in which they live. Students oriented positively to online coursework when they felt it was meeting their personal goals. Accomplishing this was no easy task, since the perceived benefits offered by online coursework are achievable only when both the instructor and students engage authentically to develop a community that supports risk-taking. Instructors must attend to students as individuals, even as they attend to the wider course context. For example, in the absence of face-to-face communication, it is important to seek more information before interpreting students' actions, or lack thereof, in a particular way. Further research might examine if and how synchronous online meeting rooms might simulate the embodiment of face-to-face interaction.

The course assignments required that students *be reflective* at a level of intensity usually not required of students face to face. Students indicated this was beneficial, even if challenging. Reflective peer-to-peer and instructor feedback helped create social presence. Teachers might encourage students to be reflective about not only the course content and how research is practiced, but how they themselves learn and interact with others in the online environment. Further research might examine students' reflections on course activities and compare these to those developed in face-to-face classes.

Cognitive presence was established through the authentic connections made in the asynchronous and synchronous discussion forums through which students displayed their learning in a visible manner (Preissle & deMarrais, 2015), leading, we hoped, to the reflexive stance needed both to learn and to engage in effective qualitative inquiry. *Being reflexive* entails examining one's assumptions, experiences, and worldviews as they relate to research. It "is our means of developing and assessing ourselves as information gatherers, and of assuring our constituencies that we are providing information that is as balanced, inclusive, dispassionate, impartial, disinterested, and equitable as our purposes, questions, and theoretical frameworks

permit" (Preissle & deMarrais, 2015, p. 190). Online discussions provided a space for students to learn about others' reactions to their work and assess themselves as researchers as they engaged in developing their own knowledge and skills. In that instructors worked to facilitate online interactions among the course content, students, and themselves, there was a constant examination of the online context in order to assess whether learning goals were being accomplished. Students, especially those who are new to online learning contexts, might be provided guidance in *being reflexive* with respect to their learning preferences and management of their course schedule so that they are prepared to engage fully in the online experience.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, we argue for the value of applying the principles of qualitative pedagogy (responsiveness, context, recursivity, reflection, and reflexivity) to the design of online courses and programs. While this study examined students' descriptions of their engagement in learning, we believe these principles align well with those of the CoI model developed by Garrison et al. (2000, 2001), and Garrison and Vaughan (2008). Findings from this study explored the processes involved in student engagement, including learning to value a recursive course design, learning to make authentic connections with others, and learning to value feedback from others.

The study reported here provides a significant contribution to the literature in that, unlike previous research, it focuses on a graduate-level online learning environment where adult learners often struggle with balancing busy professional and family lives while seeking advanced degrees. In addition, the study expands an understanding of online research courses aimed at preparing students for rigorous dissertation studies. The integration of a general CoI model with the specific disciplinary model of qualitative pedagogy serves as an innovative lens through which to examine graduate students' perspectives of online learning. Although this study is limited in that it was conducted in one geographic context in the USA and focuses on a qualitative research program in only one institution, readers may judge for themselves in what ways these students' perceptions of learning online align with those of students in other contexts.

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