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Biese, Ann M. *Perceptions of Student Satisfaction with Instruction in a Contemporary American Society course at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College*

Abstract

This study analyzed student feedback about their experiences in an online Contemporary American Society course offered at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College during the 2011 academic year. The study determined the level of satisfaction of students relative to instructional delivery, methodology, instructor interaction and learning experience in the course. The following research questions were addressed: Were students satisfied with instructor interaction? Did the instructor encourage students to express themselves? Were students satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed? Were students able to understand learner responsibilities? How did students rate their instruction in the online course? The research design for this quantitative study used a course evaluation. The instrument used in this study was an Online Learner Feedback Form. The data was analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. The findings indicated that the instructor who taught the online course was able to interact and engage the students and the students were satisfied with their learning experience in the course.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Computer technology, equipped with access to the internet, had and continues to have a profound impact on our culture and society. Throughout this study it was not surprising to learn that educational institutions, in order to keep pace with technological advances, are offering more courses online. This alternative format for acquiring education, however, was not the first non-traditional course format to make history. Distance education has been in existence since the early 1900's and began with the use of correspondence courses (Morabito, 1997). In an effort to educate women and rural populations, correspondence courses were sent through the mail (Nasseh, 1997). By the end of the 20th century, distance education was no longer limited to correspondence courses. Television and video technology also provided access to courses (Nasseh, 1997). Today, courses offered via the Internet are creating a boom in online education that has educators and school leaders realizing that online learning is quickly becoming the educational mainstream (Robelen, 2007). Colleges and universities are recognizing the demand for online alternatives to learning. "By 1995, nearly 50% of higher education institutions engaged in some type of online learning" (Blackboard, Inc. 2002). A study conducted by the Instructional Technology Council, an organization dedicated to the advancement of distance learning, reported an increase in online education in community colleges across the nation (Hale, 2007). According to Allen and Seaman (2006 & 2010) approximately 4.6 million college students in the United States enrolled in a web based course during the fall of 2008, double the number of students who took an online course in the fall of 2004. "In 2009, 73% of higher education institutions reported growth in demand for online courses and programs" (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 58). Chief academic officers in colleges (58%) consider online learning to be a critical component of future instruction in their institutions. (Ward, Peters, Shelley, 2010)

A key finding in the California Community Colleges Distance Education Report for 1995-2004 stated that "by 2015 as much as 20 percent of the total community college system enrollment in California may be in distance education courses" (Hale, 2007. p. 6). According to Sheard (2005) community colleges experienced more growth in online learning than all other colleges, including private colleges and colleges with graduate programs. Sheard continued by saying that "online learning opportunities are rapidly expanding in higher education. After the Associates degree, the Master's degree is the second most prevalent type of program offered" (Sheard, et. al. p. 317).

Distance education attracts the non-traditional students who have multiple responsibilities and obligations, transportation issues and time constraints to contend with and who need the flexibility, convenience and lower cost that online courses offer (Hale, 2007). Single parents, physically disabled individuals and adults with demanding work weeks who are not able to find time to travel to a traditional classroom in order to participate in the learning environment are given an opportunity to continue their education in the distance education arena (Li, 2002).

Online learning is also changing the future of the traditional university campus. Professor Peter F. Drucker, a well-known business strategist, believes that the traditional classroom on a university campus will be replaced by online lectures and online classes delivered to students at minimal cost (Lau, 2000).

Despite the growing popularity and convenience of online learning, it is not without its problems. Attrition (decrease in number of enrolled students) is one of the main problems of online education (O'Brien, 2002). The dropout rates for distance education courses are usually higher than those for similar traditional classroom courses (Keegan, 1990). Dropout rates range from 30-50% in the United States (Parker, 1995; Hill & Raven, 2000; Frankola, 2001).

While the online format for learning has appeal with both traditional and non-traditional students, course effectiveness and learning outcomes need to be considered before post-secondary institutions offer an ever expanding menu of credit courses online. The online format is still a relatively new educational delivery mechanism that requires questioning and study. Jorgensen (2002) posed two questions: Is distance learning an effective substitute for face-to-face teaching? Does the impersonal mode of teaching deprive students of quality instruction? The research that has been conducted is both supportive and critical of the online experience. Hara and Kling (2000) studied six novice computer users in an online course. Three common frustrations emerged as a result of the study: lack of prompt feedback, ambiguous instructions on the Web and technical problems. Research also indicated that online education could be effective when instructor feedback was timely, when students were able to interact with one another and instructional tasks were clearly communicated in the online format (Verduin and Clark, 1991). According to Tucker (2000) the research is not sufficient to draw conclusions as to whether one delivery method is more or less effective than the other.

Several leaders in education found that instructors were the key factor in creating and maintaining a quality online education program (Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, Marx, 2000; Schifter, 2002). Instructors who initiated and maintained interactivity within the online class directly impacted the quality of the online education experience (Yang, 2005).

Researchers attempted to define and measure student success in online education and encountered limited and debated results. Researchers agreed that student satisfaction with online learning was directly affected by the degree and type of interactions between the assigned faculty member and enrolled online students (Arbaugh, 2001; Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Shea, Pickett & Pelz, 2004; Valenta, Dieter & Mrtek, 2001).

There was limited published research on what students thought of online education and how it met their needs (Valenta, Therriault, Dieter & Mrtek, 2001; Roblyr & Ekham, 2000; Stewart, Hong & Strudler, 2004). Few studies "actually explored the teaching-learning experience in the online environment" (Talent-Runnels, Lan, Cooper, Shaw, 2006, p. 119).

Studies dedicated specifically to student satisfaction in distance education programs at two-year colleges were virtually non-existent (Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett & Pelz, 2004). Of the 76 studies reviewed by Tallent-Runnels et al. (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Shaw, 2006), two studies clearly involved community college students as research participants.

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) is a two year technical college located in Green Bay, Wisconsin. NWTC is accredited by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education and a member of the North Central Association (NCA) of Colleges and Schools. The vision statement states that NWTC "strives to provide all learners the highest quality, lifelong learning opportunities that are what students want, when they want, where they want and how they want them, so that students may continue their learning and successfully engage in a career that enhances their quality of life in a global community" (NWTC College Catalog, 2011, p. 1).

NWTC offers learning options including weekend and evening classes, online classes, interactive television and video classes, classes in regional learning centers and classes in communities and businesses district-wide. The NWTC Sturgeon Bay campus is a regional learning campus located an hour from the main campus in Green Bay. Students who attend the outreach campus travel from as far as Washington Island and the small town of Algoma. The satellite campus offers traditional classroom courses and also videoconference, interactive television and online courses. Two associate degree programs, Nursing and Diesel and Heavy Equipment Technology include social science courses in their curriculum. All students enrolled

in one of these programs were required to enroll and successfully complete one or two of the following courses: Race, Ethnicity and Diversity, Contemporary American Society or Introduction to Sociology.

Many students enrolled in one of the associate degree programs took advantage of social science courses offered in an online format. Contemporary American Society is offered in an online format.   Since this course is required to complete a program, it is beneficial for instructors to better understand how online learners rated their satisfaction with instruction. Currently, NWTC provides students with an Online Learning Feedback Form during the final class. The form is a course evaluation that focuses on student evaluation of course content, course organization, course expectations, instructor availability, instructor response time and student effort spent on coursework. The data from the form was collected via email when the class was finished.

Existing data was collected from the course evaluation that included closed ended questions. The questions asked students to rate their satisfaction with instruction in an online Contemporary American Society course.

The intent of this study was to identify student perceptions of satisfaction with the instruction in the online Contemporary American Society course.

Statement of the Problem

The online format offers students at NWTC a convenient alternative to the traditional classroom format. Students enrolled in programs requiring social science courses could choose to learn in person in an instructor led classroom or at a computer with internet access, utilizing Blackboard. Limited research was conducted at NWTC to evaluate learner satisfaction with the online Contemporary American Society course. An analysis of the perceptions of student

satisfaction with the instruction in the online course provided faculty the feedback they needed to evaluate the instructional delivery, instructional methodology, instructor interaction and learning experiences in the course.

The research questions enabled instructors at NWTC to better understand if students were satisfied with the online instructional delivery in the Contemporary American Society course.

Research Questions

Within the context of online enrollment in the Contemporary American Society course offered by NWTC during the 2011 calendar year, the following questions were addressed in this research:

1. Were students satisfied with instructor interaction?

2. Did the instructor encourage students to express themselves?

3. Were students satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed?

4. Were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?

5. How did students rate their instruction in the online course?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to analyze student feedback about their experiences in an online Contemporary American Society course offered at NWTC. This study determined if students were satisfied with the instructional delivery, instructional methodology, instructor interaction and learning experiences in the online Contemporary American Society course. The research questions enabled instructors at NWTC to better understand if students were satisfied with the online instructional delivery in the Contemporary American Society course.

Importance of the Study

NWTC has been teaching the online Contemporary American Society course in the online format and collecting the feedback from the students. The data had not been analyzed. An analysis of the data helped instructors know if they were meeting student needs. This study answered how students rated the instruction in an online class using existing data from the Online Learner Feedback Form.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations were noted for this study:

1. The study was limited to students who are enrolled in an online section of Contemporary American Society.

2. Students with inadequate prerequisite skills required for online learning could experience performance problems and this could impact student perception of the learning environment.

3. Instructor inexperience teaching an online course could impact student perceptions.

4. Instructor quality, in terms of teaching ability, could impact student perceptions of the course.

5. The feedback form did not include instructions on how to complete it and was limited in its depth of questions and the way the questions were asked.

6. The feedback form results were limited to the opinions and answers of the students.

Definition of Terms

Academic Advisor – a college professional who aids students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the use of the full range of institutional and community resources. NACADA. (2003) http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Research_Related/definitions.htm.

Administrator – a manager, supervisor and typically a decision maker at a college.

Blackboard – an online learning environment that is accessible to students using the Internet. Often referred to as course management software, Blackboard is a commercially produced e-learning software platform that provides course management, content authoring, collaborative discussion, virtual classrooms, testing and grading to users.

Blended format – online and in person blended course offering.

Distance education – a field of education that focuses on the technology and institutional systems design that aim to deliver education not physically "on-site".

Instructor – individual teaching the course at the college.

Faculty – instructional staff at a college.

Non-traditional format – a course offered in an alternate format, for our purposes, an online format.

Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) – an accredited public postsecondary educational institution serving Northeast Wisconsin.

Online Learning – all course content online, all communication and interaction with students online, assignment submission and feedback online, all exams online, interactive communication between teacher and students online at least weekly or as established at the beginning of the course.

Skype – a software application that allows users to make voice and video calls and chat over the internet.

Traditional classroom – instruction in a classroom setting, with students and instructor in the same learning environment.

Wholly online – all content online (either commercial print-based textbooks or commercial e-texts could be used as supplementary material), all communication and interaction with students online, assignment submission and feedback online, examination online, and each unit having at least one session of interactive communication between student and teacher at least weekly (Holt & Palmer, 2008)

As stated earlier this chapter, educational leaders agreed that instruction was the key component to quality online learning; however, research was limited on the teaching-learning experience in online courses. This study explored the satisfaction of students with the instruction and learning in an online Contemporary American Society course at NWTC. Chapter two will present a review of literature relative to this study.

Chapter II: Literature Review

A review of the literature revealed that educators were divided on the effectiveness of teaching and learning online.   Proponents cited advantages to online learning such as convenience for students, a more customized format in which instructors interact with each student (Wagner, 2001), an improved learner setting as compared to crowded college and university halls (Sher, 2009) and proponents stated that it was a practical and viable option for all types of learners (Jung, 2001).

Critics argued that there were limitations to distance education. The lack of instructor presence and lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor (Arbaugh, 2000), the feelings of isolation among learners (Weller, 2007), the lower rate of online learners completion rate (Keith, 2006) and the quality of education compared to traditional classroom courses (Arbaugh, 2000) were several disadvantages that were frequently cited.

Other problems that were identified in previous studies included learner frustration, anxiety and confusion (Hara and Kling, 2000; Piccoli, 2001; Almad & Ives, 2001), the need for greater discipline, writing skills and self-motivation and the need for online learners to make a time commitment to learning (Gollady, Prybutok & Huff, 2000; Serwatka, 2003).

Students enroll in online classes to learn at a time convenient for them. Learning in the online format differs from the traditional classroom in regard to instructor interaction and student learning of the content.   A small body of research has been conducted that explores these online learning topics. This literature review discusses the topics. Of primary interest to this literature review are the theories of learning and teaching that address communication and interaction between student and instructor and the emerging concept of online community and how this relates to the learning of the content of the online course. This chapter includes discussion of

learning theory, pedagogical theory, studies that address interaction and engagement between learner and instructor and the emerging understanding of learning communities. The discussion reviews the constructivist framework and the studies that have constructivism theory as the underpinning theoretical base. The literature review explores areas of theory that undergird the conceptualization of desirable learning environments and the related studies which uncover the dimensions, conditions and criteria of learning environments. Implications for the nature of the classroom are included. A conclusion of findings is explored in this section of the literature review.

Online learning has a dimension of interaction and engagement that differs from traditional classroom learning. A definition of online interaction is discussed. The studies that directly relate to online interaction is explored, including studies which reveal the dimensions of interaction and active engagement, criticisms of online interaction, instructional effectiveness and instructor communication processes. Transactional distance is included and the three types of essential interaction are highlighted. The conflicting results of several notable studies that address instructor communication processes are summarized in this section. Finally, the emerging thinking that the formation or creation of an online learning community is directly related to student participation is reviewed. An explanation of non-active, non-constructivist learning environments is included and the paradigm of the virtual community is defined. The role of discussion in traditional and online classrooms is explored and the early and recent studies that pertain to group discussion are included.

These topics were directly applicable to the completed study in that students enrolled in the online Contemporary American Society course were participants in a learning environment in which the level of interaction and engagement, the level of active learning and level of cognitive

reflection could have affected the perceived level of satisfaction with the online course. The research questions addressed the level of interaction and engagement, the level of active versus non-active learning and the level of cognitive reflection of the students in the Contemporary American Society course and analyzed student feedback about their experiences in the course. Specifically, the research questions of this study included:

1. Were students satisfied with instructor interaction?

2. Did the instructor encourage students to express themselves?

3. Were students satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed?

4. Were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?

5. How did students rate their instruction in the online course?

Finally, the study determined if students were satisfied with the instructional delivery, instructional methodology, instructor interaction and learning experiences in the course.

Learning Theory

Instruction in an online course can be understood when the components (interaction, engagement, feedback) and learning theory are identified and explained.   The next section will review the theoretical framework, learning process and studies that relate to online instruction.

According to Branford, Brown, Cocking (2000) and Driscoll (2002) learning theory suggests that learning is promoted or enhanced when 1) students are actively engaged in the learning 2) assignments reflect real-life contexts and experiences 3) deep thinking or deep learning is promoted through applied and reflected activities. Numerous studies demonstrate that a student's active involvement in the learning process enhances learning, a process often referred

to as *active learning* (Benek-Rivera & Matthews, 2004; Sarason & Branbury, 2004). Active

learning requires "instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about

what they are doing" (Bonwell & Elsen, 1991, p. 5). Interactive instruction or "learning by

doing" is found to result in positive learning outcomes (Smart & Cappel, 2006, p. 202).

The research question that linked to active engagement and feedback was 5) how students

rated their instruction in the online course. An understanding of the Constructivist framework

explained the importance of feedback in online learning. According to Espasa & Meneses

(2010), within this framework the feedback process was considered a key element. The feedback

process promoted regulation of learning. The presence of feedback was associated with

improved levels of performance and higher levels of satisfaction with the general running of the

course. In this framework, learning combined two basic psychological and complementary

processes. Espasa and Meneses stated that one was interpersonal in nature, sustained in

interaction, confrontation and negotiation in regard to contributions from the participants in the

educational activity, and the other was an intrapersonal process, based on individual cognitive

reflection. Researchers referred to this constructivist feedback as formative feedback.

Chickering and Ehrman (2008) highlighted feedback as one of the key elements in quality

teaching in higher education. Several studies further defined the components and significance of

formative feedback. Nicol & Mcfarlane-Dick (2006) proposed seven principles for good

feedback:

1. helped clarify what good performance was (goals, criteria, expected standards);

2. facilitated the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;

3. delivered high quality information to students about their learning;

4. encouraged teacher and peer dialogue around learning;

5. encouraged positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;

6. provided opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;

7. provided information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

A study by Gibbs and Simpson (2004) revealed the importance of feedback as an influential mechanism of learning. Another study by Williams and Hellman (2004) noted that a teacher's influence was crucial for propitiating students' self-regulation in a virtual environment. Allal (1979, 1988, 1993) listed three kinds of formative assessment in learning environments: 1) continuous assessment throughout the entire teaching and learning process that included various forms of help, among them feedback, in the educational process 2) regular formative assessment which required retroactive, compensatory regulation and sought to improve results in order to achieve objectives during the teaching and learning processes and 3) proactive regulation which intended to consolidate the skills acquired by the student in relation to future learning. Studies by Dunn (2003), Lou (2003) and Willems (2006) justified the need for feedback by identifying the association between feedback and student satisfaction and performance. Their studies of online learning environments were markedly theoretical and explained two types of feedback. Feedback offered during the continuous assessment process (answering student doubts) was the most widespread form of feedback in the online classroom. This feedback was characterized by information on how to improve work and how to take learning further. In this kind of feedback, the elaboration component was more often present than the verification component. This type of feedback fulfilled a formative or regulatory role. It helped improve a student's work. Feedback given after an assignment was the second most common type of feedback. This feedback was more retroactive than proactive and more oriented towards error correction than the furthering of learning. In this kind of feedback the verification component was present. This feedback did not

contain the formative component which allowed students to improve their learning process. A similar study concluded by suggesting that university teachers who taught online courses should have received training and knowledge of the types and characteristics of feedback (Egan & Akdere, 2005; Goodyear, 2001; Williams, 2003).

The literature was extensive on the topic of active learning and interactive learning. According to Driscoll (2002), "when students become active participants in the knowledge construction process, the focus of learning shifts from covering the curriculum to working with ideas" (p.1) Using technological tools to "*think with* facilitated working with ideas and learning from that process" (Scardamalia, 2002, p. 1). Furthermore, authentic learning occured when students better understood and applied material when problems and situations were set in the context of real world issues and situations (Eble, 1988). Authentic situations and scenarios provided a stimulus for learning, creating greater student motivation (Quitadamo & Brown, 2001). Emphasizing authentic tasks in context rather than abstract out-of-context activities created a greater likelihood of learning (Driscoll & Carliner, 2005). Use of real world situations had potential to promote deep learning through the development of critical thinking skills (Scriven & Paul, 2004). Learning retention and performance improved when students were required to apply what they learned and reflected upon the learning (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000).

According to Driscoll & Carliner (2005), online instruction had the potential to provide opportunities to promote reflective thought and deep learning through realistically integrating and applying principles learned. The use of simulation in online learning propelled learners into a learning experience, which increased engagement and provided activities that actively engaged learners to analyze, synthesize and evaluate information while constructing knowledge. In

conclusion, Web-based activities were interactive and online coursework had the potential to create environments where students actively engaged with material and learned by doing (Johnston, Killion & Oomen, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

In summary, learning theory had a theory language that differed from researcher to researcher and from learning theorist to learning theorist. The process of interaction between student and instructor was a complex task that involved active learning, feedback processes and authentic learning. The theories that described this interactive process set the stage to explore instructional delivery, instructional methodology, instructor interaction and the learning experience in the online format.

Pedagogy

In order to understand what needs to occur to create a quality course that is delivered via online instruction, the areas of theory that undergird the conceptualization of desirable learning environments will be reviewed. This section will focus on instructional delivery and methodology, as stated in the purpose of the study and will link to the third research question 3) were students satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help (additional instruction) was needed? This section will better help understand why students were satisfied or dissatisfied with the instructional delivery and methodology in the online Contemporary American Society course.

Based on 50 years of research on college pedagogy, Chickering and Gamson (1987) developed seven dimensions of practice that have been widely accepted as criteria of quality in university instruction. An instructor was effective when he/she did the following 1) encouraged student-faculty contact 2) encouraged cooperation among students 3) encouraged active learning 4) provided prompt feedback to students 5) emphasized time on task 6) communicated high

expectations and 7) respected diverse talents and ways of learning. Ward, Peters & Shelley (2010) asserted that the degree to which online learning could attend to multiple dimensions of teaching and learning was of paramount interest to the instructor. They maintained that online content was more accessible; however, obtaining information was only one stage of learning complex content. Hofer, Yu and Pintrich (1998) found that self-regulation of learning was difficult for most students. Students in online courses often had difficulty with comprehension and application of information (Schwartzman, 2007). Oh and Jonassen (2007) insisted that merely providing information to students was insufficient – the nature of discourse in asynchronous online courses (postings and threaded discussions guided by the instructor) aligned poorly with the inherent complexity of learning processes associated with mastering complex course content.

Newmann & Wehlage (1993) discussed several conditions that characterize authentic learning activities: 1) analysis based upon depth of knowledge 2) dependence upon higher order thinking 3) substantive dialogue 4) social support for learners and 5) real world applicability. Thoughtful presentation, demonstration, monitoring and feedback positively impacted student mastery of complex material (Chen & Shaw, 2006). Van Merrienboer & Kirachner (2001) distinguished between two worlds of learning. In the World of Knowledge, designers constructed methods by which given learning goals in a specific subject matter domain could be attained by the learner. In the World of Learning, designers focused on methods which enhanced deep level learning, intrinsic motivation and collaborative argumentation. Kester, Kirschner & Corbalan (2006) described learning environments in which 1) complex learning occurred 2) student motivation for learning was intrinsic and 3) dialogue and debate were integral elements.

Woo & Reeves (2007) outlined multiple criteria for learning environments consistent with the following theoretical orientations. Instructors who based learning environments upon these principles 1) engaged learners in authentic learning tasks 2) created opportunities for meaningful collaboration among the instructor, experts and other students 3) engaged the students themselves in defining, implementing and negotiating perspectives relative to these tasks 4) used collaboration, debate and analysis to refine and complete the learning tasks and 5) assured that students have access to the instructor, resources and one another in order to clear points of confusion and expand concepts.

Ward, Peters and Shelley (2010) described social constructivism as learning that was greatly dependent upon the interactions, collaboration and social exchanges that occurred in the learning context. This theory of learning assumed that knowledge was constructed by learners via a formative process. This process relied not only on what was transmitted by the instructor, but also on the manner in which the learner made sense of content within the context of his/her existing knowledge and experiences (Ward, Peters & Shelley, 2010). According to Woo & Reeves (2007), "such a meaningful interaction process is required for meaning making and hence learning." (p. 20) The implication for the nature of the classroom was that instructional applications of email, typed threaded online discussions and interactive online audio technologies needed to be very deliberately designed if they were to ensure that learning environments consistent with the principles of constructivism were provided (Ward, et al., 2010). Such design required "change in pedagogical thinking toward student-centered classrooms with lots of constructivist, project-based activities, with opportunities for social discourse and collaboration between teacher and student, and between student and student." (Creighton, 2003, p. 13)

According to Picciano (2010), a plethora of online learning studies was conducted on the topic of student satisfaction since the mid-1990s. There were enough studies with large samples to conclude that most students who completed an online course or program perceived online learning as beneficial. Picciano stated that "satisfaction curves for students in online courses were always very high once they became comfortable with the change in format, resulting in a curve that started very low and increased as the course went on" (p. 27).

Woo and Reeves (2007) concluded that the internet had exponentially expanded access to authentic instructional experiences via simulation, access to information and experts, virtual access to remote locations, complex manipulations of data, and sophisticated presentation capabilities. Chen and Shaw (2006) found that when comparing face-to-face, online asynchronous, and online synchronous instruction and learning over substantial periods of time, there were no differences in learning outcomes among the three instructional modalities. Meyer (2003) found that students believed that their contributions to asynchronous collaboration were of higher quality because of the expanded availability of time to craft and edit their postings. The potential of web-based learning to enhance dimensions of constructivist learning approaches was significant, yet Woo and Reeves (2007) argued that the potential remains largely untapped in college classrooms. Wang and Woo (2007) found that the responsiveness of the instructor, interaction and communication between students, and the quality of the learning climate were lower in asynchronous online classes than in face-to-face classes.

Interaction & Engagement

This section focuses on instructor interaction and learning experiences of online students. The review of literature in this section will help the reader gain an understanding of why students may or may not be satisfied with an online course. The research questions that addressed

interaction and engagement in the online Contemporary American Society course were 1) were students satisfied with instructor interaction? 2) did the instructor encourage students to express themselves? and 4) were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?

Bernard, Brauer, Abrami, and Surkes (2004) defined online interaction as the ability to collaborate with peers and the instructor. Wanstreet (2006) stated that the nature of interaction was an important consideration in the design of online learning and in students' evaluations of the quality of their experiences in such courses (Wanstreet, 2006). According to Ward, Peters and Shelley (2010) theories of interaction and engagement were integrally connected to social constructivism. The researchers go on to say that interaction was "an important dimension of university course work" (Ward, Peters & Shelley, 2010, p. 61). Hirumi (2002) noted only certain dimensions of interaction were significantly related to higher achievement. Interaction that a) prompted intellectual insight b) provoked analysis and c) deepened commitment to instructional activities influenced the quality of learning. Savery & Duffy (1995) contend that active engagement of students in discourse during analyses of complex problems prompted learning through comparative mental processes and enriched application of content to other problem solving circumstances. The quality of interaction between instructor and students was related to both student performance and to student satisfaction; so too was the quality of collaboration among students themselves (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Wanstreet (2006) found that online interaction both between learners and between learner and instructor addressed learning style preferences of students. While a number of features of online course work lended themselves to interaction, the degree to which they fulfill student needs for interaction and immediacy could vary significantly (Wanstreet, 2006). According to

Kearsley & Schneiderman (1998) online media was lauded by researchers for enhancing interaction and engagement. Threaded discussions, online chats, email and in some instances, two-way audio and video feeds expanded the nature and richness of interaction. The timing of this interaction conformed better to the schedules of some students (Kearsely & Schneiderman, 1998). Ho & Swan (2007) noted that online instruction assured a more democratic approach to interaction because domination of the online "dialogue" by any one individual was less likely to occur.

Criticisms of online interaction and engagement as a viable option for learning appeared in several studies. Web based instruction was not free from criticism. Several researchers were concerned with the lack of face-to-face interaction among students and their instructors, the quality of education relative to classroom-based courses (Arbough, 2000), the feelings of isolation among learners (Weller, 2007) and the lower rate of online learners completion rate (Keith, 2006). A study by Zhang & Walls (2006) researched the degree to which online instruction addressed instructional effectiveness developed by Chickering & Gamson. They found that the elements of "encouraging cooperation among students and encouraging student-faculty contact were least frequently practiced" in online instruction (Zhang & Walls, 2006, p. 420). Another study by Mazzolini & Maddison (2005) noted that the frequency, timing and nature (clarifying, posing questions, answering questions) of an instructor's contributions to online postings and threaded discussions were negatively correlated with the frequency and length of student postings.

Moore (1993) suggested that there was a transactional distance in distance learning environments as instructors and learners did not interact in the same physical and temporal

space. In order to overcome potential shortfalls due to transactional distance, Moore identified three types of interaction essential for learning in distance education:

Learner-content interaction – the method by which students obtained information from course materials. The content could be in the form of text, audio or videotape, CD-rom, computer program, or online communication.

Learner- instructor interaction – referred to the interaction between the learner and the instructor. This could take the form of the instructor delivering information, encouraging the learner, or providing feedback. In addition, this could include the learner interacting with the instructor by asking questions or communicating with the instructor regarding course activities.

Learner to learner interaction – the exchange of information and ideas that occurred among students about the course in the presence or absence of the instructor. This type of interaction could take the form of group projects, or group discussions, etc. The learner to learner interaction could foster learning through student collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Several studies researched instructor interaction and engagement. Easton (2003) conducted a qualitative study to explore communication processes that affect the roles of the online learning instructor. She found that many of the skills required of an online instructor were similar to those for effective face-to-face teaching. She concluded that online instructors needed to develop new course management techniques for teaching virtually. Easton recommended that instructors define the virtual "time and place" and ensure that students were notified. In addition, instructors needed to determine when it was appropriate to use various forms of mediated communication, such as email or discussion boards.

Another study by Muagaiah & Thang (2010) utilized an active, asynchronous approach to teaching English as a second language to students at the University of Malaysia. Instructors incorporated interactive and reflective writing activities which helped raise students' awareness of their own learning processes and become actively engaged learners responsible for their own learning. The ratio was 1000 students to one teacher. The authors created a comfortable learning environment and initiated communication by asking students to introduce themselves online in English. Muagaiah & Thang observed that over time, a learning community developed where students were able to help peers with their English writing. The researchers concluded that by engaging in coteaching, students learned about written English and how they and others developed the complex skill.

A study conducted at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) suggested that the reflective nature of asynchronous online discussion was helping out deaf and hard-of-hearing students. The students achieved better academic results than in comparable campus-based courses. The study explored how the quantity of interaction in online courses related to student perceptions of course satisfaction, learning and ease of communication. Long, Marchetti and Fasse (2011) noted that students communicated with the instructor and other students "more than I did in most face-to-face courses" (p. 14). Students said they were better able to express their own ideas "because of the online interactions in this course" (Long et al., 2011, p. 14). Data revealed that there are significant benefits for deaf and hard-of-hearing students enrolled in online courses with hearing students.

A third study researched by Long, Marchetti and Fasse (2010) looked at academic achievement of students enrolled in 432 online courses based on the amount of online interaction that occurred in the course. The results indicated that students enrolled in online courses with

more interaction outperformed students in online courses with less interaction. Relating this study to the NTID study, students in the NTID study said that online interaction was important to their learning and findings of the third study confirmed the validity of these perceptions with higher GPA's for more interactive courses. Long, Marchetti and Fasse (2010) noted that it was hard to explain why students with a hearing loss responded the most positively about being able to communicate with the instructor and peers online in the second study. What they did find was that students in the online courses with the most interaction had better academic achievement than students in the courses with the least interaction. According to the researchers, this link recognized the importance of students learning from the instructor and from each other as a critical component of overall learning in the online environment.

Literature on the role of interaction and engagement by the instructor and students in online college learning environments was limited and mixed. The absence of studies made it difficult to draw conclusions about student satisfaction with interaction and engagement in online courses. The research that was done uncovered a connection between student satisfaction and high levels of instructor interaction and engagement. In conclusion, continued research on the link between instructor interaction and engagement and perceived levels of student satisfaction was needed.

Learning Communities

The learner experience with online learning was discussed in the next section. The research question that gathered information about the learner experience was question 4) were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?

In recent years, researchers started to recognize that learning communities play a part in online learning. The formation of a learning community developed when the instructional delivery, instructional methodology and instructor interaction promoted active participation among learners. The formation of a learning community affected learner experience with an online course. Palloff and Pratt (2007) described online community as "embedded in the process of communication, whether it is through email, text messaging or chat. The fact is we live in and search for community. Many of our attempts to communicate are, at core, attempts at community building – a search for the commonality that connects us" (p. 35). Palloff and Pratt continued by saying "our communities and neighborhoods are now virtual as well as actual, global as well as local" (p. 35).

A look at group and organizational behavior and the development of community leads us to Tuckman (1965), who referred to the stages as forming, norming, storming, performing and adjourning. The first stage involved people coming together around a common purpose, and was referred to as the forming stage. In the second stage, people reached out to one another to figure out how to work toward common goals, and developed norms of behavior in the process, which was referred to as the norming stage. In the third stage, not uncommonly, conflict occurred as members grappled with the negotiation of individual differences versus the collective purpose or objective, referred to as the storming stage. In the next stage, Tuckman stated that group cohesion took place and the group started to perform tasks together. At this stage the group needed to work through conflict and move to the performing stage. The last stage was the parting or adjourning stage.

Palloff and Pratt (2007) described the paradigm, the instructional process, the approach (theory) and the difference between active, constructivist learning environments and non-active,

non-constructive learning environments as it related to the formation of online learning communities. Several studies by other researchers expanded on the development of online learning communities. One study discussed student reports of online learning with vast geographical distances between the online learners (Maddix, 2010), a second study analyzed online group discussions and outlined the most common online behaviors (Yu-Chu, 2010) and a third study revealed fifteen major themes that enhanced or diminished the sense of community (Gallagher-LePak, Killion, Reilly, 2009). These studies will be reviewed in this chapter.

Palloff and Pratt (2007) described the community in the virtual classroom as a paradigm that involved an active, collaborative, constructivist approach. The one significant difference between face-to-face and online learning was that in online learning attention needed to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful. Palloff and Pratt went on to say that the learning community was the vehicle through which learning occurred online. Members depended on each other to achieve the learning outcomes for the course. Brookfield (1995) reported that instructors who taught well online promoted a sense of autonomy, initiative and creativity while encouraging questioning, critical thinking, dialogue and collaboration.

How could an instructor make students work together? According to Palloff & Pratt (2007) the process was not something that happened instantaneously, it must be facilitated. The process involved implementing a number of teaching strategies. Palloff & Pratt described this instructional process. Instructors could post introductions and encourage students to look for areas of common interest. Instructors needed to be flexible – they must throw away their agendas and a need for control in order to let the process happen and allow for personal agendas of learners to be accommodated. The instructor gently guided the discussion in another direction

asking open-ended questions that allowed learners to examine that interaction. The instructor needed to remain actively engaged in the process in order to gently guide students who stray, coaxing them back to the learning goals that brought them together in the first place. Palloff and Pratt stated that in online classrooms, discussion could be collaborative, and unlike face-to-face classrooms the conversation was not dominated by one or two extraverted students, which could give the illusion the class was engaged. The ability to think before responding and to comment whenever the student wished helped create a level of participation and engagement that went much deeper than face-to-face discussion might (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Palloff & Pratt (2007) elaborated on learning environments that lacked a sense of online community. The researchers described non-active, non-constructivist learning environments that still exist. In these learning environments, the instructional methodology was instructor-focused instead of student-focused. Palloff & Pratt described the teaching methods used in instructor-driven online classrooms. The instructor posted lectures and directed and dominated the process, used multiple choice and true/false exams as the only measure of learning, posed closed ended questions that did not stimulate discussion, and used old methods of pedagogy and student assessment, all of which resulted in lack of interaction or lack of response among students.

Three studies were located that looked at the learning community. In one study, Maddix (2010) researched student feedback in a Spiritual Formation online course for graduate students. A second study conducted by Yu-Chu (2010) analyzed online group discussion in a pre-service instruction program for teachers. A third study organized by Gallager-LePak, Killion and Reilly (2009) explored the sense of community in online nursing courses.

The first study, conducted by Maddix (2010), involved a cohort of 15 to 20 students with vast geographical distances between them from over 400 congregations in Alaska, Washington,

Oregon, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, Idaho and Nevada. Graduates reported that the learning

community was one of the strongest aspects of the program. They viewed the learning as a

"real" community where they could share their ideas. The students took what was being learned

in the class and applied it in a local ministry context. The results indicated that the

contextualization was more transformative than more traditional forms of delayed learning. The

online learning context was enhanced by the human interaction (Maddix, 2010). The results

align with Alfred Rovai's observations that transactional distance, a psychological and

communication space between learners and instructors, was reduced when students engaged in

effective dialogue (Rovai, 2002).

The second study, researched by Yu-Chu (2010), involved 32 pre-service teachers who

participated in an 18 week instruction program. An analysis of online group discussions

revealed the following: of 13 identified online behaviors, the most common were constructing a

positive atmosphere, providing opinions for group assignments, and providing reminders of

assignment-related work. Of eight online roles identified within a group, the most common roles

were information providers, opinion providers and troublemakers. Yu-Chu identified four online

learning communities based on "collaboration" and "participation". The results correspond to

what Lin, (2007), found. Lin observed that for any group to perform well via an online setting,

group members must recognize their functional roles in knowledge-related activities and each

functional role requires a corresponding behavior in the process of knowledge sharing and

creation.

A third study, conducted by Gallagher-LePak, Killion, Reilly, (2009), researched student

perceptions of community in online learning environments. Five focus group sessions were held

and online nursing students were asked to give examples of experiences related to their sense of

community. Fifteen major themes emerged. The theme that addressed class structure and participation revealed that focus group participants benefitted from faculty involvement as positive reinforcers or coaches, content experts and facilitators of collaborative learning. The researchers noticed that group members of this study appreciated having clear guidelines for planned communication, such as mandatory postings. Two other themes that emerged from the focus group study were mutual exchange, involving reciprocity or the "real exchange" that occurs and allows participants to know that others are there (talking back and forth, giving feedback to others) and informal discussion, the frequent casual chatting occurring outside course content through an open discussion forum. (Gallagher- Lepak, Killion, Reilly, 2009) Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance is referenced in this study. One key variable in the theory is structure, which refers to aspects of the course design and organization, such as learning objectives, planned interaction and assignments. (Moore, 1973, 1993)

Gallagher-LePak, Reilly & Killion (2009) present the argument that some online educators and students question the notion that community in online learning is important (Liu et al, 2007). They believe that the advantages of online learning are flexibility and self-paced learning. In the view of these authors, adult learners have multiple responsibilities and putting effort in to building an online community would be an extra burden on both the students and instructors.

Gallagher-Le Pak, Reilly & Killion (2009) conclude that the general consensus from students who completed online courses was that a sense of community was desirable, achievable and can be structured.   Several teaching strategies to facilitate community building have been offered by other authors. Rovai (2002) suggested using both task-driven and socio-emotional

interactions to enhance a sense of community. Misanchuk and Anderson (2001) proposed increasing levels of communication and interaction to promote online learning communities.

Further studies indicate that online learning communities promote active participation, increase academic achievement, contribute to knowledge creation and improve learner cognitive abilities. (Lin et. al., 2007; Ludwig & Hardmann &Woolley, 2000; Moller, 1998; Waltonen-Moore, Stuart, Newton, Oswald & Vaonis, 2006)

There is a limited body of research on sense of community in distance education courses. Student perspectives of community are important to study because student perspectives may not align with the perspectives of course developers and instructors. Understanding the student experience will assist with course design that utilizes active learning and effective interactive teaching methods.

Concluding Statements

In conclusion of the literature review, several important topics became significant and the underlying theories and studies that included the topics were explored. The first topic, active engagement and feedback was found to be a critical component of online learning. Online learners should be actively involved in the learning process, applying the learning and constructing knowledge, which promotes deep learning and deep thinking. Active learning includes authentic learning, learning that occurs in the context of real world issues and situations. Critical thinking skills, learning retention and performance improve when students apply learning. Instruction that includes active learning engages learners to analyze, synthesize and evaluate information in the knowledge construction process. Feedback is another key element to online learning. Formative feedback, which is instruction that provides information on how to improve work, is proactive instruction.   It is feedback that answers student doubts. This type of

feedback has a better outcome for online learning than retroactive feedback, feedback that is more oriented toward correcting errors. Formative feedback is continuous assessment during the learning process. Studies show that instructors who teach online need to implement active learning theory and feedback that improves the learning process. Instructors who are using non-active learning theory and retroactive feedback should be required by the college to gain knowledge of active learning theory, formative feedback and authentic learning and the teaching strategies that incorporate these theories before teaching online courses. It is a complex task to incorporate these theories in to instructional methodology and delivery; however, it is an improvement in instruction and essential to student learning. The research question that linked to the topic of active engagement and feedback was 5) how students rated their instruction in the online course.

The second topic covered pedagogical theories. Pedagogical theories were reviewed because the theories applied to instructional methodology. Inherent in the major theories were practices that characterized authentic learning. The question that was posed in online learning asked if complex learning could occur in an asynchronous environment? Social constructivism asserted that learning could occur if the instruction was student-centered. This required a change in pedagogical thinking on the part of the instructor. Researchers were not in agreement that such student-centered learning was occurring in online environments. The third research question addressed whether students were satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed. This question answered whether the instructional methodology was satisfactory for students in the online Contemporary American Society course.

Topic three, interaction and engagement, was related to student satisfaction with the instructional delivery and instructional methodology in the Contemporary American Society

online course. Viewpoints were mixed, however, some researchers considered online interaction via threaded discussions, online chats, email and two-way audio and video feeds to be an improved way of interactive learning, by being more democratic and conforming to student schedules. Other researchers disagreed and maintained that encouraging contact between instructor and student and student to student was less frequent in online learning. Some researchers stated the asynchronous nature of online learning negatively correlated to frequency of student postings. Three research questions: 1) were students satisfied with instructor interaction? 2) did the instructor encourage students to express themselves? 4) were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)? addressed student satisfaction with interacting with the instructor online.

The fourth topic, learning communities, was important to the research questions because when an online learning community formed, the student to instructor interaction was only one part of the learning process. The other part of the learning process was student to student interaction in the online learning community. An instructional methodology and delivery that incorporated the teaching strategies which form an online learning community would promote student to student interaction. Students asked questions and obtained feedback from other students. Students learned not only from the instructor, but also from fellow students. The research question that linked to the formation of a learning community was the following: 4) were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?

Finally, a brief discussion of online course evaluations was helpful to understand the way that student feedback was being collected and the advantages and disadvantages of course evaluation tools. The course evaluation that this study utilized was an evaluation that was given

after the class was finished. Existing data had been collected and was analyzed for this study. Course evaluations that were given when a learning event was completed are the most common method of obtaining student feedback. A survey of 105 of the "most wired" four-year colleges and universities in the United States (Hmeileski & Champagne, 2000) reported using evaluation forms at the end of the term. The survey also revealed that "only 25% of these schools received the results of their course evaluations within two weeks; 10% of faculty did not receive results for more than two months, if at all" (Hmeileski & Champagne, 2000, p. 283). New research proposed utilizing evaluation tools that would capture student feedback midstream and provide timely feedback that instructors could act on during the duration of the online course. This feedback could also assist instructors in meeting individual student learning needs with minimal time investment. Traditional formative evaluation approaches, therefore, had limitations. New, innovative evaluation tools were needed that provide meaningful results and interpretation immediately to the instructor (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004).

Chapter 3 will present the Research Methodology utilized in this study.

Chapter III: Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to analyze student feedback about their experiences in an online Contemporary American Society course offered at NWTC. This study determined if students were satisfied with the instructional delivery, instructional methodology, instructor interaction and learning experiences in the online Contemporary American Society course.

The research questions helped instructors at NWTC better understand if students were satisfied with the online instructional delivery in the Contemporary American Society course.

Design

The research design for this quantitative study utilized a course evaluation. An online Contemporary American Society class was used to gather the data that was needed to answer the research questions.   The design determined the perceptions the students had of the interaction of the instructor in the course and the instruction of the course content.

The instrument used in this study was an Online Learner Feedback Form. The feedback form was created prior to this study as a tool to measure student perceptions of satisfaction with instruction. The feedback form was developed from best practices used by other colleges and reviewed by NWTC faculty. In 2004, the feedback form was revised to align with feedback forms used for online and face-to-face courses. The form was developed with faculty involvement and was in compliance with language in the Faculty Association Contract.   Data collected from four online Contemporary American Society course sections, taught by the same instructor, increased the accuracy of the data.   The same evaluation form was used in face-to-face Contemporary American Society courses. The evaluation form was not constructed exclusively for this study and therefore has a measure of reliability. The evaluation form

answered the research questions and established face validity. The instrument appeared to measure what it was designed to measure.

The course evaluation methodology was used to gather data on a variety of variables. The independent variables were course delivery method, instructor experience with online teaching and student experience with online technology. The dependent variable was student satisfaction with the instruction in the course. The extraneous variables were student interest of the subject area and the IQ of the student. The confounding variable was an instructor with poor teaching ability.

Population and Sample

The population for this study was undergraduate students enrolled at NWTC. The subjects in this sample were students enrolled in an online Contemporary American Society course during the summer semester 2011.

Instrumentation

The data was collected for the purpose of review by the instructor who taught the course. Instructors reviewed the data to better understand the perceptions learners had with the instruction in the course.

Twenty four questions were designed to be distributed to students on the Online Learner Feedback Form. The course evaluation questions were created by the faculty at NWTC. The questions were agreed upon within faculty contract language. The faculty worked with the Online Learning Services Department to develop the course evaluation form.

The evaluation was designed to be convenient for students and would take approximately ten minutes to complete. The questions were in a logical order and were grouped with similar

components together. The evaluation contained simple words and simple phrasing and used short sentences.

Of those 24 questions, ten questions were designed to gain knowledge about 1) learners' awareness of class expectations, requirements and grading policy 2) learners' awareness of learner responsibilities 3) learners' perceptions of the instructor returning homework, tests, papers, projects in a timely way 4) learners' perceptions of the instructor returning phone calls promptly 5) learners' perceptions of the instructor returning emails promptly 6) learners' perceptions of instructor availability during posted office hours 7) learners' perceptions of the availability of extra help when needed 8) learners' perceptions of receiving answers to learner questions 9) learners' perceptions of the encouragement given learners to express themselves 10) how the learners rated the instruction in the class.   Students rated their perceptions on a four point rating scale with four being excellent and one being weak.

The responses from the ten questions on the course evaluation form answered the research questions as outlined below.

Research Question	Feedback Form Question
1. Were students satisfied with instructor interaction?	6, 7, 8, 9, 11
2. Did the instructor encourage students to express themselves?	13
3. Were students satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed?	10
4. Were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?	4, 5

5. How did the student rate their instruction in the   17
    online course?

Data Collection

Existing data was collected from the Online Learner Feedback form (course evaluation

form). The course evaluation included closed ended questions. The questions asked students to

rate their perceived satisfaction with instruction in the Contemporary American Society online

course.

The Online Learning Services Department utilized a website https://online.nwtc.edu/eval

to collect the data in the summer semester of 2011. The feedback form was sent to 78 learners.

The feedback form was completed by 26 learners. The study was explained to the students on

Blackboard with the instructor's assistance. The instructor informed students how to access the

link in Blackboard to complete the form.   Students were informed that participation was

voluntary.   The instructions explained how to complete the questions on the feedback form.

Completed feedback forms were retrieved by the Online Learning Services Department for

computation. The data was made available to instructors in an Excel spreadsheet.

Student names were optional on the course evaluation and the data cannot be traced back

to which students provided which ratings. The researcher had access to the number of students

who filled out the form during the summer semester 2011, but had no way of determining who

those students were. Student identifiers were not listed in the data run. Students were informed

at the time of data collection that the results would be used for course evaluation.

Data Analysis

The data collected was derived from a rating scale. The feedback form was analyzed

using simple descriptive statistics.   The selected responses were counted and a percentage was

accrued to each of the responses.   The data was analyzed using frequencies for all ten questions, since this information was nominal. This involved computing a frequency table for the categorical variables.

Chapter four will present the findings relative to this study.

Chapter IV: Findings

The purpose of the study was to analyze student feedback about their experiences in an online Contemporary American Society course offered at NWTC. This study determined if students were satisfied with the instructional delivery, instructional methodology, instructor interaction and learning experiences in the online Contemporary American Society course. The data from the study answered the following research questions:

1. Were students satisfied with instructor interaction?

2. Did the instructor encourage students to express themselves?

3. Were students satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed?

4. Were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?

5. How did students rate their instruction in the online course?

The purpose of this chapter was to present and analyze student feedback about their experiences in the online Contemporary American Society course offered at NWTC.

Demographics

The sample used to complete this study were 26 students at NWTC, Wisconsin who were enrolled in four online Contemporary American Society sections in summer 2011. A course evaluation was administered to the students at the end of the term they were enrolled, summer 2011. The course evaluation was made up of 24 questions that would measure their level of satisfaction.

Student Satisfaction with Instructor Interaction

The first research question addressed student satisfaction with instructor interaction in the online course. The research question was addressed in The Online Learner Feedback Form which asked students to answer the question or statement by selecting excellent, strong, adequate, weak or does not apply. Student satisfaction was defined as teacher practices such as the instructor returning homework, tests, papers, projects, etc. in a timely way; the instructor returning phone calls promptly; the instructor returning e-mails promptly; the instructor being available during posted hours; the instructor answering learner questions, and the learner being aware of learner responsibilities. These were important subtopics of the first research question and the statistical data is shown in the tables below.

When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the instructor returning homework, tests, papers, projects, etc. in a timely way, 88% of the students rated their instructor as excellent; 8% of the students answered strong; there were no responses of adequate or weak; 4% of students indicated does not apply. The majority of students were satisfied with the instructor returning homework, tests, papers, projects, etc. in a timely manner. Table 1 presents these findings.

Table 1
Levels of Satisfaction with Instructor Returning Homework, Tests, Papers, Projects, etc. in a Timely Way

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	23	88%
Strong	2	8%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	1	4%
Total	26	100%

When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the instructor returning phone calls promptly, 31 % of the students described instructor promptness at returning phone calls as excellent; 69% said this statement did not apply to them.

Students responded that they were satisfied with the instructor returning phone calls promptly. Over half of the students responded that this question did not apply to their satisfaction. Table 2 presents these findings.

Table 2
Levels of Satisfaction with the Instructor Returning Phone Calls Promptly

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	8	31
Strong	0	0
Adequate	0	0
Weak	0	0
Does Not Apply	18	69
Total	26	100

When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the instructor returning emails promptly, 65% of the students described instructor promptness at returning emails as excellent; 4% of the students described instructor promptness as strong; and 31% of the students responded that this did not apply to their satisfaction.

The majority of students were satisfied with the instructor returning emails promptly. Table 3 presents these findings.

Table 3
Levels of Satisfaction with the Instructor Returning Emails Promptly

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	17	65%
Strong	1	4%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	8	31%
Total	26	100%

When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with instructor availability during posted hours, 42% described instructor availability during posted hours as excellent; 4% of the students answered strong; there were no responses of adequate or weak; 54% of students indicated does not apply.   Over half the students responded that this did not apply to them. Table 4 presents these findings.

Table 4
Levels of Satisfaction with the Instructor Available During Posted Hours

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	11	42%
Strong	1	4%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	14	54%
Total	26	100%

Levels of Satisfaction with the Instructor Available During Posted Hours

When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the instructor answering learner questions, 81% described instructor answering learner questions as excellent; 15% of the students answered strong; there were no responses of adequate or weak; and no responses for does not apply.   Over half the students were satisfied with being aware of learner responsibilities. Table 5 presents these findings.

Table 5
Levels of Satisfaction with the Instructor Answering Learner Questions

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	21	81%
Strong	2	8%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	3	11%
Total	26	100%

When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the learner being aware of learner responsibilities, 85% described their satisfaction with being aware of learner responsibilities as excellent; 15% of the students answered strong; there were no responses of adequate or weak; and no responses for does not apply.   Student satisfaction was defined as satisfaction with the instruction that explained the learner responsibilities. The majority of the students were satisfied with being aware of learner responsibilities. Table 6 presents these findings.

Table 6
Levels of Satisfaction with the Learner Being Aware of Learner Responsibilities

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	22	85%
Strong	4	15%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	0	0%
Total	26	100%

Student Satisfaction with the Instructor Encouraging Students to Express Themselves

The second research question was designed to gain an understanding of student satisfaction with the instructor encouraging students to express themselves. The research question was addressed in the Online Learner Feedback Form which asked students to answer the question or statement by selecting excellent, strong, adequate, weak or does not apply.

When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the instructor encouraging students to express themselves, 100% rated their instructor as excellent; there were no responses of strong, adequate or weak; and no responses for does not apply. All of the students who responded to this question rated their satisfaction with the encouragement given by the instructor as excellent. Table 7 presents these findings.

Table 7
Levels of Satisfaction with Instructor Encouragement Given Learners to Express Themselves

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	26	100%
Strong	0	0%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	0	0%
Total	26	100%

Student Satisfaction with Availability of the Instructor When Extra Help Was Needed

The third research question addressed whether students were satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed. The research question was addressed in the Online Learner Feedback Form which asked students to answer the question or statement by selecting excellent, strong, adequate, weak or does not apply. Student satisfaction was defined as the availability of the instructor to provide extra instructional help when students asked. When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed, 58% described their satisfaction with the instructor providing extra help as excellent; 4% of the students answered strong; there were no responses of adequate or weak; and 38% responded does not apply. The majority of the students were satisfied with the availability of the instructor providing extra help when needed. Table 8 presents these findings.

Table 8
Levels of Satisfaction with the Availability of the Instructor when Extra Help was Needed

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	15	58%
Strong	1	4%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	10	38%
Total	26	100%

Student Understanding of Learner Responsibilities (class expectations, requirements, grading policy).

The fourth research question asked if students were satisfied with their understanding of learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy). The research question was addressed in the Online Learner Feedback Form which asked students to answer the question or statement by selecting excellent, strong, adequate, weak or does not apply. Student satisfaction was defined as satisfaction with the instruction that explained class expectations, requirements and grading policy.

When asked to describe their level of satisfaction with their understanding of learner responsibilities, 92% of students described their satisfaction as excellent; 8% of the students answered strong; there were no responses of adequate, weak or does not apply. The majority of the students were satisfied with the instruction that explained class expectations, requirements and grading policy. Table 9 presents these findings.

Table 9
Levels of Satisfaction with Students Understanding Learner Responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy).

Response	Frequency (N=26)	Percentage
Excellent	24	92%
Strong	2	8%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	0	0%
Total	26	100%

Student Rating of Instruction in the Course

The fifth research question asked how students rated their instruction in the online course. The question was addressed in the Online Learner Feedback Form which asked students to answer the question or statement by selecting much higher, average, same, lower, does not apply. Student satisfaction was defined as satisfaction with the instruction in the online course.

When asked to rate their level of satisfaction with instruction in the online course, 53% of students rated the instruction as much higher; 37% of the students answered strong; there were no responses of adequate or weak and 10% responded does not apply. The majority of the students rated their satisfaction with the instruction in the online course as much higher or average. 10% of students responded that this question did not apply to their satisfaction. Table 10 presents these findings.

Table 10
How Students Rated their Instruction in the Online Course

Response	Frequency (N=19)	Percentage
Excellent	10	53%
Strong	7	37%
Adequate	0	0%
Weak	0	0%
Does Not Apply	2	10%
Total	19	100%

The goal of this chapter was to present and analyze student feedback about their satisfaction levels in online Contemporary American Society courses offered at NWTC. A majority of students indicated that their level of satisfaction with the online Contemporary American Society course was excellent or strong in tables 1, 3, 5 and 6. A majority of students rated their satisfaction as much higher or higher in table 10. In tables 2 and 4, a majority of students indicated Does Not Apply to their satisfaction.

Chapter 5 will present the Summary of Findings, Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations of this study.

Chapter V: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

This final chapter contains a summary of the findings, conclusions as they relate to the instruction in the course and the research questions and recommendations for instructors who teach online courses.

The purpose of this study was to analyze student feedback about their experiences in an online Contemporary American Society course offered at NWTC. The study determined if students were satisfied with the instructional delivery, instructional methodology, instructor interaction and learning experience in the online Contemporary American Society course.

Within the context of online enrollment in the Contemporary American Society course offered by NWTC during the summer semester 2011, the following questions were addressed in this research:

1. Were students satisfied with instructor interaction?

2. Did the instructor encourage students to express themselves?

3. Were students satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed?

4. Were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?

5. How did students rate their instruction in the online course?

The research design was descriptive in nature and utilized a course evaluation that was emailed in a form of questions to students enrolled in online Contemporary American Society classes. The sample used to complete the study were 26 students at NWTC in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. The students responded on a voluntary basis.

The course evaluation featured 10 questions that were aligned with the research study questions. The research questions were designed to answer if online students were satisfied with the instructional delivery, instructional methodology, instructor interaction and learning experience. Each participant was emailed a copy of the questions. The course evaluation provided specific directions which described how to complete each question. The course evaluation data was collected via a web based survey and compiled by the Online Learning Services Department. The existing data and results were used to identify student feedback about their online experiences in the online Contemporary American Society course.

Summary of Findings

A brief summary of the findings are presented below organized by the research study questions.

Research question 1: Were students satisfied with instructor interaction?

The majority of students were satisfied with the instructor returning homework, tests, papers, projects, in a timely way. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that they were very satisfied and 8% indicated satisfied. This was consistent with Dunn, Lou and Willem's study that justified the need for feedback by identifying the association between feedback and student satisfaction. Feedback given after an assignment was the second most common type of feedback. (Dunn, 2003; Lou, 2003; Willems, 2006).

Less than half the students responded that they were satisfied with the instructor returning phone calls promptly. Sixty-nine percent of the students responded that this question did not apply to their satisfaction. Chickering and Gamson, 1987, stated that an instructor is effective when the instructor did the following: provided prompt feedback to students.

The majority of students were satisfied with the instructor returning emails promptly. Sixty-five percent of the students described instructor promptness at returning emails as excellent. Less than half of the students responded that this did not apply to their situation. This was consistent with Chickering and Ehrman (2008) which highlighted feedback as one of the key elements in quality teaching in higher education. It was also consistent with Chickering and Gamson, 1987, which again stated that an instructor was effective when the instructor provided prompt feedback to students.

Forty-six percent of the students were very satisfied or satisfied with the availability of the instructor during posted office hours. More than half of the students responded that this did not apply to their situation. Chickering and Gamson (1987) listed encouraging student-faculty contact as one of the seven dimensions of practice that had been widely accepted as criteria of quality in university instruction.

The majority of students were satisfied with the instructor answering learner questions. Eighty-one percent of students indicated they were very satisfied and 8% indicated they were satisfied. Less than half of students responded that this did not apply to their situation. This was consistent with Nicol & McFarlane-Dick's (2006) study that cited one of the principles of good feedback as the instructor delivering high quality information to students about their learning. The findings were also consistent with Dunn (2003), Lou (2003) and Willems (2006) which stated that feedback during the continuous assessment process (addressing student doubts) was the most widespread form of feedback in the online classroom. This feedback was characterized by information on how to improve work and how to take learning further.

The majority of students were satisfied with the learner awareness of learner responsibilities. Eighty-five percent of students responded that they were very satisfied and 15%

responded they were satisfied. This was consistent with Nicol & McFarlane-Dick's (2006) study which listed instructor help and clarified what good performance was (explaining goals, criteria and expected standards) as one of the principles of good feedback.

Research question 2: Did the instructor encourage students to express themselves?

All of the respondents in this study were satisfied with instructor encouragement given learners to express themselves. All of the students indicated high levels of satisfaction with this statement. Newman and Wehlage (1993) discussed substantive dialogue as one of the conditions that characterize authentic learning activities.   Nicol and McFarlane-Dick (2006) listed encouraging teacher and peer dialogue around learning and encouraging positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem as two of the seven principles of good feedback.

Research question 3: Were students satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed?

The responses of the students indicated high levels of satisfaction relative to the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed. Fifty-eight percent responded that they were very satisfied and 4% responded that they were satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed. This was consistent with one of Woo & Reeves (2007) deep level learning criteria: assuring students have access to the instructor in order to clear points of confusion and expand concepts. This was also consistent with Chen & Shaw's (2006) discussion of thoughtful presentation, demonstration, monitoring and feedback positively impacting student mastery of complex material.

Research question 4: Were students able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy)?

The majority of students were satisfied with understanding learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy).   Responses to this question resulted in 92% indicating very satisfied and 8% indicating satisfied with understanding learner responsibilities. Nicol & McFarlane-Dick (2006) cited helping to clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria and expected standards) as one of the seven principles of good feedback. This finding was also consistent with Palloff & Pratt (2007) who explained that an instructor who used an active, collaborative, constructivist approach remained actively engaged in the process and gently guided students who strayed, coaxing them back to the learning goals.

Research question 5: How did the student rate their instruction in the online course?

The majority of students, 53% indicating excellent and 37% indicating strong, rated their instruction in the online course as above average. This was consistent with the finding by Picciano (2010) that most students who completed an online course or program perceived online learning as beneficial and that satisfaction curves for students in online courses were very high once they became comfortable with the change in format, resulting in a curve that started very low and increased as the course went on.

Student satisfaction with instructor interaction, additional assistance when extra help was needed, encouragement given students to express themselves, student understanding of learner responsibilities and overall rating of the instruction provided in the online Contemporary American Society course was high or above average in all of these areas. In addition, response rates to the emailed course evaluation were above 20%.   Thirty-three percent of students from four Contemporary American Society online course sections responded to the evaluation.

Conclusions

The findings of the course evaluation supported the literature reviewed. The research questions were listed below with the supported research from the literature review.

1. The first research question asked if students were satisfied with instructor interaction. The findings showed that student satisfaction with instructor interaction was high. One could conclude that student satisfaction was high because the instructor had experience teaching in the traditional classroom before teaching in the online format. Research done in the study by Easton (2003) supported this conclusion. In this study the researcher found that many of the skills required of an online instructor are similar to those for effective face-to-face teachings.

2. The second research question asked if the instructor encouraged students to express themselves. The findings showed that student satisfaction with the instructor encouraging students to express themselves was high. According to a study by Moore (1993) to overcome transactional distance in online learning "learner instructor interaction" needed to occur. Learner instructor interaction referred to interaction that included encouraging the learner, interacting with the instructor by asking questions and communicating with the instructor regarding course activities. A conclusion could be made that the instructor in the Contemporary American Society online course applied "learner instructor interaction" as a teaching method and as a result, student satisfaction with instructor encouragement was high.

3. The third research question addressed availability of the instructor when extra help was needed. The findings indicated that the majority of students were satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed. A study by Woo &

Reeves (2007) stated that one of the criteria for learning to occur was student access to the instructor in order to clear points of confusion and expand concepts. The instructor who taught Contemporary American Society was accessible to students when extra help was needed and therefore students were satisfied when they needed extra instructional help.

4. The fourth research question asked if students were able to understand learner responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy). The findings indicated that students were very satisfied with understanding learner responsibilities. A study by Lepak, Killion, Reilly (2009) stated that faculty serve as positive reinforcers or coaches, content experts and facilitators of collaborative learning. Group members of this study appreciated having clear guidelines for planned communication. Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance stated that one key variable in the theory was structure, which referred to the aspects of course design and organization, such as learning objectives, planned interaction and assignments (Moore 1973, 1993). A conclusion could be drawn that the instructor who taught Contemporary American Society provided structure, planned interaction, course design, organization and served as a positive facilitator and coach, answering student questions about learner responsibilities and learning objectives in the course.

5. The fifth research question asked students to rate their instruction in the online course. The majority of students were satisfied with their instruction. This was consistent with Espasa & Meneses (2010) and the feedback process that promoted regulation of learning. According to Espasa and Meneses, the presence of feedback was connected with higher levels of satisfaction with the general running of the

course. Furthermore, in a study by Egan & Akdere (2005), Goodyear (2001) and Williams (2003) it was recommended that university teachers who taught online courses receive training and knowledge of the types and characteristics of feedback. One could conclude that the instructor in the Contemporary American Society course had received training and knowledge of the process of feedback and applied the teaching methods in the course.

Recommendations

The results of this research study yielded several recommendations. The recommendations are listed below.

1. The findings indicated that the instructor who taught the Contemporary American Society course in the online format was able to develop interaction and engagement with the students. The findings also indicated that the instructor encouraged students to express themselves in the online class. It was not evident that this instructor needed training and knowledge to develop teaching strategies that would improve instructor -student communication in the online format.

 The findings indicated that learners were satisfied with their awareness and understanding of their responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy) in the online course. For students in online courses who are not aware of or do not understand these responsibilities, (students who are very new to the online format) college administrators could provide Introduction to Blackboard training sessions for these students. This could be accomplished by informing academic advisors and instructors when the sessions will be held so that they could direct students to the sessions or by loaning out a DVD to students in the library for student

viewing prior to the start of the course. This could improve learner awareness and understanding of their responsibilities (class expectations, requirements and grading policy) in the online course.

2. Students in the course were satisfied with the availability of the instructor when extra help was needed. For students who were struggling with the lack of face- to- face instruction and need extra help, the use of Skype could be a way to solve the lack of face -to -face interaction with students and provide the extra instructional help. Students could be encouraged to schedule a Skype appointment with the instructor when they needed clarification about content or had a question that could not be adequately addressed on discussion boards or email. Instructors could post this on the syllabus and offer days and times when Skype appointments could be scheduled. Students could arrange appointments via email on Blackboard with the instructor. It is recommended that a system be developed to utilize Skype to enhance student and instructor interaction.

3. Students in the online course rated their learning as above average. For students in online courses who are struggling with the learning in the online format, a meeting with an academic advisor is helpful. Academic advisors could hand out a questionnaire that asks what skills the student is bringing to the course, specifically, the student could be asked if they possess computer navigational skills, time management skills, self-directed and independent learner skills and information searching skills. The advisor could help determine if the online format is appropriate for the student and advise on other options such as taking the course in a traditional or blended classroom.

4. The course evaluation tool that was used had questions that could be worded in a way that would capture more meaningful information. The wording on the course evaluation could be changed to read "was instructor feedback helpful in clarifying concepts?", "did the instructor encourage students to participate in online discussion with other students?", "did the instructor explain the course expectations (class expectations, requirements and grading policy) in a way that was understandable?" A research evaluation tool that would capture student feedback midstream and provide timely feedback that instructors could act on during the duration of the online course would be an improved way of evaluating interaction, instructional delivery, instructional methodology and learning. The course evaluation that was used to capture feedback was given after the online course was finished. A new, innovative evaluation tool is needed that provides results immediately to the instructor.

Research showed that if instructors are trained to be effective facilitators of online learning, students enrolled in distance education courses are satisfied with their learning experience. Teaching online requires more than designing a course and outlining content. Instructing in the online format means finding ways to connect with students, in other words facilitating and guiding the learning process. Teaching strategies need to be utilized which actively engage the learner and develop an online learning community. Students are then less likely to "disappear" or "make minimal efforts" when communicating online. The instructor needs to be aware that students in the online format are challenged by the distance and transactional communication. Keeping lines of communication open between the instructor and student and the student and their classmates is the challenge that online instructors face. The findings and research of this study indicated that the instructor was an effective facilitator in the

online learning process and as a result the students were satisfied with the instruction and

learning.

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