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**Abstract**

Statistics show that online learners have higher attrition rates than students on campus (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). However, engaged learners often persist to completion (Tinto, 2017a). This paper presents a literature review exploring distance learner engagement from the perspective of students and instructors. Factors contributing to engagement were summarized by Moore’s (1989) three types of interactions; learner to content, learner to instructor, and those between learners. These categories were used to code and report the findings of this study.

The purpose of this research was to study and describe strategies used by instructors to stimulate and sustain distance learner engagement. A sample of instructors from the University of Wisconsin-Stout who taught online courses were interviewed for this qualitative study. The findings were reported in a rich narrative description highlighting many of the participants’ best practices. The data revealed that this group of instructors employed teaching strategies which aligned with best practices in the literature. This information may be of value to instructional designers as well as online educators. By sharing this information with the academic community, the author’s hope is that engagement, and therefore outcomes of online students will benefit by this study.
Acknowledgments

To my children Moses and Marley. Follow your passions wherever they lead; you have the power to accomplish anything you set out to.

Love, Mama
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Chapter I: Introduction

Throughout history, little about the educational setting was developed with the learner in mind (Moore, 1989). If one wanted formal education, they attended a class that was held at a pre-determined place and time. Some face to face classes are still held today simply because it is the most familiar format to instructors and institutions of learning. There is a disconnect on how to convert traditional courses to flexible, interactive and engaging material for distance learners (Moore, 1989). However, online or distance education, defined by the US Department of Education as any education that occurs wherein the instructor and learners are physically separated, which includes instruction by telepresence, correspondence courses, and self-paced courses (Distance Education Policy, 2013) continues to gain in popularity (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Ginder & Stearns, 2014; Gregory & Lampley, 2016). Statistics show that over one-fourth of higher education students take online courses (Seaman & Seaman, 2017). The percentage of US college students taking at least one online course has increased from 25.9% of enrolled students in 2012 to 29.7% in 2015 (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Although the numbers of students enrolling in online education courses continues to rise, this format suffers from students dropping out of courses 10 – 20% more frequently than in the face-to-face environment (Angelino & Natvig, 2009).

Lack of learner engagement is cited as a leading reason for online course dropout. Students report feeling disconnected from their classmates, instructors, and the learning materials, as well as the institution (Banna, Grace Lin, Stewart, & Fialkowski, 2015; Dixson, 2010; Jobe, Lenio, & Saunders, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). In online courses, instructors face the challenge of providing advisement, instruction, and expectations to create an environment of learning that is inspiring to students (Lee, Pate, & Cozart, 2015). Interactivity
within online courses is shown to increase student engagement, but the asynchronous interactions of distance learning demand a different approach than the real time interactions used in the face to face environment (Croxton, 2014; Handelsman, Briggs, Towler, & Sullivan, 2005). Online instructors must devise a new skillset of teaching strategies to bridge the distance for their distance learners (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Dixson, 2010; Lee et al., 2015; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Moore, 1989).

Much research has been done to examine engagement from the perspective of online students (Martin & Bollinger, 2018; see also Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015; Croxton, 2014; Dixson, 2010; Handelsman et al., 2005; Moore, 1989). These studies suggested there was a need for research on learner engagement from the perspective of online instructors. Martin and Bolliger (2018) have studied how student and teacher perceptions of engagement compare to each other. Recently studies have emerged which address strategies that instructors employ to make their courses interactive and engaging to distance learners (Gómez-Rey, Barbera, & Fernández-Navarro, 2016; see also Banna et al., 2015; Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, & Ritzhaupt, 2019; Martin, Ritzhaupt, Kumar, & Budhrani, 2019). While there is a wealth of information available outlining strategies to inspire distance learners to succeed, it is not known how UW-Stout online instructors’ perceptions of engagement and teaching methods align with best practices identified in the literature.

According to the 2017 Distance Education State Almanac, Wisconsin had a total college enrollment of 88,369 students in the 2015–2016 school year. In that year, one fourth of those students were enrolled in at least one online course (Seaman et al., 2017). The University of Wisconsin – Stout offers many degrees in the field of education. In 2017 the institution had a
total of 195 students enrolled in undergraduate, MS, or EdD Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, and 156 students in the MS Ed program. Of these students, 38% percent of undergraduate and 78% of graduate enrolled in online courses (NCES College Navigator, 2018). All these programs are offered entirely online, and the EdD program consists of online and hybrid courses (Programs University of Wisconsin-Stout, 2019). In the 2017 school year the University of Wisconsin-Stout retention rate was 60% of undergraduate and 100% of MS students in CTE programs, and 94% in the MS ED program (Fact Book University of Wisconsin-Stout, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Research shows that increased student engagement results in greater student success and retention (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Lee et al., 2015; Moore 2014; Tinto, 2017b). The number of distance learners is increasing, therefore efforts must be made to understand methods of stimulating and sustaining student engagement in the online environment (King, 2014). Published studies on distance learner engagement have identified methods online instructors perceive as best practices in stimulating and sustaining student engagement. It is unknown how the perceptions and teaching strategies used by UW-Stout online instructors align with those studies.

Purpose of the Study

Student success and engagement not only are a primary goal of all education, but they also fall under several research problem areas and research objectives of the National Career and Technical Education Research Agenda (Lambeth, Elliot, & Joerger, 2003). Areas identified where research is warranted are teacher-learner interactions, best practices; educational methods, innovative instructional technologies, distance education and technology, and CTE student
graduation rate. This researcher believes that the primary importance of this study is in finding best practices which engage students and promote their success as online learners. While studies providing this information exist, they cannot be inclusive of all teaching methods. Furthermore, the technology which provides online learning is in constant evolution; new tools and techniques may have developed which could be reported.

**Research Questions**

The aim of the research was to answer the following questions:

1. What methods do instructors use to increase interactions in the online environment?
   - Interactions between learners and the course materials.
   - Interactions between learners and the instructor.
   - Interactions between learners.

2. Which strategies do instructors perceive are the most valuable or best received by their online students?

3. How do instructors define or identify engaged learners in their online courses?

**Importance of the Study**

Research has been done that address engagement from the student and instructor perspective, as well as strategies that teachers believe stimulate and sustain distance learner engagement. What methods do UW-Stout instructors use, and how do those methods align with published findings on student engagement? This study may benefit educators and instructional designers seeking best practices in engaging online students, contribute to the existing body of research on this topic, and positively influence the engagement of future online learners. It is likely that the best practices identified in this study may be applicable to many online courses and can be employed by educators in diverse programs of study.
Assumptions of the Study

This research was conducted with the following assumptions:

- Similar themes of describing engaged students from the viewpoint of instructors would emerge.
- Individual instructors would identify a variety of teaching strategies perceived as best practices for stimulating and maintaining engagement of online learners.
- Participants are knowledgeable in the terminology of online teaching and answered interview questions to accurately reflect their teaching practices.
- Participants provided truthful answers to the interview questions.
- The information gathered in this study may be transferrable to many online courses and employed by educators.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this research paper, the following definitions of terms will be used.

Asynchronous communication. Defined as communication between participants at varying times such as through email or discussion boards (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 22).

Distance (online) education. Any education that occurs wherein the instructor and learners are physically separated. That includes instruction by telepresence, correspondence courses, and self-paced courses (Distance Education Policy, 2013).

Engagement. “Actively participating, interacting, and collaborating with students, faculty, course content and members of the community” (Angelino & Natvig, 2009, p.3). The student’s personal investment in participating, learning and applying the knowledge and skills presented in the course material (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).
**Icebreaker.** An activity with the purpose of establishing familiarity of participants and beginning dialogue in a course in a non-threatening and low risk manner (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 51). Often a discussion post introducing oneself to others.

**Learning management system (LMS).** “A software that enables companies and educational institutions to create and manage lessons, courses, quizzes and other training materials” (Ismail, 2017).

**Netiquette.** A code of good behavior and communication style while using the internet, for the purpose of this paper, professional conduct in an online classroom environment (Christensson, 2017).

**Social presence.** “The degree of which a customer (learner) feels that there is always someone behind the screen” (Gómez-Rey et al., 2016, p. 149); measured by perceived amount of support the instructor gives to assist in student success.

**Synchronous communication.** Real-time communication that occurs at the same time for all participants (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 22).

**Limitations of the Study**

This researcher acknowledges the following limitations of this study.

1. The study is limited to the University of Wisconsin–Stout online CTE and MS ED instructors.

2. It is unknown if these teachers received faculty training through the University which may cause standardization of teaching methods.

3. As a qualitative study, the data is based on instructors’ perceptions of student engagement, actual effectiveness of these methods was not studied.
4. Variances of teaching strategies may differ within institutions as well as geographic regions.

5. Cultural differences of both students and instructors may influence what is perceived as engaging, this study reflects only the population of UW-Stout, in the US Midwest.

6. A small sample size (n= 10) impacts the ability to be inclusive of all methods for developing student engagement.

7. Time was a limitation, a study over a longer period most likely would produce additional information.

8. By nature, qualitative research is influenced by the interpretations of the researcher.

**Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to identify teaching methods that instructors perceive to stimulate and sustain online learner engagement. The intent was to document those strategies so the information could be transferable to instructional practice. Therefore, the study was conducted using a descriptive, qualitative research design. Qualitative research findings go beyond numerical statistics and describe the perceptions not only of the subjects, but also the researcher (Weirsma & Jurs, 2009, pp. 239-240).

A purposeful sample of UW-Stout instructors who taught at least one online course in the BS CTET, MS CTE, EdD and MS ED programs during the 2018–2019 school year were the focus of this research. Data was collected using open-ended, semi-structured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed to maintain accuracy of participants’ responses. Emerging theories and patterns were documented. Responses were coded and reported according to Moore’s (1989) Theories of Interactions, and then compared to a compilation of existing research findings. The results were reported in rich descriptive narrative.
Chapter II: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to identify what instructors believe are best practices to foster student engagement thereby promoting the success of online learners. Effective teaching stimulates and sustains student engagement (Handelsman et al., 2005). The following literature review investigated how student engagement was defined in previous studies. Documented teaching methods suggested to increase online student engagement were also explored.

Student engagement is a topic of importance in both the face-to-face and online learning environments. All students, regardless of their learning environment, who are engaged in their learning are more apt to be retained, therefore decreasing attrition rates (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). However, as Tinto (2017a) observed, students do not look to be retained by their learning institution, they speak of persisting through to degree completion. Persistence is driven by motivation, “the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise” (Tinto, 2017a, p. 2). Engaged learners are motivated students that are more likely to retain knowledge, synthesize and apply new concepts, earn higher grades, and complete degree programs (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015; Croxton, 2014; Dixson, 2010; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Literature was reviewed to explore models of student engagement and instructional strategies used by online educators, particularly at the post-secondary level.

Models of Engagement

In 1998, the Pew Charitable Trust gathered together a panel of educational scholars to create the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2019a). The focus of this endeavor was to identify effective teaching strategies and educationally purposeful activities which stimulate engaged learning. A survey tool was developed and is deployed to undergraduate freshmen and seniors from participating colleges and universities in the United States. Their
goal was to “assess whether an institution’s programs and practices were having the desired effects on students’ activities, experiences, and outcomes” (NSSE, 2019b, p.1). The survey was comprised of questions about participation in programs and activities provided by their schools, which are shown to correlate with high level educational development (NSSE, 2019a). The NSSE (2019a) identified 10 engagement indicators organized in four different themes. The major themes are; 1) academic challenges; activities to inspire critical thinking; 2) learning with peers; 3) experiences with faculty; and 4) campus environment (NSSE, 2019a). While campus environment does not seem to apply to distance learners, the components within this category can be translated to online courses through quality of interactions and creation of a supportive environment (Croxton, 2014; Tinto, 2017b). Handelsman et al., (2005) took components from the NSSE survey tool and incorporated them into their Student College Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ). Their research described engagement as a multi-dimensional phenomenon composed of “action, effort, and persistence”, cognitive and affective tendencies, and interactions within the learning community, which they assessed in their survey as skills, perceptions/interactions, emotions, and performance (Handelsman et al., 2005, p. 185).

Another prescription for student engagement can be found in the work of Conrad and Donaldson (2004) who described a Phases of Engagement Framework. Activities within this framework are intended to progressively build student engagement by incrementally increasing levels of interactions, similar to the levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. Phase one involves preparing the students to become comfortable in the online environment. Activities include orientation to the learning management system (LMS) on the computer, netiquette rules, introductions and icebreaker activities (Banna et al., 2015; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). The second phase creates activities encouraging student-to-student interaction and sharing of ideas, such as discussion
forums. The third increases interactions between students by introducing small group activities (Banna et al., 2015; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). In the fourth phase student led activities take place, such as presentations or student facilitated discussions (Banna et al., 2015; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).

Published studies imply that interactions are vital to stimulate and sustain student engagement, and students who interact more frequently during online courses tend to report higher levels of satisfaction (Gómez-Rey et al., 2016). However, Moore (1989) observed that the term “interaction” can remain ambiguous and therefore useless if not clearly defined. He concluded that there are three distinct levels of interaction which are critical in creating an environment of engagement for the online student. These include learner-to-content, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-learner interactions (Moore, 1989). Further research on student engagement confirmed these specific interactions are valued by online students and instructors alike (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2019a; Martin et al., 2019b). Creating opportunity for meaningful interactions throughout the length of a course is a challenge for online instructors which requires a different approach and more initial preparation than in the traditional face to face environment (Baran et al., 2013).

**Interactions between learners and the content.** Learner-to-content interaction is the “process of intellectually interacting with content that results in changes to the learners’ understanding, perspective, or the cognitive structures of the learners’ minds” (Moore, 1989, p. 2). A well-designed course should be rich in content interaction through the inclusion of active learning activities; ideally, inspiring excitement about progressing through the content to mastery of the material (Martin et al., 2019b). The content should be designed as a “continuous course pathway that increases their self-efficacy” (Martin et al., 2019a, p.38). Instructors reported that
they spent more time on course design and preparation for online courses than those they taught in the classroom setting (Baran et al., 2013). Successful online educators place students at the center of their teaching, and those who have difficulty stepping away from a teacher-centered practice may have difficulty in adapting to the needs of their distance learners (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016). Instructors reported on the importance of knowledge of the content they are teaching. This knowledge helps them break or “chunk” the course materials into manageable modules and sort through information to assess what is relevant to the students (Baran et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2019a). A survey by Martin et al. (2019a) reported that 92% of students preferred a consistent and structured course design, particularly across program courses. This reveals that collaboration on course design between instructors within a program may be beneficial to student engagement and retention.

Courses must be designed to provide a relevant, productive and effective learning experience, with activities which encourage the students to express how the information transfers to real-life situations, their interests and interpretations (Croxton, 2014; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Handelsman et al., 2005; Martin et al., 2019b). Students report higher satisfaction when presented with short learning modules that are visually appealing (Baran et al., 2013). Lengthy video recorded lectures, when presented to online students, do not result in the same outcome as in the face-to-face environment; the lack of interactivity reduces student engagement and quality of the lesson (Baran et al., 2013). Because many distance learners are working adults balancing full time careers with education, consideration should be given to the amount of time students must spend to complete the required activities when designing course materials (Gómez-Rey et al., 2016).
Early contact with students is important in setting the stage for the course and an effective step in reducing student attrition due to technical problems or feelings of isolation (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). Educators should assess student computer competency and provide training on how to navigate through the LMS or learning materials (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Croxton, 2014; Martin et al., 2019a). If technology is required that students may not be familiar with, tip sheets and tutorials can prevent frustrations which may cause student attrition (Martin et al., 2019b). While some instructors may not feel it is within their realm to provide technical support, they should be able to connect students with the proper resources to guide them through the learning process (Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2019b)

One way to encourage student interaction with the course materials is to provide detailed instructions and expectations early on in the course (Martin et al., 2019b). Croxton (2014) reported that distance learners complain of receiving “limited guidance” (p. 318) on how to complete assignments. This highlights the importance of instructors setting examples and delineating expectations to alleviate student anxiety and set a framework of consistency for students (Croxton, 2014). Because online educators cannot pick up on visual cues of a possible lack of understanding that can be noticed in the face-to-face classroom, it is imperative to provide clear, detailed, step by step instructions for each activity and assignment (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). Many online instructors report using rubrics as a guide for expectations in discussion forums and assignments (Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Martin et al., 2019a). However, some feel that providing a rubric is ineffective because it turns students into “doers rather than engagers”; working to check off a list rather than put thoughtful application into the activities (Bolliger & Martin, 2018, p. 576). In a study by Bolliger and
Martin (2018) comparing student to instructor perceptions on engagement, students ranked posting a due date checklist in the course shell higher in importance than instructors did. Perception gaps regarding what is important to the students can be alleviated by deploying pre-course surveys or through icebreaker activities.

Experienced online learners tend to interact more often and navigate through course modules easily (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). However, most adult learners have been educated in the traditional lecture based classrooms, they may not be experienced collaborating and interacting with online course materials or managing the time required to complete coursework (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 7). Instructors can help nourish autonomy by announcing how much time students can expect to spend on weekly course materials, thereby helping them self-regulate and plan for their study time (Martin et al., 2019a). Furthermore, instructors can and should be a model of what it looks like to participate in an online course (Martin et al., 2019b).

To increase the effectiveness of their teaching, online educators need to know who their students are. Icebreaker activities can be a practical tool for instructors to learn about their students and tailor the material to their needs and interests, thereby stimulating learner engagement at the beginning of a course. To initiate an icebreaker activity the teacher posts a personal introduction and instructs students to do the same, usually using a prompt asking for details that may give an insight to what is important to the student. (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Baran et al., 2013). This simple activity can provide a wealth of information to the instructor about their students that goes beyond the superficial demographics that comes with a course roster (Baran et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2019b). Educators can then stimulate engagement by creating interactive assignments tailored to meet student interests and goals identified in
icebreaker activities, empowering them to draw from their experiences and apply them to coursework (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Dixson, 2010).

Handelsman et al. (2005) measured learner-to-content engagement as a component of skills and emotional engagement; ways the students make connections between the course material and application in their life or future. Learner-to-content engagement is “invisible” unless the educator creates activities that encourage the students to demonstrate these connections (Handelsman et al., 2005, p. 186). Activities should involve the learners in doing, thinking, and applying the material they are learning to their lives (Martin et al., 2019b see also; Baran et al., 2013; Croxton, 2014; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Handelsman et al., 2005). When students achieve the ability to transfer new information to real-life situations, they experience a greater sense of meaningful learning, thereby increasing engagement (Gómez-Rey et al., 2016). Opportunities for students to demonstrate their ability to transfer the lesson material may include discussions, cooperative learning, debates, role playing, problem-based learning, real-life simulations, interactions with multimedia, information searches, storyboard creation journaling, blogs and Wikis (Banna et al., 2015; Burns, 2010; Croxton, 2014). The plethora of internet-based learning tools affords to almost unlimited possibilities to create these rich learning experiences; for instance instructors can create virtual 3D field trips, and live-stream or record interviews with guest speakers (Baran et al., 2013). Some instructors have reported posting short weekly videos or podcasts to introduce new content, updates on activities and course news, and module completion feedback to the general population of the class (Baran et al., 2013).

Online courses that are designed with high levels of interactivity leave room for the instructor to improvise, edit, and update activities based on the needs of each group of students (Baran et al., 2013). As previously addressed, much time is put into pre-course preparation
however, instructors should employ flexibility to change direction of activities in response to any identified problems or unique situations that may arise as the class unfolds (Baran et al., 2013). Some instructors reported deploying mid-semester course evaluations to check student engagement with the material, making adjustments in alignment with survey responses (Baran et al., 2013). Another technique which has been found to increase engagement and relevancy of course content is to request that students provide additional resources such as multi-media, articles, or case studies related to the topic which are then shared with the class (Baran et al., 2013).

Effective online teaching is not a matter of simply creating learning modules, presenting them to students and repeating with each new group of students. In order to maintain relevancy of instructional strategies, course materials, and presentation methods, changes may need to be made (Baran et al., 2013). At the end of each course, successful instructors review the materials for what worked and what was not well received, revising the content or deployment methods prior to the next offering (Martin et al., 2019b). Just as the students undergo assessment, the course itself should be assessed to assure it continues to meet the learning objectives.

**Interactions between learners and the instructor.** The absence of face-to-face interactions in the online setting can contribute to a feeling of isolation in distance learners, reducing their feelings of belonging, engagement, and participation in the course (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015; Burns, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Dixson, 2010; Handelsman et al., 2005; Moore, 1989). In fact, the lack of interactions between learners and their instructor is reported to be the highest indicator of online student drop out (Croxton, 2014). Conversely, research has shown that online students identified frequent learner to instructor interactions as highly valued and the most reported indicator of student satisfaction (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger
Instructors who have frequent interactions with their students, demonstrate flexibility, and provide timely feedback are most valued by learners (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015; Croxton, 2014; Handelsman et al., 2005). Because their students are not sitting in front of them giving visual clues of engagement (or lack of), there is an increased risk that a student could “fall through the cracks” (Baran et al., 2013, p. 27). Consequently, online instructors must aim to achieve an even higher level of interaction than they would in a face-to-face classroom (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Baran et al., 2013; Moore, 1989). Therefore, teaching in an asynchronous online environment requires a different approach to maintain communication with students (Banna et al., 2015; Burns, 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Moore, 1989).

Studies report that the level of engagement of the teacher may have a strong correlation with engagement of the learners, and there is a positive relationship between instructor involvement and student engagement (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Handelsman et al., 2005; Martin et al., 2019b). Online teaching requires a great investment of time on the part of the instructor. One online instructor stated “the core of teaching was not in providing the content, but rather in interacting with the students” (Baran et al., 2013, p. 29). Online educators need to establish a sense of social presence for their students. Gomez et al. (2016) defines social presence as “the degree to which a customer (learner) feels that there is always someone behind the screen; the level of concern the teacher shows for the student or the extent to which the teacher encourages student participation” (p. 149). Research has shown that consistent presence by the instructor correlated with distance learners’ perceived growth of knowledge, satisfaction and sense of belonging to a community (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018). This online presence is an integral component, the instructor must
“perform activities that translate virtual interactions into an impression of a real person” (Banna et al., 2015, p. 250). A practical way to establish an online presence is through audio or video recordings embedded within the course materials which allow students to see the instructor’s facial and body language and hear the voice inflection that is naturally present in face-to-face classes (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Martin et al., 2019b). Creation of social media pages dedicated to the class such as Face Book, Twitter, Instagram, or Snap Chat sites can be useful to easily send out announcements or check in with students (Banna et al., 2015; Baran et al., 2013; Burns, 2010). In addition to increasing student engagement, frequent social presence and communication also has shown to establish a relationship of trust between distance learners and their instructors (Baran et al., 2013).

As the subject matter expert, the primary role of the instructor is of the facilitator of learning (Martin et al., 2019b) Interactions between the learner and instructor allow the student to learn from the experience of the professional, to become influenced and inspired to learn and create their own meanings from the course content (Baran et al., 2013; Moore, 1989). In the void of this interaction, the student can be at risk of not making the correct application of the material. When functioning independently, learners don’t have enough knowledge or background of the topic to be sure they can apply it correctly, to the extent it can be taken, or know all the possible ways it can be applied to a given situation (Moore, 1989). The instructor provides this guidance and should “be the person who tries to instill what the profession is all about” (Baran et al., 2013, p. 192) Through sharing their expertise, online educators can both foster learner-to-instructor interactions, and also model what it looks like to participate in an online course (Martin et al., 2019b). Instructors can also help guide the students’ learning by
recording short introductory commentary at the beginning of each learning module, sharing their insights on the material or prompting further analysis (Baran et al., 2013).

Lack of learner-to-instructor interaction makes it extremely difficult to personalize instruction, resulting in a generic presentation (Moore, 1989). It is essential to know who the students are and what their goals are in order to help them meet those goals. (Baran et al., 2013). Icebreaker activities and pre-course surveys can provide an instructor with valuable information about those in their class. One strategy discussed in a study by Baran et al. (2013) is to ask students to create a short presentation as an introduction of themselves including their photo and information about their major, reasons for taking the course/course goals, their location and time zone. Some instructors appreciate having a face to put with their students’ names and to know what drives the students in their course. Knowing the students’ location and time zones may be helpful in planning for any synchronous meetings. Asking the students if there is anything they want the instructor to know about them can be useful as well. It can give the teacher the opportunity to provide additional support as needed, to help the student work through their challenges to reach course or even degree completion (Martin et al., 2019b). One instructor revealed that during the first week of class they reach out to students and ask how they feel about the course (Martin et al., 2019b). When they receive responses indicating anxiety or nervousness, the teacher reaches out to those students to provide support from the beginning rather than mid-way through the semester (Martin et al., 2019b). Being aware of students’ needs and making connections with them early on is shown not only to stimulate student engagement, but also can make the difference in preventing student attrition (Martin et al., 2019b). Getting to know one’s students is a progressive process, best accomplished through daily interactions; tracking the students’ performance and communicating frequently with them (Baran et al., 2013;
Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Martin et al., 2019b). Bolliger and Martin (2018b) reported that the most valuable engagement strategies identified by instructors were creating and maintaining presence throughout the course through frequent communication and personalizing those contacts to the individual student. In the online environment educators can use multi-media approaches to communicate and build relationships with their students such as recording Screencast commentaries on their work, using Skype or another video tool for synchronous meetings, or even communicating through text. To increase learner satisfaction, communication channels can be tailored to each students’ preferred method (Baran et al., 2013).

Along with frequent communication regarding course modules, numerous studies have found that timely feedback correlates with student satisfaction and engagement (Banna et al., 2015; Burns, 2010; Dixson, 2010; Handelsman et al., 2005). Croxton (2014) reported that students prefer feedback from their instructor within two to three days. Feedback and interaction between the online learner and instructor can be personalized to each student rather than addressing the whole class, as often happens in the face-to-face environment (Moore, 1989). One drawback is learners may not benefit by hearing questions asked by other students and the resulting responses. Solutions to this issue may be to instruct students to post questions that are not learner specific to a discussion forum for all to learn from, or for the teacher themselves to post announcements addressing frequently asked questions (Banna et al., 2015). Many educators reported using online office hours; posted times when they are available for students to contact them with questions and concerns (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Martin et al., 2019b). However, some felt this strategy was under-utilized by students and they opted to call students directly when they identified a problem (Baran et al., 2013).
Online instructors should prioritize student communications and emails and strive to help resolve student problems as soon as possible (Baran et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2019b). Effective feedback goes beyond grading assignments to mentoring students, helping them manage their time, develop learning skills and apply new information to their interests (Martin et al., 2019b). One online instructor commented that his LMS allowed him to monitor student activity in the course shell and used this tool to take attendance of his distance learners. If a student hadn’t logged in or participated, he would email them to check in and find out why (Martin et al., 2019b). Small gestures such as this show students that their teacher cares about their success and helps build positive student-to-instructor relationships.

Interactions between learners. Connectivism, or constructing knowledge from interactions with others is extremely valuable in any learning environment (Kunkle, 2011; Moore, 1989). Learner-to-learner interactions are important in creating a sense of belonging to a community (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015; Moore, 1989; NSSE, 2019). As already addressed, distance learning can create a feeling of isolation, but educators have the means to span the distance by incorporating learner-to-learner interactions in their courses (Moore, 1989).

Virtual classrooms have no walls, online students can be connected globally, and these collaborations can and should be fostered to increase learning and student engagement (Kunkle, 2011). Icebreaker activities are a useful strategy to initiate learner to learner interactions, and are ranked at the top of activities that inspire online student engagement (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Introduction posts are often used in online courses to allow students to get to know who their classmates are, where they are from, and various other demographic information; helping to dispel the myth that online
learning is a solitary endeavor (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). Icebreaker activities are described as a means to create a sense of community, “a supportive and friendly atmosphere”, as well as an “interactive, meaningful and entertaining experiences for students” (Martin & Bolliger, 2018, p. 216). Additionally, they are a non-threatening way for students to start dialogue for collaborative learning (Bolliger & Martin, 2018, p. 577).

Guided discussion forums are a commonly used tool to stimulate and perpetuate student collaboration, with the goal of reaching a deeper understanding of the topic (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Participating in discussions in the traditional classroom can feel intimidating to students, but distance learners report feeling that asynchronous discussion “virtually eliminates” this awkwardness (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015; Croxton, 2014). Students feel safe to express their thoughts without restraint and are more comfortable asking questions (Banna et al., 2015; Croxton, 2014). The online environment also allows learners to use asynchronous social interactions to their advantage by taking the time to reflect on what they learned before responding to discussion prompts (Croxton, 2014). Educators can use asynchronous student-to-student interactions to encourage original thought, personal interpretations, and promote critical thinking (Croxton, 2014).

Some students reported that asynchronous discussion forums can feel artificial or forced and prefer synchronous exchanges with other students (Croxton, 2014). The plethora of multimedia tools available allow students to collaborate live via chat, audio, video, and interactive whiteboard applications (Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2018). These synchronous interactions have the potential to add a human feel; a sense of social presence and increased feeling of involvement in a learning community (Martin, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Budhrani, 2017). Instructors can use information gleamed from introductory icebreaker activities to assign students into groups
according to personalities, professions or interests; using their similarities to help forge positive relationships (Baran et al., 2013). It is of note however, that some studies reflect that distance learners find more faults with synchronous online sessions; ranking them as one of the least appreciated teaching strategies employed by instructors (Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2018). In a study by Martin and Bolliger, (2018), one student stated “we are all adults with busy lives – we take online classes so we don’t have to cater to another person’s schedule” (p. 214). This speaks to the importance of attention to flexibility when creating activities that require synchronous interactions between learners. Another strategy instructors can use to help overcome scheduling barriers is to be aware of locations of students, assigning them to groups within the same time zones and working around their hours in the workplace (Baran et al., 2013). Some online educators report using weekly class announcements, email updates, or an informal Q&A forum rather than trying to arrange synchronous activities (Bolliger & Martin, 2018).

Both asynchronous and synchronous communication methods can be used to enhance learning experiences of online students. Conrad and Donaldson (2011) outline a scaffolding effect of increasing opportunities for learner to learner activities. Beginning with icebreaker or introduction activities, learners then progress to participating in discussion forums, working in small groups, and finally through student-led activities such as presentations (Banna et al., 2015; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). One area of note is that Croxton (2014) found that students who find synchronous activities engaging reported higher satisfaction when assigned groups were limited to 4 participants. Once students are practiced at collaborating online, learner-guided activities are introduced, allowing for “opportunities for students to know and trust one another”, with the goal of working together to expand learning rather than relying on the instructor; thus building student autonomy (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 10). To create a sense of community
among their distance learners, some teachers provide an online “virtual lounge” in the LMS as part of their course shell; a place for students to chat about non-course related topics. A study by Bolliger and Martin (2018) revealed that both students and online instructors ranked virtual lounges low on a scale of effectiveness for encouraging engagement. They hypothesized that this may be because students don’t have time to participate, or may be connecting with each other through other social media outlets (Bolliger & Martin, 2018).

**Online Learning at University of Wisconsin-Stout**

The University of Wisconsin–Stout is one of 125 US designated Polytechnic Institutions, combining career focused applied learning with liberal arts education (Our Polytechnic Advantage, 2018). Located in the US Midwest, The University of Wisconsin-Stout had a fall 2017 total of 9,401 enrolled students (Fact Book University of Wisconsin-Stout, 2019). Of these, 38% undergraduate and 78% of graduate students were enrolled in online courses (NCES College Navigator, 2018).

**The University of Wisconsin–Stout Educational Career Cluster Programs**

The University of Wisconsin-Stout offers several programs for students pursuing a career in education, many of which have hybrid or completely online offerings (UW-Stout 2019). Stout’s Career and Technical Education Training program “provides instructors and non-instructors the opportunity to articulate an Associate’s Degree or Technical Diploma to a Bachelor's Degree by expanding their technical knowledge to include expertise in instruction, leadership, course construction, and evaluation” (B.S. Career Technical Education and Training, 2019). Graduates are qualified to teach in post-secondary schools, business or industry training and may pursue an advanced MS degree with specialties in CTE Coordinator, Educational Leadership, E-Learning and Online Teaching, or Instructional Design (M.S. Career and
All three programs offer customized instruction, specifically created for adult distance learners. The MS Education program features 100% online curriculum targeted at currently licensed teachers and instructors in business or industry who are seeking to complete a Master’s degree (UW-Stout 2019). In fall 2017, 195 students were enrolled in undergraduate, MS, and EdD Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs along with 156 students enrolled in the MS Education program at UW-Stout (Fact Book University of Wisconsin-Stout, 2019). In the same school year, the University of Wisconsin-Stout had a retention rate of 60% of undergraduate and 100% of MS students in CTE programs as well as 94% retention in the MS ED program. (Fact Book University of Wisconsin-Stout, 2019). Over 20 instructors taught online classes during the year referenced above, comprised of full-time faculty and adjunct professors (S. Jochim, personal communication, March 18, 2019). The high retention rate for online students in these programs indicate that UW-Stout instructors may be employing strategies that stimulate and sustain student engagement. Their online teaching methods and perceptions about how the methods affect student engagement are of interest and could potentially serve as a resource for other online educators.

Summary

Four theories of student engagement were studied in this literature review (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Handelsman et al., 2005; Moore, 1989; NSSE, 2019). Each contained similar themes, best represented by Moore’s (1989) Three Types of Interactions (learner-to-content, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-learner) which will be the model of comparison for the findings of this research. The reviewed sources provided information gathered from the perspective of both online students and instructors and used a combination of survey tools and semi-structured interviews. There is a wealth of research on methods to stimulate and maintain
distance learner engagement; how do the perceptions and strategies of UW-Stout online educators align with published strategies of best practices in this realm?
Chapter III: Methodology

Many studies have been conducted examining engagement from the perspective of both online educators and learners. The purpose of this research is to explore strategies instructors use to stimulate and sustain student engagement in the online environment, gather information specific to the practices of UW-Stout online educators, and compare the findings to published literature on the topic. Information gathered in this study may help this researcher and others who teach distance learners by revealing best practices, methods, and strategies employed in online courses.

The literature review consisted of both quantitative and qualitative research studies. This study employed a social constructivist approach, with the belief that individuals create assumptions and meanings based on their surroundings, experiences, and interactions within their lives (Creswell, 2003). A qualitative research design was employed to gather the narrative of the subjects of this study. In a qualitative study “it is the perceptions of those being studied that are important, and, to the extent possible, these perceptions are to be captured in order to obtain an accurate “measure” of reality (Weirsma & Jurs, 2009, p. 232). Variability in instructors’ perceptions, and therefore, methods employed to stimulate and encourage online student engagement were anticipated. Reporting these variables was the focus of this research.

While the results of this study are compared to Moore’s Theory of interactions (1989), the intent was to learn from instructors what teaching strategies they perceived were most successful in engaging their students. This research sought answers to the following questions:

1. What methods do instructors use to increase interactions in the online environment?
   - Interactions between learners and the course materials.
   - Interactions between learners and the instructor.
• Interactions between learners.

2. Which strategies do instructors perceive are the most valuable or best received by their online students?

3. How do instructors define or identify engaged learners in their online courses?

This chapter not only re-addresses the focus of the study, but also reveals the impetus behind selection of the study sample, the method of collecting data, the measures by which the data were analyzed, expected limitations of the study and concludes with a summary of major points.

Subject Selection and Description

The goal of this research was to explore strategies instructors use to stimulate and sustain student engagement in the online environment. While some studies queried distance learners on their perspectives on effective teaching strategies, (Banna et al., 2015; Croxton, 2014; Dixson, 2010; NSSE, 2019) online instructors became the focus of this inquiry. Key informant interviews are described as “qualitative interviews conducted with program stakeholders who are selected based on their background and unique knowledge about the program” (Zimmermann, Hurtig, & Small, 2019, p. 5). The population studied was UW-Stout instructors who taught at least one online course. Convenience sampling was used by focusing the study to those instructors teaching in the BS CTET, MS CTE, EdD, and MS ED programs during the 2018 – 2019 school year.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research it is said that the researcher is the instrument; their perspectives are highly influential, continually sorting and processing the data, deciding what information to collect, and how it affects the findings of the study (Weirsma & Jurs, 2009, pp. 239 - 240). Interviews are used in research “to collect detailed information about participants’ experiences
and impressions” (Zimmermann et al., 2019, p. 5). In order to gain detailed insight to instructors’ perspectives, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted which allowed flexibility to question further and encouraged participants to elaborate when needed. An interview protocol, (Appendix E) which included scripting for the introduction phase, interview itself, and closing was developed to assist the researcher to follow a consistent procedural guide while interacting with each participant (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). This protocol was trialed and reviewed by two non-participant online instructors and edits were made in response to their suggestions.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Prior to contacting study participants, approval was sought and received through the UW-Stout Institutional Research Board (IRB)( Appendix A). A list of twenty-five perspective participants (UW-Stout instructors who taught online classes) was provided by UW-Stout’s Adult Student Services Coordinator in the Department on Online and Distance Education. Those instructors were contacted through university email with an introduction letter detailing the purpose of the research, invitation to participate, identity protection, and statement of implied consent (Appendices B & C). A second email was sent to non-responders after one week (Appendix D).

During the study, ten participants were interviewed using the synchronous video conferencing tool Zoom™. Interview questions were displayed on the screen to assist the participants in maintaining focus and understanding the questions (Martin et al., 2019a). After obtaining verbal permission from the participants, each interview session was recorded using tools available in the software platform to ensure accuracy in data collection. A blind response study is not possible when conducting interviews in this manner. None of the participants are
named in this publication to maintain their privacy. Electronic records of interview transcripts were deleted after acceptance of this research paper by UW-Stout’s Graduate School.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were conducted and recorded using synchronous video conferencing software and then transcribed into documents labeled with participant demographic information. Consistency of interview questions within the study population was maintained allowing for additional probe questions which prompted participants to expand on their narrative or address emerging themes as needed (Miller, Willson, Chepp, & Padilla, 2014). The raw data was abridged to remove possible identifying information about the participants, additionally paraphrasing was used to mask speech patterns and dialects. The resulting condensed data was transferred to the data audit trail matrix (Appendix H) and re-ordered using a random number generator for each question.

In qualitative research, data analysis coincides with data collection, there is a continual building and adjusting of working hypotheses often due to unanticipated results (Weirisma & Jurs, 2009, p. 237). The assumption was that although the study participants taught at the same university and in the same field, many different teaching methods would be revealed. As patterns and themes were identified, additional documentation was created as an audit trail (Appendix H). This documentation revealed the observations of the researcher and how the findings were influenced by that process. This audit trail provides transparency so results can be understood and replicated in future studies (Miller et al., 2014).

According to Miller et al., (2014), qualitative research analysis can be broken down into five steps: 1) interviewing; 2) summarizing; 3) comparing data of all participants; 4) comparing data within sub-groups of participants; and, 5) reaching conclusions. Results from all
participants were compared and noted. Demographic data was collected to discern if there was a correlation within sub-groups of years of teaching in general, online teaching experience, or training of instructors. Similarities and differences in perceived best practices for engaging online learners were recorded. Teaching strategies perceived to engage learners were sorted into one of Moore’s (1989) Three Types of Interactions (learner to content, learner to instructor, or learner to learner) and compared within each category. Reported engagement strategies by UW-Stout instructors were compared to best practices identified in published research (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2019a; Martin et al., 2019b). Coding the interview responses to Moore’s (1989) model provided a means for the findings to be systematically organized, generalized to a larger population, and structured for comparison in future studies.

Unlike quantitative research which transforms data into numerical representations, qualitative studies aim to report on data using rich descriptions; interpreting the data within its own context and as an original phenomenon (Weirsma & Jurs, 2009, p. 237). The purpose of this study was to explore teaching methods used by online college instructors; results are reported in the narrative form.

Limitations

Because a small purposeful convenience sample was used, the data set is limited. A larger population sample, perhaps encompassing all instructors who teach online courses at a university would provide a greater number of teaching strategies used to stimulate and sustain student engagement. By nature, qualitative interview-based studies take a significant time investment by the researcher, a larger population sample would also increase the time to complete such a study.
Cultural differences of both students and instructors may influence what is perceived as engaging, this study reflects only a small population of UW-Stout instructors in the US Midwest. Variances of teaching strategies may occur within geographic regions, institutions, programs of study, and individual instructors.

As a qualitative study, the data is based on instructor’s perceptions of student engagement, actual effectiveness of these methods was not studied. Further research comparing teaching strategies to a post-course student engagement survey might reveal similarities and differences between the perceptions of instructors’ and students’ views of what engaging practices are.

Qualitative research is influenced by the interpretations of the researcher who collects, analyzes, creates hypothesis, and draws conclusions from the data (Miller et al., 2014; Weirsma & Jurs, 2009). The narrative style of reporting findings does not provide statistical information.

Summary

The purpose of this research is to explore strategies instructors use to stimulate and sustain student engagement in the online environment. The goal was to contribute to the existing body of research on engagement of distance learners from the unique perspective of educators. Additionally, the findings of this study reveal best practices that can be implemented by others in online education.

A purposeful convenience sample of UW-Stout instructors who taught at least one online course in the BS, MS CTE, EdD, and MS ED programs of study were the subjects for this research study. Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted via synchronous video conferencing tools, allowing flexibility to question further and encourage elaboration when needed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy during data analysis as well
as audit tracking of decisions made by the researcher and how they influenced the findings. During this process, data was abridged to protect the identity of participants.

Responses were sorted into categories of learner to content, learner to instructor, and learner to learner interactions. Reported engagement strategies by UW-Stout instructors were compared to best practices identified in published research (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2019a; Martin et al., 2019b).

The small population sample size and specificity of interview subjects is identified as a limitation. Additionally, the nature of qualitative research is that it is based on perceptions of both the subjects and the researcher, both of which may influence the findings. Results are reported in a rich descriptive narrative rather than statistical formulations. These are presented in chapter four.
Chapter IV: Results

Research shows that increased student engagement results in greater student success and retention (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Lee et al. 2015; Moore 2014; Tinto, 2017b). Interactivity is shown to increase student engagement however, the asynchronous nature of online education requires instructors to adapt a different approach than in the classroom experience (Croxton, 2014; Handelsman et al., 2005; Moore, 1989). The purpose of this study was to reveal best practices used by UW-Stout instructors to inspire and sustain engagement of their online students, with the intention of adding to the published body of research available as a reference for educational professionals.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the demographics of the research participants, their experience and training followed by a detailed description of the data analysis. The research questions were modeled to Moore’s (1989) theory of interactions, collected data was coded, sorted and reported parallel to this model. This study focused on answering the following research questions:

1. What methods do instructors use to increase interactions in the online environment?
   - Interactions between learners and the course materials.
   - Interactions between learners and the instructor.
   - Interactions between learners.

2. Which strategies do instructors perceive are the most valuable or best received by their online students?

3. How do instructors define or identify engaged learners in their online courses?

The data was coded, sorted and reported following this format.
Demographics

The subjects of this study were University of Wisconsin-Stout instructors in the BS, MS CTE, EdD, and MS ED programs. The sample was comprised of ten instructors who taught at least one online course per semester during the 2018-2019 school year. Three of the instructors described their roles as part-time adjuncts and the remaining seven are employed as UW-Stout faculty. The mean and median number of years of experience teaching in higher education for this group of instructors was 15.5 years. The mean and median number of years of experience teaching online was 10 years (Figure 1, Appendix F). The number of online courses taught per semester ranged from two to eight, with an average of three per instructor. Half of the instructors taught multiple offering of the same course within a semester, including the summer term.

The amount of flexibility that an instructor has in designing their course materials has a direct effect on the data collected from this study. All ten participants stated that although there are standardized components of the course shell through UW-Stout’s learning management system, they design all or most of their course materials. Instructors who inherit courses that have been developed by others often make changes that align with their personal teaching styles. All reported updating courses on a regular basis to keep the material relevant for their learners. One noted that while there are advantages in having flexibility in course materials and presentation methods, there is also the risk of inconsistency when multiple teachers are teaching the same course. The importance of collaboration to assure alignment of information and meeting of course objectives was stressed.

Participants were questioned about any training they received specific to online teaching. It was unknown if UW-Stout provided standardized training for their distance educators. None
of these educators were required by UW-Stout to take any formal training, however instructors are reimbursed for continuing education they pursue on their own. Seven instructors reported receiving formal training and three instructors reported that they had no formal training prior to teaching online. However, all the participants reported various methods of obtaining continuing education for online teaching (Figure 2, Appendix G). While the level of training specific to online teaching varies within this sample of ten online educators, similarities in practices emerged throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Moore (1989) wrote of the importance of balancing three types of learner interactions (learner/content, learner/instructor, and learner/learner) within a course to engage online students. This theory of interactions (1989) was used as the model for composing the interview questions, organizing, and analyzing the collected data.

Interactions between learners and content. Moore (1989) defined learner to content interactions as “the process of intellectually interacting with content that results in changes to the learner’s understanding, the learner’s perspective, or cognitive structures of the learner’s mind (p. 2). When asked about strategies used to spark learner engagement with the content, most participants spoke of the importance of starting with course design. A benefit that UW-Stout instructors have is the flexibility to develop their courses, choosing the supplemental materials, activities, and assessments. An important component of this is the ability to build the course around their own teaching philosophy and style. One instructor reflected on when they inherited a course from another teacher with misalignment of teaching styles. There was no time to make adjustments prior to deployment, the instructor struggled to adapt to the style, and the students commented that the course didn’t go well or as smoothly as they anticipated. In institutions
where instructional designers are used for course design, this highlights the importance of collaboration between instructional designers and teachers. One respondent said, “if the designer’s philosophy and the teacher’s style don’t match up it’s a very bad outcome for the students and it ends up being twice as much work.” Comments were also made regarding the importance of having instructional designers who not only know how to manipulate the technical components for an online course, but also have a strong background in adult learning theory.

Strategies that encourage learner to content interactions were assessed and sorted as design process, deployment, and techniques to sustain engagement throughout the course. A recurrent theme was the importance of creating lessons and materials with relevancy; explaining the why behind each learning module and which objective it responds to. Many spoke of giving students choices, creating multiple options for activities and letting them choose which ones they want to complete; letting the student decide how they will demonstrate mastery of the material. Hand in hand with relevancy came conversation about application, creating assignments that the student can apply to the context of their life or profession. One participant said,

It’s much easier for me to structure an assignment so the student can personalize their learning than for me to do it; here is the assignment, apply it to your context. I’m not the one personalizing the content, it’s the student doing the personalization.

Another instructor spoke about being cognizant to the knowledge level of their students. While advanced learners are expected to demonstrate application, undergraduate students don’t have the same level of experience in the working world. For those students, case studies that introduce them to situations from the workplace are woven into assignments.

Along with relevancy, attention to designing a consistent course structure was identified as important. One participant stated, “I think the layout of the course is really big; having things
accessible really adds to engagement.” It was suggested that this can be achieved by creating a “loop” between readings, activities, assignments and discussion posts so everything in each unit relates to each other and back to the objectives. Another said,

They (students) need the learning materials organized in a structured consistent manner. They need simplicity in its’ presentation, so they don’t have to spend time trying to find materials or figure out what an assignment requires. It needs to be user friendly; clear directions ahead of time so they can schedule what they need to do in their already busy lives.

This was echoed by another participant who reported creating an overview of each module which outlines the expectations, and anticipated outcomes; beginning the unit with questions that the students will be able to answer upon completion. It is felt that this strategy prepares the students to actively engage in the learning process as they proceed through the materials. One respondent reported they assign students to write a final reflection paper, describing their learning and how they will apply it. When an assignment such as this is introduced at the beginning of the course, students can be mindful of their knowledge acquisition as they progress through the materials.

The differences between the face to face classroom and the online environment creates challenges in presentation of materials. Online instructors must present the materials in a student-centered way that will draw them in. One instructor said, “there’s no way I can hope to hold the students’ attention throughout the entire course, I’m just not that interesting.” To compensate, this teacher incorporates relevant and interesting Ted Talks, YouTube videos, or other resources to engage their students.

Early contact with students is important in setting the stage for the course. All the participants reported deploying an introduction video upon opening the course. These videos
consist of an introduction to the instructor and in most cases an overview of the syllabus, expectations, textbook information and general course information. Some send out welcome emails to their students, preparing them for the opening of the course. One said they open the course shell early so students “can go in ahead of time, look around and get a feeling for how the course flows.” This may help to alleviate stress about how to access the course and how to work within the LMS. Another instructor creates assignments for the first week of class that require the students to use all the tools within the LMS that are needed for the course. This gives students practice and allows the instructor to learn who can navigate easily and who might need some technical assistance prior to beginning the learning modules.

It is not enough to inspire engagement at the beginning of the class, instructors must work to maintain student connections with the content throughout the course. Many continue to provide videos introducing each new learning module, giving background of what is ahead, narrating and explaining weekly assignments, and prompting students to think about what they will need to achieve by the end of the unit. This can also be used as an opportunity to help students plan how much time they will need to devote to their studies in the upcoming week and remind them of deadlines. Participants felt that students are more engaged when they have choices. Especially at the graduate level, students are given options on their assignments so they can make them relevant to their area of expertise or profession. Many also reported attention to different learning styles. They let students choose the media format for completing assignments; using a style of response that they’re comfortable with for instance using video, text, audio, or choice of presentation tools when appropriate. Some instructors provide narrated power point presentations because they recognized that many students do not like to read. One educator also reported providing documents containing instructor comments for each module, giving deeper
explanations and highlighting key points. They found that their busy adult learners appreciated this resource. Another spoke of trying to learn the environment the students are coming from professionally and customizing the lessons around that as much as possible, “if they’re coming from a foodservice background, they’ll need a different approach than if they’re coming from the insurance business.” It was also suggested to find something that students are aware of in the real world and draw a parallel between that and the learning topic to help them make personal connections with the material. Encouraging questioning of the subject and within the discussion forums was also a common strategy for maintaining student engagement as was prompting critical thinking as part of the assignments. One participant said it is important to show respect to adult learners and honor their knowledge base; “I assume they have experiences and perceptions and attitudes that can contribute to the class, and so I look to encourage that to come out.” Another said, “being cognizant of people, that they have busy lives and families and jobs is important. I’m flexible in the due dates so they’re able to solve their life things that happen, and then work on their class.” Also, as the subject matter expert professional within the field, it is important that instructors work to show their own personal enthusiasm for the topics they teach, “working to inspire the next generation of professionals.”

**Interactions between learners and the instructor.** Research has shown that online students identified frequent learner to instructor interactions as highly valued and the most reported indicator of student satisfaction (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016). When asked about strategies for interacting with their distance learners, UW-Stout instructors spoke of building relationships, instructor presence, accessibility, and providing feedback in their online courses.
These interviews revealed a common theme of building relationships with students. As one participant stated, “everything you do has to be very intentional.” Another instructor spoke of drawing students into the course and building trust from the first day. They felt that by building a relationship of trust, their students were more likely to reach out when they were facing difficulties in the course, opposed to dropping out. Instructors reported spending more time answering questions and giving direction at the beginning of the course while the students go through the normalizing period; adjusting to the flow, how to navigate the LMS, time management, and meeting expectations. One participant observed students need additional attention for the first three weeks of the semester, and slowly become more independent as the course progresses stating, “during the first three weeks I’m available more than I should be, but the students just need to know that you’re there; I will be present however I can.” It was also said such high level of interaction cannot be sustained (by the instructor) with large class sizes over a much longer timeframe. Another common strategy was to make personal contact with students who are absent or seem to be struggling; trying to find out why the student is not participating and if there is any help the instructor can give. One stated, “if they’re really struggling, then I call them on the phone and have a conversation with them.” Most participants spoke of sending out emails or announcements to remind students of due dates or to publicly address questions that they’ve received from students during the week. It was said, “if there’s one person that asks a question, clearly there are ten others that have the question too, but only one was courageous enough to have the conversation.” Another instructor observed that online educators must work to establish an approachable persona for their students stating,

I’m aware that there is a power differential and students are loathe to approach instructors... this is interesting, but the email messages of inquiry that I receive from face
to face students is vastly different from the email messages of inquiry that I receive from online students; such that online students will be almost apologetic; “I’m sorry I’m bothering you, do this whenever you want to.”

In light of this phenomena of power differential, the importance of building a relationship of trust and reliability should be noted, every interaction with students should be viewed as an opportunity to make a difference and bridge that gap.

In order to establish a sense of online presence the instructor must “perform activities that translate virtual interactions into an impression of a real person” (Banna et al., 2015, p. 250). Participants in this study reported recording welcome introduction videos with information about themselves so the students could get the sense that they are a real person, not part of a computer simulation. Additionally, students were assigned introductory icebreaker activities which the instructors replied to on an individual basis either directly through the discussion forum, or student email, commenting on specific interests, strengths, or commonalities that they brought to the class. This group of instructors routinely deployed audio or video introductions to each learning module. One said that in their weekly announcement they include something that’s happening in their life to show their students that they are a real person with a busy life too, updating the videos with things that are current to the date such as, “It’s Monday and the Packers won yesterday.” It was felt that this increases the sense of instructor presence because the students can see the videos are not recycled from semester to semester.

Discussion forums are not only a tool to assess student learning but can also be an important component of interactions between the learners and the instructor. The reported levels of instructor participation in discussion forums varied. Some instructors felt that the discussion forums were a place where students interacted and shared ideas with each other and although the
forum would be monitored for participation and appropriate behavior, the teacher typically wouldn’t post to the platform. Others participated regularly, and some even strove to respond to each students’ post in every discussion forum. However, depending on the class size and number or classes an instructor is teaching, responding to each discussion post may not be feasible. One instructor said, “as an instructor I don’t want to do too much (in the discussion forum) because I really want the students to engage with each other, but I’ll nudge or add a little bit of information they might not know about.” Another instructor reported that they used the discussion forums to “find the gaps in thinking.” At the end of each unit they compose a summary of the students’ posts, citing their words from the perspective of “here’s what I learned, here’s what we learned, and here’s where the gap is that we might want to consider going back and reading more about.” This strategy allows the students to see the big picture of what the general theme of interpretation of the material was, as well as encourages critical thinking of how to further explore the lesson to gather additional meanings from it.

All the participants recognized the importance of providing timely and specific feedback to their students. One instructor said, “I believe that feedback is a huge powerful thing for students. Students enjoy that I take the time to read and watch everything they’ve done and give them feedback on everything.” Others echoed this sentiment, saying they strive to provide timely and specific feedback, using “canned” feedback only sparingly and on assignments that do not heavily impact students’ grades. Within feedback they will note things the student did well, use questioning, or point out areas they can improve on with details on how to make these improvements. They spoke of the importance of showing that they’ve read all the students’ work, demonstrating that their work matters. One instructor stated that they send out emails when grades have been posted and adds,
I also let them know that I can see whether they’ve read my feedback or not, whether they’ve even accessed it. I don’t want to be correcting the same mistake throughout the semester, so this holds them accountable to my feedback as well. Others have reported that students thank them for providing feedback that is specific and targeted to their work.

This group of instructors not only reported that they aim for timely turn around on student feedback, but they also strive to provide responses to all student communications within 24 to 48 hours. It was very important to them to be accessible and responsive to their students. Many of the instructors commented that they kept their email open most hours of the day and answer student queries immediately. One respondent explained, “I know it’s a horrible feeling to be stranded and on hold when you’re trying to figure something out and you feel like no one’s ever there to help you, I don’t ever want my students to feel that way.” Almost all the participants stated that they give their students their personal cell phone numbers and tell them to call or text when they have questions. This option is highly utilized by the students. One instructor said,

I interact with my students by having my cell phone on the syllabus. At first I was really debating that, but it’s been one of the best things because if they’re at the soccer game and they just have a quick question we can still interact even though I’m not sitting in front of a computer. I think that it’s really valuable for them to have me available.

Another said, “I think you have to respond to them all the time. Always make sure that you’re responding to as many as you can and ask them a question so you can communicate back and forth with them.”
Overwhelmingly, participants found that when offered, online office hours were underutilized. The feeling was that office hours do not appeal to online students because they need to coincide with the busy schedules of adult learners. One instructor said, “I have held office hours every week, but I have never in seven or eight years had a student visit me ever.” All the participants stated that students readily communicate through emails, texting, and phone calls. “They seem to want to get in touch with me when they want to get in touch. So, I’m available by phone and I’m available by email” said one instructor.

**Interactions between learners.** It has been reported that students in the online setting can feel isolated and detached from others in their class (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015; Moore, 1989; NSSE, 2019). When asked how they inspire interactions between learners and encourage a sense of community within their online courses, three major themes emerged; 1) introduction/icebreakers, 2) discussion forums, and 3) group work.

All the participants reported using some variation of an icebreaker or introduction activity during the first week of the course. These activities are intended to set the tone for the class, demonstrating to the students that they are not alone, there are many others participating with them. One instructor reports they hoped to show their students they are in a safe learning environment where they are encouraged to share their thoughts. Another instructor said they can watch students begin to form groups of like professionals, often spurred by the introduction activity. “Students learn who is in a similar field or has similar interests, and these students often begin discussions with each other.” One instructor stated that they require students to use a free video platform to record their introductions and then post the videos to the discussion forum area.
This is done for two reasons, number one, it builds a sense of community, a name and a face for everyone and two, it requires the use of technology and that’s how I figure out who may need help with technology;… I do that intentionally to feel out who is going to need help.

Another educator agreed that by using the video introduction strategy both the students and they benefit by having the ability to see each others’ faces; the visual connection of putting a name with a face is very powerful.

Discussion forums were the most talked about tool that instructors used to create interactions between their learners. In these forums students answer a prompt related to the learning topic and then read their classmates’ writings and answer a pre-determined number of those posts. It can become apparent that some students will skim through the discussions, or only read and respond to the minimum requirement. One instructor revealed using a strategy where rather than responding directly to a specific number of posts, students read every initial post and then create a reply synthesizing everyone’s ideas and what they’ve learned from their classmates. Some learning management systems have tools for limiting student access to replies until they make a post; therefore, requiring them to create original work prior to reading their classmates’ responses. A tactic used by another instructor is to randomly group students and assign them to a pro or con stance on a topic; each group must defend their assigned stance. This strategy often takes students out of their comfort zone and through the interactions that ensue during this activity, students begin to see multiple facets of the topic through each other’s eyes. Another said that after watching the discussions over a few weeks, they can begin to see groups beginning to form naturally, with the same students responding to each other. Sometimes this participant will “help a sub group expand their circle by assigning them to the individuals they have not
formed with a relationship with prior” thereby encouraging more interactions with other learners. One participant remarked that they “learn more about my students in the discussion (forum) than I ever do in the introductions.” Another instructor remarked, “I’ll look at the discussion and they’ve gone way off base, but you know what, that’s what they want to do and that’s good for them” recognizing that sometimes discussions can take students through deeper levels of understanding, but sometimes they can be used as a social channel as well.

Participants were asked if they use social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter to inspire interactions between their students. The majority (eight out of ten) of the instructors said they did not. Reasons for not using such tools included:

- Students may not be literate in social media or have access to the tools.
- Questions of how the sites will be monitored, whose responsible to assure they are being used appropriately?
- Instructors already faced a taxing workload and are available through many other channels.
- Students do not need another place to log in or visit, especially outside of the LMS.
- Questions and concerns about privacy on sites located outside of the LMS from both the instructor and student perspectives. Some students do not want to use social media.
- Instructors want to keep communications within the LMS to simplify things for students, and they want to present everything in one space.
- Fears about legal implications.
- Concerns about feeding possible social media addictions.
Two instructors said they have used or currently use social media sites with their students and feel this tool can add a feeling of belonging to a cohort of learners to a group of students. One participant said they encourage their students to create their own social media page to interact with each other. It is known by the students that the instructor does not view or participate in that site. Students have given many positive comments in the end of course survey, saying they liked having the private Facebook group and used it as a help page. Other students reported that the support from their classmate on these pages was what helped them persist through to course completion when they felt like giving up. “They are using it as a sense of community, support and connections within their cohort.” Another instructor said,

I hope some of it’s happening offline (from the course), I hope students are having conversations. The best we can do to create a cohort online is to support online chatting.

But, I don’t want to manage it, offer it, or monitor it.

Along with the importance of creating interactions between learners, discussion forums were viewed as a means for students to learn from each other; adult learners bring a wealth of experiences with them and discussion posts are used as a tool for accessing and encouraging the sharing of those experiences.

Research has shown that synchronous sessions can give the feel of social presence and community to distance learners (Martin et al., 2017). Participants were asked if they include synchronous sessions in their online courses. Eight instructors identified their courses as mostly asynchronous with some synchronous and two said their courses were 100% asynchronous. While specific activities within synchronous sessions were not explored, participants offered some insight as to pros and cons of these online class meetings. Overall most instructors reported poor attendance with synchronous sessions attributed to the logistics of busy adult
learners, scheduling, and time zone differences that are inherent in distance education. Of the participants who offer synchronous sessions, most do not hold students accountable to attending them. One instructor whose course was identified as mostly asynchronous said,

> The whole point of online education is to be there any time for the student, that’s why they’re there and if you start making something mandatory you start taking away that freedom that online courses offer a lot of students.

Most of the instructors expressed that they thought that students were missing out on an important part of the learning experience in a completely or mostly asynchronous environment. One stated that while synchronous sessions may not offer extensive conversations, sometimes it’s easier to have a verbal discussion rather than trying to communicate through writing back and forth over what could amount to several days. Another who reported their courses as mostly asynchronous said,

> (This is) not because I think it’s the best approach, but because that’s what students will engage in. Many students like to have face to face time, but they also have incredibly demanding schedules, so I will always record whatever we’ve done (in synchronous sessions) so at least they have the sense of it.

While those students are not held accountable to attending the synchronous sessions, they are held accountable to viewing the recording and submitting a synopsis of what they’ve learned from the session. One instructor requires their students to attend one synchronous session per semester but provides several different dates for students to choose from and therefore reports good participation. Another reported that they surveyed their students to find out how they felt about synchronous sessions and group work and “90% responded that they really did not want to do that.”
As the above quote indicated, instructors also struggle to engage distance learners in group activities. The topic of group projects revealed mixed feelings. Most instructors felt that students learn best from each other, but the logistics of doing group projects in the online setting is not worth the outcomes. It was said that adult distance learners want to participate at their convenience, they don’t want to depend on others or try to overcome scheduling difficulties to complete their work. Participants reported that creating cohesive groups can be a logistical puzzle for instructors who find it difficult to get to know their students and understand who will work together well. One instructor observed,

I know people aren’t always crazy about working with each other. I’ve learned I need to look at providing (students) some tips for working in groups online. Based on what I’ve observed and feedback from students I’m thinking we need to reiterate some things about how to work together effectively.

Another instructor reported that while group projects don’t often appeal to distance learners, they often come out of them with an increased sense of community; reconnecting with people they worked with in a previous course as they move through their program.

Many participants indicated that they find it difficult to inspire a sense of community in an online course. In this setting there is not a stereotypical cohort of students systematically moving through required courses like those who attend on campus. Some students may take one course and then not another for an entire year, while others may move through the program quicker. Because of this one instructor stated, “I am sure that many online learners don’t come away with a big sense of community.” Another observation was that online students may not want or have the time to build a sense of community with their classmates. They may be pressed for time or have many outside obligations. Perhaps some are not comfortable with their writing
skills, something that is heavily relied on in the online setting. Some students may have an introverted personality and are not comfortable interacting with others, which draws them away from classroom learning. Overall it was felt that students can be encouraged to interact, but they will only do so to the extent that they are comfortable.

**Most effective strategies.** It was anticipated that many best practices would be revealed by this research. Participants of this study were asked what they thought distance learners needed from them and which strategy they thought was the most successful in supporting their students. Responses fell into four main categories 1) presence, 2) flexibility, 3) feedback, and 4) course design.

Each instructor gave an example that related to creating a high level of presence in the course to support student learning. Most provide students with their personal cell phone number and work to create an environment that is welcoming and supportive. All have made comments about being attentive to student needs and trying to quickly address any questions that are brought to them. “They (students) need me to be quick in my response when they have a question.” Many spoke of being available to students on their time; adult learners often have professional commitments during regular business hours, “you are active, and you are available whatever that means in that environment.” Another participant said, “being present and (students) knowing that I’m reading their stuff. Posting some question that really doesn’t have an answer just to keep them thinking, and then we might stumble on an answer.”

Flexibility in understanding the online learner was the second most popular category of best practices to support student learning and engagement. One instructor said,

During the second week of the semester I put something out there saying don’t worry about the due dates, just (let me know) if you need more time. I had one student who
said, “I never turned anything in late, but just knowing that I had that option took a load off my mind.” Just understanding the students.

Other instructors spoke of understanding that adult distance learners are not traditional students, they have many personal and professional commitments and are also trying to work in furthering their education. One participant said their most effective strategy in online courses is,

Being really flexible and accommodating to support them. I’ll try to work with them because it’s amazing to hear these students. There’s not one that has a silver platter that I’m aware of, they all are juggling two or three jobs, spouse, children, pets, and I’m not even talking sleep.

Of importance was “understanding that life happens” and being flexible with deadlines when possible; working with these adult learners instead of being so stringent that it creates barriers to their success. Another instructor emphasized “letting them know I care about them as people.”

Flexibility also carried into components of the course design, assignments, and materials. Many spoke of giving students choices to personalize their learning so they can apply it to their lives. One instructor spoke of being flexible, “You have to be willing to take each assignment and bend it to fit their particular situation or job situation. I give choices for my assignments.”

Providing timely feedback that is specific and relevant and shows that their work is being read by the instructor was another popular strategy for keeping students engaged. One instructor said, “you must be responsive to those students.” Another replied, “They need me to be there, to support their learning, and they need me to give them the constructive feedback they need to become a better student. My job is to facilitate their learning.”

Some instructors identified components of course design as effective strategies to inspire and maintain student engagement. Designing a course with relevance in mind which follows
adult learning theories, one with simplicity in its’ presentation. One participant said, “they need clear directions and they need those directions ahead of time so they can schedule what they need to do into their busy lives.” Information needs to be presented in a user-friendly manner with consistent structure in how it is laid out. Another instructor said “just getting started is the big thing. They already have enough stress in their lives, they don’t need to stress out about where to find the textbook” in their online classes. Again, providing students with choice was identified;

   Making learning your own is the biggest thing. I try to do that by giving students choices and having them choose what’s most appropriate for their practice. I think once they internalize it, it really builds the intrinsic motivation and it allows them to develop as a learner.

Further conversation addressed allowing students choices on how to complete assignments; the online setting allows for the use of many forms of media to express oneself. Another instructor spoke of accommodations, “how do we even know what our students need to be successful? In other words, adult students don’t always disclose their needs for accommodations.” This highlights the importance of designing course materials for the largest possible audience, while at the same time allowing flexibility for the students to personalize their learning to make it meaningful to themselves, to make it engaging.

   Describing the engaged learner. When asked how they identify the engaged learners in their online courses, many spoke of student work and participation in the discussion forums. According to these participants students who thoughtfully answer more than the required number of classmates’ posts appear more engaged because they willingly interact with their classmates. Likewise, students who post early are seen to have higher motivation and engagement within the
course. One instructor said, “they post early, often, frequently, the first people to post I’m never worried about in an online course.” However, one instructor posed an interesting perspective about those who are more active than others in discussion forums;

Maybe these are people more likely to think on that social scale, the ones that are social maintainers. At a party they’re going around (asking) “is your drink ok, do you need something more?” They’re going around making sure everybody has met and you can see them do that in an online discussion. But maybe, just naturally they’re more social. How do you engage the learner that is very shy, introverted, isolated? How do I get them part of that community when they’re not the social butterfly that’s going to love those discussion posts? Not everybody is that social, there are some that feel very awkward and they’re even more of a challenge to engage.

This presents a valid issue when trying to identify who is engaged and who is not in an online course, or why some students participate willingly while others may seem uninterested in interacting with their classmates.

Other instructors identified engaged learners by their work; how they synthesize the material, the ways that students “thought about it and they internalized it and they made it their own.” Another said, “it’s effort. You can tell whose putting effort in and who’s not.” Some learning management systems record student participation, how often they log in, how long they are logged in, even how many discussion posts they click on to read. Instructors may pair these statistics with the quality of a student’s work to identify an engaged learner. One participant said, “they’re present and I can see that they’re reading and thinking, and I can see that they’re presenting some of their own interpretations with support of other’s ideas.” Another said
engaged students “will ask questions, they’ll ask where to find more information and they will share resources that I haven’t asked for.”

One instructor expressed that caution should be used when identifying an engaged learner by the quality of their assignments. Their thought was that quality assignments demonstrate that the student was able to follow directions and complete an assignment, but that is no measure of engagement. In this study, the group of ten participants described two ways of identifying engaged learners, through their discussion forum postings and by their work.
Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation

Lack of learner engagement is cited as a leading reason for online student dropout. (Banna et al., 2015; Dixson, 2010; Jobe et al., 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Published studies show that interactions are vital to stimulate and sustain student engagement, and students who interact more frequently during online courses tend to report higher levels of satisfaction (Gómez-Rey et al., 2016). Therefore, administrators, educators, and instructional designers must embed multiple opportunities for interaction throughout online courses. The purpose of this study was to explore effective teaching strategies used by a sample of online instructors to stimulate engaged learning; with the goal of sharing these findings with the educational community.

Discussion

Moore’s (1989) theory of interactions was used as the reference for structuring interview questions and sorting data during this qualitative study. Participants were comprised of a sample of ten University of Wisconsin-Stout instructors who taught online courses in the BS CTET, MS CTE, EdD, and MS ED programs during the 2018 – 2019 school year. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted and recorded using the Zoom video recording platform. Responses were transcribed, condensed, sorted, and analyzed to reveal common themes, educator commentary, and best practices for inspiring and maintaining student engagement in the online environment. The findings of this qualitative study were reported in a rich narrative style.

Interactions between learners and content. Moore (1989) stated that interactions between the learner and the course content are those that define education; without which knowledge acquisition is not possible. Course design is the foundation on which these interactions are built. A well-designed course should create many opportunities for students to
interact with the content as they progress through the material to content mastery (Martin et al., 2019a). All the participants of this study had the freedom to develop their courses, choosing materials and activities that aligned with learning objectives while complimenting their personal teaching styles. They expressed that this flexibility in course design was a great benefit. It was reported that when instructors were presented with pre-designed courses lacking in interactive design, or those that didn’t align with their teaching styles, they felt they struggled to inspire engagement between learners and the course content. Many commented that in situations where instructors are not the ones developing courses, efforts should be made for collaborations between those doing the design and those who will be teaching the material. Furthermore, great importance was put on the ability to build a course which allowed for flexibility to adapt and personalize materials to the needs of the learners. This correlates with multiple studies which found that successful online educators recognize the importance of adapting to the needs of their distance learners (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016).

Courses should be designed with relevant learning experiences that provide opportunities for students to demonstrate application to their lives (Croxton, 2014; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Handelsman et al., 2005; Martin et al., 2018). Relevancy was a recurrent theme when discussing learner to content interactions with this group of educators; many spoke of creating activities which empower the learner to personalize the content to the context of their life or profession. One commonly reported strategy related to relevancy was to introduce lessons with the reasoning behind the material; demonstrating how it aligned with the course objectives. These introductions outline the expectations and anticipated learning outcomes of the unit and serve to prepare the students to actively engage in the learning process. Providing detailed instructions
and expectations early on in a course is shown to encourage student interactions and engagement with the content (Martin et al., 2019b).

Along with relevancy, attention to designing courses with a consistent format was identified as important to learner engagement. One participant stated, “the layout of the course is really big; having things accessible really adds to engagement.” This agrees with a study by Martin et al. (2019a) who reported that 92% of students preferred a consistent and structured course design. The UW - Stout instructors spoke of creating a loop between readings, activities, assignments, and discussion posts; relating everything within each unit and then back to the learning objectives. It was reported that courses need simplicity in presentation, making it easy for students to find the materials. “It needs to be user friendly (with) clear directions ahead of time so they can schedule what they need to do in their already busy lives.” Martin et al., (2019a) also wrote of the courtesy of helping busy adult learners plan ahead by deploying weekly announcements about how much time they should expect to spend on each learning module.

Early contact between the instructor and their students is important in setting the stage for the course. All the participants reported deploying an introduction video upon opening the course. Icebreaker activities were used universally as a means for the instructor to learn about the individuals in their class, learning the environment the students are coming from professionally, and customizing the lessons to them as much as possible. Another reasoning behind icebreaker activities is to assess student computer competency and provide training on how to navigate through the LMS or learning materials (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Croxton, 2014; Martin et al., 2019a). One participant reported creating assignments for the first week of class that require the students to use all the tools within the LMS needed for the course.
As the literature indicates this gives students practice and helps the instructor identify those students who may need additional technical support prior to delving into the learning materials.

It is not enough to inspire engagement at the beginning of the course, teaching strategies must be deployed throughout the course to maintain learner engagement. When discussing application of multi-media tools in online courses, Baran et al. (2013) suggested that instructors should create videos or podcasts to introduce new content, updates on activities, course news, and module completion feedback to their students. This was a common practice as reported by UW - Stout instructors. In order to maintain student connections with the content, many continue to create videos introducing each learning module, and give background or instructor comments for the current unit, providing deeper explanations and highlighting key points. The instructors reported their learners appreciated this practice, and they felt it increased student engagement with the course content.

**Interactions between learners and the instructor.** Several studies report that frequent interactions between students and instructors has a positive effect on distance learner engagement (Banna et al., 2015; Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gómez-Rey et al., 2016). When asked about their interactions with students, UW - Stout instructors spoke of the importance of creating a sense of presence, building relationships with their students, being accessible, and providing meaningful feedback.

Establishing and maintaining presence is an integral component to successful online teaching. As Banna et al. (2015, p. 250) stated “the instructor must perform activities that translate virtual interactions into an impression of a real person.” All the participants of this study reported that they create welcoming introduction videos which include information about themselves to help give their students a sense that they are a person, not part of a computer
simulation. Likewise, students were assigned a discussion forum activity where they introduced themselves. The instructors reported that they replied to each student, either through the discussion forum or privately through email. Recordings with audio and video which allow students to see the instructor’s facial and body language as well as hear their natural speech patterns helps to build familiarity and increase the sense of presence (Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Martin et al., 2019b). Weekly video announcements were commonly reported by study participants. Rather than recycling videos from year to year, some instructors said they intentionally created videos mentioning current events or personal happenings in their lives showing their learners that they are real people with busy lives too.

During the interviews, many participants spoke of the importance of building trusting relationships with their students. The opinion was that if a sense of trust is built students are more likely to come to the instructor for help and guidance if they are facing difficulties rather than dropping out. One common strategy was to make personal contact through email or phone calls when an instructor identified an at-risk student, one who has not been present in the course or who seems to be struggling with the materials. In a study by Baran et al. (2013) online instructors also spoke of this importance of building trust with their learners and the positive effect it creates in terms of student engagement.

Frequent, personalized communication between teachers and students was identified to be one of the most valuable engagement strategies in the online environment (Martin et al., 2019b). This group of instructors put great emphasis on being available to their students. Almost all the participants reported that they share their personal cell phone numbers with their students and encourage them to reach out whenever needed. They recognized the importance of being accessible to their students outside of traditional school hours, stating that adult learners
not only need the freedom to participate in their online courses when it works in their busy schedules, but also need to communicate with their instructors often during evenings and weekends. In addition to being available by phone, these instructors also typically kept their email open and notifications turned most hours of the day and answered student queries almost immediately, if not within 24 to 48 hours. This high level of accessibility demonstrated student service above and beyond what was found in the reviewed literature.

In addition to frequent communication, timely feedback was shown to correlate with student satisfaction and engagement (Banna et al., 2015; Burns, 2010; Dixson, 2010; Handelsman et al., 2005). All those interviewed in this study recognized the importance of timely as well as specific feedback. One instructor summarized the responses of the group by stating, “I believe that feedback is a huge powerful thing for students.” Croxton (2014) reported that students prefer to receive feedback from their instructors within two to three days. While educators can strive to meet this goal, depending on class size, this is seen as unrealistic when giving personalized feedback. These UW-Stout instructors spoke of providing specific feedback that shows that they’ve read and value the students’ work; canned feedback was used sparingly and only on assignments that had low impact on student grades. Although it may take longer to complete, specific personalized feedback is more beneficial to students when recognizing their strengths and guiding them on how they can improve their work. It was reported that students recognized the value of detailed feedback and commented to their instructors that it was greatly appreciated.

**Interactions between learners.** Learner to learner interactions are important in creating a sense of community within any course, but these connections can quell the sense of isolation which can be experienced by distance learners (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015;
Moore, 1989; NSSE, 2019). When asked how they inspire interactions between learners and encourage a sense of community within their online courses, the major themes that emerged were; introduction/icebreaker activities, discussion forum exchanges, and synchronous or group projects.

Icebreaker activities are a useful strategy to initiate interactions between learners. Students have reported that these are among the most engaging of activities within an online course (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Baran et al., 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). All the participants employ some variation of an icebreaker or introduction activity during the first week of the course, setting the tone of the class, helping students to make connections to each other, and demonstrating that they are not alone; there are many others participating with them. While most of the instructors spoke of activities that occur within the discussion forum, one revealed that they required students to record a short introduction video and share it within the LMS. This strategy helps to give a name and a face to the students so they can begin to build a sense of familiarity with each other.

Discussion forums are a common tool in the online environment for encouraging students to interact with each other (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). When asked how they created opportunities for interactions between students, discussion forums were the most popular response. Discussion based assignments can be approached in many ways. Some instructors assign a minimum number of responses the students must make, some have the students read and then summarize the thoughts of the class, and others create discussion assignments and then give the students license to take the conversation wherever it may lead. It was noted that as the course progresses, instructors can watch students naturally form groups or a circle of correspondence, often amongst students who work in the same profession. There was a wide
variation of instructor participation within the discussion forums, from instructors responding to
every student post to others who practice periodic monitoring; leaving the discussion forum as a
place for students to interact without instructor presence. Participants of this study noted that
student discussion forums serve a dual purpose, along with creating opportunities for learners to
interact with each other, a great deal of social learning takes place when students share their
expertise and perspectives of the material.

Social media tools can be used within an online course to help learners connect with each
other and build a sense of community (Banna et al., 2015; Baran et al., 2013; Burns, 2010).
When asked if they used social media sites such as private Facebook groups or Twitter feeds as a
communication tool in their online courses, most of these instructors said they did not think
using social media platforms was a good idea; they preferred to keep all school communications
within university email or the LMS. Two of the instructors said they have used private Facebook
groups with their students and these groups successfully increased student engagement by
building a cohort and a sense of belonging.

In a study by Croxton (2014) it was reported that some learners prefer synchronous
communication within their online courses. When asked about the presentation of their online
courses, most of the participants identified their courses as 100 percent asynchronous or mostly
asynchronous with some synchronous sessions. Many of those who held synchronous sessions
reported poor attendance, or attendance that would drop off as the term progressed. This was
attributed to difficulties for busy adult learners to attend sessions due to other commitments,
location/time zone differences, and because synchronous sessions contrast with the freedom that
many online learners want and need. One instructor commented that “students will connect if
and when they want to.” Studies by Bolliger and Martin (2018) and Martin et al. (2018) echoed
this sentiment, stating that online students rank synchronous online sessions as one of the least appreciated teaching strategies. However, it should be noted that many of the UW - Stout educators felt that students were missing a critical learning component without real time interaction with classmates and their instructors. They lamented that this collaborative learning has become an unsuccessful teaching strategy due to the desires of students.

Likewise, while many instructors incorporated group projects into their online courses, they also reported begrudging participation or even outright refusal from students to work with others. Most felt that students learned best from each other and through collaborations but found the logistics of busy adult learners completing group projects to be a difficult barrier to overcome. One instructor observed that perhaps students need to be taught how to work together online, that because many come from a background of the traditional classroom environment in their past schooling, they don’t know how to effectively work together in the virtual world.

**Most effective strategies.** The purpose of this research was to discover what a sample of University of Wisconsin-Stout online instructors identified as their best practices to engage distance learners and thereby promote their success. It was anticipated that many best practices would be revealed and shared through this research. Responses showed trends of instructor presence, flexibility to student needs, timely personalized feedback, and relevancy and simplicity in course design. Although the participants of this study had varying levels of training specific to teaching online, they all reported educational strategies that aligned with best practices in the published literature. Details of these strategies were described within the data analysis section of this work.

**Describing the engaged distance learner.** To summarize the descriptions given in numerous studies, engaged learners are motivated students that are more likely to retain
knowledge, synthesize and apply new concepts earn higher grades, and complete degree programs (Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Banna et al., 2015; Croxton, 2014; Dixson, 2010; Martin & Bolliger, 2018). More specifically, engagement was felt to be demonstrated by student effort, cognitive and affective tendencies, and interactions within the learning community (Handelsman et al., 2005). When asked how they identify the engaged learners in their online courses, these UW - Stout instructors overwhelmingly referred to student participation in the discussion forums. According to their responses, those who posted early and often; those who willingly interacted with their classmates or posted more than required were viewed as engaged students. However, one instructor hypothesized that perhaps rather than a picture of engagement, these actions may reflect personality; perhaps students who have high levels of participation within the discussion forum are those who are extroverted or have more social tendencies than those who meet the minimum requirements. Another consideration is that busy adult learners may not have the time to correspond with multiple classmates each week.

Another strong identifier for engaged learners was student presence and effort. Participants spoke of using tools within the LMS to monitor the frequency and amount of time students logged into the course shell and interacted with the materials. Paired with assessments of the quality of student work, this online presence was used to identify engaged learners. One instructor cautioned about identifying learners as engaged based on the quality of their work. In their opinion academic performance only demonstrates if the student can follow directions to complete assignments, in the online environment it is not a measure of engagement.

Conclusions

Both the literature review and results of the data analysis from this research indicate that online learner engagement is closely tied to interactions within online courses. The findings
from this study revealed that this group of University of Wisconsin-Stout online instructors reported teaching strategies that are in alignment with published best practices for stimulating and sustaining engagement of online learners. Many of these teaching methods were described in this work with the hope that they may benefit the online educational community and ultimately distance learners.

Knowledge acquisition and growth are extremely difficult to obtain without interactions between the learners and the content. This is especially true in an online environment where students typically are not passively listening to lectures or presentations of the material. Opportunities for interactive learning activities are an integral component in course design. Even more beneficial are student-centered activities with flexibility for personalization to the needs, interests and profession of the learners.

The importance of frequent and responsive communications with the instructor cannot be underestimated in online courses. Distance learners are non-traditional students. They are often adults already in the workplace who have multiple commitments in addition to their studies. Effective online instructors are available to their students many more hours than those who teach in the classroom setting, working under a student-centered approach in availability as well as course materials.

Although there are mixed results on participation in interactions between learners, it is preferable to offer and encourage these interactions rather than to remove them from course design in response to students who do not want to interact with their classmates. Instructors should work to close the feeling of distance in distance learning by supporting collaboration and community within their online courses. We live and work in a global community, interacting from a distance both synchronously and asynchronously is a skill that should be encouraged.
Recommendations

Teaching strategies to stimulate and sustain student engagement should be an inherent part of course design. Of utmost importance is adhering to a student-centered teaching style, with guided instruction and flexibility to the needs of the learners. It has been reported that student and teacher satisfaction are higher when the course is created with the instructor’s teaching style and philosophy embedded into it. Therefore, educators should participate in the design of their online courses or work closely with the instructional designers who develop them. Because student engagement was shown to correlate with highly engaging materials, courses should be designed with a rich balance of opportunities for interactions between the learner and the content, learner and instructor, and among the learners themselves.

Research into practices to engage the population of distance learners should continue. While qualitative research is time consuming, studies on a larger scale or with participants across multiple educational disciplines likely would reveal additional teaching strategies to inspire and maintain student engagement. One area of specific concern was how to create activities where distance learners can successfully collaborate on group projects within the asynchronous environment that they require, or desire.

Student engagement has been studied and defined by researchers and instructors, this paper has uncovered some discrepancy in those definitions, even within a small sample of ten participants. Further exploration into how online students define engagement may be of interest to educators and shed new light on the accuracy of instructor interpretations of distance learner behavior within a course.
References


Appendix A: IRB Approval

Tricia Makowiak  
Teaching, Learning and Leadership  
University of Wisconsin-Stout

RE: A Qualitative Study of Teaching Strategies Used by Instructors to Stimulate and Sustain Online Learner Engagement at the University of Wisconsin-Stout

Dear Tricia:

The IRB has determined your project, “A Qualitative Study of Teaching Strategies Used by Instructors to Stimulate and Sustain Online Learner Engagement at the University of Wisconsin-Stout” is Exempt from review by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. The project is exempt under Category #2 of the Federal Exempt Guidelines. Your project is exempt for 5 years from September 4, 2019. If a renewal is needed, it is to be submitted at least 10 working days prior to the approvals end date. Should you need to make modifications to your protocol, please complete the modification form.

Informed Consent: All UW-Stout faculty, staff, and students conducting human subjects’ research under an approved “exempt” category are still ethically bound to follow the basic ethical principles of the Belmont Report: 1) respect for persons; 2) beneficence; and 3) justice. These three principles are best reflected in the practice of obtaining informed consent from participants.

If you are doing any research in which you are paying human subjects to participate, a specific payment procedure must be followed. Instructions and form for the payment procedure can be found at http://www.uwstout.edu/rs/paymentofhumanresearchsubjects.cfm

If you have questions, please contact the IRB office at 715-232-2691, or buchanane@uwstout.edu, and your question will be directed to the appropriate person. I wish you well in completing your study.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Buchanan  
Interim Director, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs; Human Subjects Protections Administrator,  
UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

CC: Stanislawski
Appendix B: Introduction and Invitation to Participate Letter

Dear (name)

My name is Tricia Makowiak. I am a UW-Stout graduate student in the MS CTE program, in the process of writing my Plan B paper. I am writing to ask if you would agree to be interviewed via recorded video conference for a research study of Teaching Strategies used by Instructors to Stimulate and Sustain Online Learner Engagement at UW-Stout.

This study aims to reveal best practices as well as instructor perspectives on student engagement. The goal is to benefit educators and instructional designers and to contribute to the existing body of research on this topic. My hope is that this project will positively influence the engagement and success of future online learners.

As an instructor with experience teaching online, you are in an ideal position to give valuable information from your perspective and professional practices.

During the interview, which I expect will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes, I will ask you questions about your online teaching experience, practice, and perceptions on student engagement. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. I will ask your permission to record the interview in interest of accurately collecting your responses. All electronic transcripts of these interviews will be deleted after acceptance of my paper by the UW-Stout Graduate School.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research, and findings could lead to a greater understanding of best practices for inspiring and maintaining distance learner engagement.

At the end of this email is a further explanation of your rights as a subject of research conducted through The University of Wisconsin–Stout. Please read the material carefully. By agreeing to participate in the study, it is implied that you have read and understand your rights.

If you are willing to participate please respond by (date) by suggesting a day and time that suits you and I’ll do my best to be available.

If you have any questions please feel free to email me as well.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Tricia Makowiak BS CTET
Appendix C: UW-Stout Implied Consent Statement for Research Involving Human Subjects Consent to Participate In UW-Stout Approved Research

**Project Title:**
*A Qualitative Study of Teaching Strategies Used by Instructors to Stimulate and Sustain Online Learner Engagement at the University of Wisconsin-Stout*

**Description:**
A Plan B research project studying teaching strategies used by UW-Stout instructors to stimulate and sustain online learner engagement. Educator perceptions of student engagement will also be explored.

Student success and engagement not only are a primary goal of all education, but they also fall under several research problem areas and research objectives of the National Career and Technical Education Research Agenda (Lambeth, Elliot, & Joerger, 2008). Areas identified where research is warranted are teacher-learner interactions, best practices; educational methods, innovative instructional technologies, distance education and technology, and CTE student graduation rate. This researcher believes that the primary importance of this study is in finding best practices which engage students and promote their success as online learners.

**Risks:**
None foreseen.

**Benefits:**
This study aims to reveal best practices as well as instructor perspectives on student engagement. The goal is to benefit educators and instructional designers and to contribute to the existing body of research on this topic, with the hope that this project will positively influence the engagement of future online learners.

**Confidentiality:**
Your responses to the interview questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. All electronic transcripts of these interviews will be deleted after acceptance of my paper by the UW-Stout Graduate School.

**Future Use:**
Perspectives, identified instructional strategies, and findings from this study may be used in further research to expand this field of knowledge.

**Time Commitment:**
Twenty to 30 minutes is expected. However, the interview may take longer depending on dialogue between the interviewer and participant.
**Right to Withdraw:**
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. You have the right to stop the interview at any time.

**IRB Approval:**
This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

**Investigator:**
Tricia A. Makowiak BS CTET  
920-370-2354  
makowiakt0239@my.uwstout.edu

**IRB Administrator**
Elizabeth Buchanan  
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**Advisor:**
Debbie Stanislawski  
715-232-3195  
stanislawskid@uwstout.edu
Appendix D: Follow up Letter

Dear (name)

My name is Tricia Makowiak. I am a UW-Stout graduate student in the MS CTE program, in the process of writing my Plan B paper. On (date) I sent you an email asking if you would agree to be interviewed for a research study of *Teaching Strategies used by Instructors to Stimulate and Sustain Online Learner Engagement at UW-Stout*.

Your experience as an online instructor is very valuable to me, so I am again reaching out to ask you to please participate in this study.

In my research I aim to reveal best practices as well as instructor perspectives on student engagement. The goal is to benefit educators and instructional designers and to contribute to the existing body of research on this topic. My hope is that this project will positively influence the engagement and success of future online learners.

During the interview, which I expect will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes, I will ask you questions about your online teaching experience, practice, and perceptions on student engagement. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a numeric code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. I will ask your permission to record the interview in interest of accurately collecting your responses. All electronic transcripts of these interviews will be deleted after acceptance of my paper by the UW-Stout Graduate School.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research, and findings could lead to a greater understanding of best practices for inspiring and maintaining distance learner engagement.

At the end of this email is a further explanation of your rights as a subject of research conducted through The University of Wisconsin – Stout. Please read the material carefully. By agreeing to participate in the study, it is implied that you have read and understand your rights.

If you are willing to participate please respond by (date) by suggesting a day and time that suits you and I’ll do my best to be available.

If you have any questions please feel free to email me as well.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

Tricia Makowiak BS CTET
Appendix E: Interview Protocol and Questions

Introduction:

Hi, thank you for agreeing to take part in this study on strategies to engage online learners. First I’m going to take a minute to give you a little background on why I’m conducting this research and then we’ll get started with the questions.

As you know, online education keeps increasing in popularity. However, online students drop classes or drop out completely 10-20% more often than those in the classroom environment. Studies have shown that lack of engagement is the most reported reason for dropping out of online courses.

Teaching online requires a different mindset and approach than teaching in the classroom setting. The reason I chose to do this research is to learn about best practices for student engagement, and what engaged learners look like to their instructors.

As an instructor at UW-Stout, you are recognized as a subject matter expert on providing exemplary online education. Your insight is greatly valued and appreciated.

In order to accurately collect your responses, I would like to record this interview so I can transcribe and include it in my pool of data for analysis. May I have your permission to record this interview? Thank you. I will begin the recording now.

This is an individual research project; this recording will remain in my possession and won’t be shared with anyone. Once the final document is accepted by Stout’s Graduate School, I will delete the recording. While this research paper will be shared with the academic community, I can assure you that you will remain anonymous.

I also want to stress that this is strictly a research-based project, the purpose of this interview is to gain insight of different teaching practices in the online environment. No judgment of the worth your practices or responses will be made.

As a reminder, your participation in this interview equates informed consent of your rights as outlined in the University of Wisconsin – Stout Consent Statement for Research Involving Human Subjects.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin the interview?

Ok thanks. First, I want to collect some basic demographic information. This data will be analyzed to determine if there are patterns in teaching methods within different demographics.

1. What is your employment status at Stout? Meaning, are you faculty or adjunct, do you teach full-time or part-time?
2. How long have you been teaching in higher education?
3. How long have you been teaching online?

4. How many online courses do you teach per semester?

5. Do you teach multiple offerings of any of the same courses within a semester?

6. Have you had any specific training to teach online?

7. Can you tell me about your training in online teaching?

Thank you.

Next I have a few questions about your online teaching practice

1. Do you design any of the course materials for your online classes?
   a. Prompt: What parts?
   b. Prompt: Who designed the curriculum for your classes?

2. How would you describe the approach of your online courses?
   a. 100% asynchronous
   b. 100% synchronous
   c. Mostly asynchronous with some synchronous
   d. Mostly synchronous with some asynchronous
   e. An almost equal blend of asynchronous and synchronous

3. How do you begin the course, what are your introduction strategies?
   a. Prompt: Do you use icebreaker activities? What kinds?
   b. Prompt: Can you tell me more about…?

4. What methods do you use to spark learner engagement with the course materials?
   a. Prompt: Can you tell me more about…?

5. How do your students know you’re present in the class, that you are a real person, not part of a computer program?
a. Prompt: Do you use email, discussion boards, weekly announcements, twitter or social media feeds or another method?

6. How do you personalize learning activities to the students in your classes?
   a. Prompt: Do you allow for flexibility in teaching methods to different groups of students based on their needs and interests?
   b. How do you encourage students to make connections between the course material and their lives?
   c. Prompt: Can you tell me more about……..

7. How do you to interact with your distance learners individually?
   a. Prompt: Do you use email, discussion boards, weekly announcements, twitter or social media feeds or another method?

8. How do you feel about using social media sites to communicate within an online course?
   a. Prompt: What social media platforms have you used with your students?
   b. Prompt: How successful was this?

9. How to you create opportunities for online students to interact with each other?
   a. Prompt: Can you tell me more about…?

10. How do you encourage students to develop a sense of community within your online classes?
    a. Prompt: By community I mean developing trust and relationships beyond completing assignments together.
    b. Prompt: Can you tell me more about…?

Thank you.
Finally, I have 3 questions regarding your perceptions of online teaching.

11. Within your practice, what do you think is the most effective strategy for supporting student learning?

12. What is the most important thing that your students need from you?

13. Finally, how do you identify the engaged learners in your online course?
   a. Prompt: What makes you think that a student in engaged in the course vs. one who isn’t?
   b. Prompt: What is your definition of student engagement?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Is there anything that you think I should be asking in addition to these questions?

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your thoughts and practices with me.

Would you like me to email you a copy of my research paper when it is completed and approved? What email address should I send it to?

Thanks again and have a good day/evening/weekend. Good-bye.
Appendix F: Participant Teaching Experience

![Bar chart showing the number of participants with different teaching experiences. The chart is divided into categories: 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-20 years, 21-30 years, and 30+ years. The chart indicates the number of participants teaching in higher education and those teaching online.](chart.png)
Appendix G: Participant Reported Training Specific to Online Teaching

![Bar chart showing the number of participants for different methods of training. The methods include UW Stout "Short Course," UW Stout Graduate Program, Training at former employer, Peer collaboration, Conferences/workshops, Quality Matters program, and Other self-study. The chart compares formal training (n=7) and no formal training (n=3).]
Appendix H: Audit Trail

Data coding key 1=Learner/content  2=Learner/instructor  3=Learner/learner

Do you design any of the course materials for your online classes?

- All ten instructors said they design the course materials and flow of their classes. Some inherit courses, but then make changes to the materials as they see fit.

- One instructor commented that they have seen other institutions moving toward standardized course shells that instructors can’t adjust and feels that the Wisconsin University System is moving toward using these standardized course shells. Doesn’t think that will be a positive move for students or instructors. Said it removes personalization and flexibility which adds to courses. 1

- Inherits some courses and then makes adjustments to update or bring in alignment with their teaching style. Also tries to incorporate activities that make the topics relevant to students, activities where they can apply their knowledge rather than a summative assessment. 1

- Creates a video intro so students can see them 2

- Incorporates collaboration into their courses when able but admits that there can be many technical and logistical difficulties in this when working with busy adult learners in the online environment. 3

- Spoke of the importance of collaboration between ID/IT and the instructor who will be teaching the course to align the technical and educational components with teaching styles. 1 - Design

- “If the designer's philosophy and the teacher's style don't match up it's a very bad outcome for the students and it ends up being twice as much work”.

- Also points to the importance of a course designer who has knowledge of learning theories rather than strictly technical knowledge. 1 - Design

- Another speaking of the importance that course materials are in alignment with teaching style/philosophy of the instructor. 1 - Design

- Spoke of having a short notice of inheriting a course with misalignment of teaching styles and had no time to adjust materials. Students noticed and commented that the course didn’t go well. 1 - Design

- Everyone uses LMS shell with given elements, but then can personalize with learning materials. 1
• Identifies pros and cons as allowing SMEs (instructors) flexibility in the materials and presentation that they think will best serve the students, but also affords for possible inconsistency between teachers teaching the same course. Says pros outweigh the cons. 1

How would you describe the approach of your online courses?

• Eight Identified their courses as mostly asynchronous with some synchronous, and 2 said their courses were 100% asynchronous.

• Has had poor attendance with synchronous sessions. Students seem interested at first but then attendance drops off with each meeting. 1,3

• Attributes logistics of busy adult learners, scheduling and time zone differences inherent in distance education.1

• Believes synchronous sessions do have positive components that add to an online course. 1,2,3

• Offered synchronous sessions via video chat and online office hours and students weren’t interested/didn’t attend. Students didn’t want to or couldn’t fit that into their schedules 1,3

• In a survey they conducted, 90% of their students reported they didn’t want to do group chats or group work. 3

• Narrates power point presentations so students can hear the instructor’s voice and allows detailed explanation of concepts verbally instead as text. 1,2

• Mostly asynchronous, with 1 synchronous session/year that students must attend but offers many different times so students can schedule it around their lives. Has good participation 1,2

• Speaks of importance of providing the flexibility that online adult learners need and want. 1

• “If you start making something mandatory you start taking away that freedom that online courses offer a lot of students.”

• Feels that students like to have f2f time but are too busy to participate in a set scheduled meeting time. When synchronous sessions are held they are recorded and uploaded to the course shell so all can view them. 1

• Thinks that synchronous sessions are more of a benefit to students, but they won’t engage in them. Therefore, tailors the course to how the students want to or have the time to interact. 1

How do you begin the course, what are your introduction strategies?
• Opens course shell early so students can go in ahead of time to look around and get a
feeling for how the course flows. This also helps alleviate stress about if they can get
into the course and how to work within the LMS. 1 – prior to deployment

• Created a video introducing students to the course. 1 (2 – can see and hear the instructor
in the video, creating a sense of presence and who the instructor is) - Day 1

• Welcome page within the course shell. 1 - Day 1

• Devotes the first few days to introductions between the students via discussion forum. 3 -
  Icebreaker

• Instructor also posts an introduction to this forum and responds to each student
  individually with a personal message. 2 - Icebreaker

• Records an introductory PowerPoint that they narrate going through the syllabus and
course materials, how to communicate with instructor, everything they need to know to
get started. This not only helps the student engaged with the content but provides an early
connection to the instructor. 1,2 – Day 1

• Presents a welcome/introduction video about them self, creating a sense of presence. 2 -
  Icebreaker

• First discussion prompt is an introduction answering 3 prompts about themselves and
  they must respond to others. Instructor also posts to this forum. 2,3

• Introductory video about the course objectives and who the instructor is with some
  personal information. 1,2

• Students do an introductory discussion post answering a prompt. 3

• Synthesizes all the intro posts into themes and uses them to tell a story about who the
  class is as a collective. This helps students see their similarities and differences and how
  they can all contribute to the overall learning and development of the whole as the course
  progresses. Works to highlight the wealth of experiences of individuals in the course and
  the advantage of sharing experiences. Builds sense of community 3

• Speaks of drawing students into the course and building trust. Feels that by building a
  relationship of trust with the students, they are more likely to reach out when they are
  facing difficulties in the course than to just drop out. Works very hard and is very
  attentive to students during the introductory weeks of the course, then begins to slowly
  back off and let them be more independent as the course progresses. States that the high
  level of interaction can’t be sustained with large classes over a much longer period of
  time. Keeps focus on that students rely on their instructor and needs to know they are
  present in the course if and when needed. 2 – Relationships
• Uses a video platform for student introductions to each other. This gives everyone a face to put with a name. Students can refer back to the intro videos anytime during the course. Creates a sense of connection seeing and hearing their classmates. 3

• Creates activities for the first week where students use the tools needed for the course. This gives them practice and allows instructor to see who can navigate easily and who might need some technical help prior to getting into the learning material. 1,2 – Design – Week 1

What methods do you use to spark learner engagement with the materials? (1)

• Intro videos at the beginning of each unit. Sustain

• Continuing to ask questions, inspire critical thinking. Sustain

• Discussion forums engage the students because they have to participate multiple times/week. Sustain

• Creating materials and lessons with relevancy, creating a loop between readings, activities, assignments, and discussion posts. Having everything in each unit relate to each other. Design

• Assignments on application, how will the student use the new knowledge? Design

• Finds that students react and interact better in small groups for discussion than when assigned the whole class. This makes the workload more manageable for busy adult learners. 1,3

• Weaves case studies into assignments for undergraduate students because they don’t have the same level of experience in the working world that most graduate students have.

• When grouping students for assignments, putting them along with others in like professions so they have similar experiences and knowledge base to be able to respond to each other appropriately and understand each other’s work.

• Showing relevancy, explaining the why behind each learning module, which objective it responds to. Giving an overview of each module so the students know what to expect as far as work goes, and then what to expect their outcomes will be upon completion. What questions they will start the module with that they will be able to answer upon completion. Design

• Within the discussion forums, encouraging students to participate by prompting them to engage differently with their classmates, encouraging questioning within the forum instead of just answering the prompt. Sustain

• Narrated power points because many students don’t like to read through them, also providing a document of instructor comments for each module with deeper explanation and highlighting key points. Sustain
• Narrated review of each assignment. **Sustain**

• Mid-term survey asking student for their opinion on the course, materials, teaching style etc.

• Responding to each students’ discussion post, this models appropriate posting and prompts the students to answer back.

• Works to show their own personal enthusiasm for the topics they teach. **Sustain**

• Gives students choices with assignments, how can they demonstrate how they will apply the material in their profession? What are they interested in? In what means are they most comfortable working? (Video, writing, podcast) **Design - Sustain**

• Prompting the students to think about what they will need to achieve by the end of the unit, giving background of what is ahead. **Sustain**

• Present the materials in a way that will draw them in. On instructor said there’s no way they can hope to hold the students’ attention throughout the entire course, they’re “just not that interesting”. To compensate they try to incorporate relevant and interesting Ted Talks, or other resources to engage the students. **Design**

• Finding something that students are aware of in the real world and then drawing a parallel between that and the learning topic to help them make those connections.

• Another that creates short video introductions for each module and each assignment walking the students through them, so they know the expectations and how much time they need to schedule to work on their studies each week.

**How do your students know you’re present in the class, that you’re a real person, not part of a computer program? (2)**

• The main themes are instructor presence, instructor accessibility, and timely feedback.

• Feedback within 24-48 hours on questions, email always open. Many instructors give out their personal cell numbers for students to call or text and they strive to respond immediately whenever possible. **Feedback**

• Posting videos that show the instructor, usually introduction to modules or assignments. Posting an intro video at the beginning of the semester so the students can see their face and hear their voice. **Welcoming**

• Providing timely and specific feedback, using canned feedback on assignments sparingly. Noting something they did well, questioning, or pointing out areas they can improve on with specifics on how to make those improvements. Showing the students that they’ve read all their work, that all their work matters. **Feedback**

• Citing students during discussion posts and telling them what the instructor has learned from the students. “I do a nutshell closure and just call it “in a nutshell” and that's where
I cite their words, but I take it from "here's what here's what I learned, here's what we learned, and here's where the gap is that we might want to consider going back and reading about". This involvement in the students’ weekly discussion forum shows that the instructor is there and reading all their posts. **Presence/discussions**

- A couple instructors use synchronous meetings, they feel that this helps the students connect to the instructor and other learners.

- Sending out periodic emails or course announcements, when one or multiple students as a course related question to inform the rest of the class. Sending emails when assignments have been graded. **Response**

- If a student is absent, sending an email to check in and find out why they’re not participating and if there is any help the instructor can give. **Trust**

- “There’s the part where they have to engage with me and know who I am and I’m aware, that there is a power differential and students are loathe to approach instructors…This is interesting and certainly anecdotal, but the email messages of inquiry that I receive from face to face students is vastly different from the email messages of inquiry that I receive from online students, such that online students will be almost apologetic “I’m sorry I’m bothering you, do this whenever you want to.” **Trust**

- Using Zoom or another online video chatting tool to communicate one on one with students. **Office hours**

- In weekly announcements including something that’s happening in the instructor’s life to show students that they are real people with lives too. Telling them things that are relevant to the date such as I took my kids trick-or-treating, etc… **Recordings**

- Sending out follow ups and reminder emails from week to week just to give them a heads up on certain things that are coming up, and kinds of questions that they might have regarding the topics for the week. **Presence**

- While some instructors reply to each student in each discussion forum (or aim to), others prefer to let the students have the discussion forum to themselves as their place to interact with each other. Those instructors do monitor the discussions for grading purposes and to head off any inappropriate posts that may happen. Depending on the class size and number of classes an instructor is teaching, responding to each discussion post may not be feasible. **Discussions**

**How do you personalize learning activities to the students in your classes? (1)**

- Giving students a choice about their assignments so they can make it relevant to their area of expertise/profession or to the style of response that they’re comfortable with, for instance video, text, audio, etc. Honoring their different learning styles and strategies. **Sustain**
“I try, here is the content and here is the assignment, so apply it to your context. So I’m not the one personalizing the content, it’s the student doing the personalization. It’s much easier to structure an assignment so the student can personalize their learning than for me to do it. I came to believe that teachers can do too much personalizing, students need to pick up the ball and figure out how they’re going to personalize it.” Design

Again, giving choice, guiding students towards a more appropriate or workable topic, slightly different approach when needed, but giving them choices on selecting ways to demonstrate knowledge and application that is meaningful to them. Sustain

One participant said, “I think this is a trial and error because I can’t know everybody, I can’t know everybody in a f2f class either”, but they try to learn the environment the students are coming from (professionally) and customize the lessons as much as possible to that. If they’re coming from a foodservice background, they’ll need a different approach than if they’re coming from the insurance business. Sustain

“I ask them to relate everything we do to what they're currently doing and then to think about that and most of my classes have some kind of a final paper where students are reflecting their learning and talking about "this is how I’m going to use what I’ve learned in this class”. Design

One instructor said “I think the hardest part of teaching is differentiating instruction for all learners. I’m flexible in the due dates so they are able to solve their life things that happened and then work on their class. Being cognizant of people that they have busy lives and families and jobs is important”. Sustain

“I assume they have experiences and perceptions and attitudes that can contribute to the class and so I look to encourage that to come out.” Sustain

How do you interact with your distance learners individually? (2)

- Being available to students when they want to connect. Office hours don’t appeal to students, they need to work with their busy schedules. All instructors are available by email, most give out their personal cell phone number for students to call or text them. Office hours
- Personalized feedback during grading with specific comments about their work. Feedback
- Emailed responses to their introduction post rather than posting to the entire forum. Icebreaker

How do you feel about using social media sites to communicate within an online course? (3)

Eight instructors said they don’t use social media sites (outside of the LMS) to communicate in class. Reasons are:
• Students may not be literate in social media or have access to those tools.

• Questions over how the sites will be monitored, whose responsibility it is to assure that they are being used appropriately.

• Instructors already face a taxing workload and don’t need another place to check.

• Students don’t need another place to log in and check/post.

• Questions and concerns about privacy on sites located outside of the LMS from the instructor and student sides. Some students don’t want to use social media sites.

• Want to keep communications within the LMS to simplify it for students, want everything organized in one site.

• Fears about legal implications.

• Concerns about feeding possible social media addictions.

Two instructors said they have or do use private social media sites.

• Can be used to add more of a cohesive classroom/cohort feeling to a group of students.

• Students are encouraged to set up their own social media page to interact with each other. The instructor stays away from the site and the students know it. In end of course surveys students said they liked having the private Facebook group and used it as a help page like the LMS “café” page is intended to be used.

Some students also responded that the support from their classmates on the private Facebook group was what helped them persist through to course completion when they felt like giving up. “They are using it as a sense of community, support and connections within their cohort”.

How do you create opportunities for online students to interact with each other? (3)

• Discussion forums are most often mentioned. Students have to answer prompts related to the materials and then read their classmates’ writings and answer a pre-determined number of those posts. They will interact online as much as they want to, some will do the minimum, but others will do more, respond to additional posts. Discussions

• One instructor works in a few posts where rather than respond to others, students read every initial post and then create a reply to all synthesizing everyone’s ideas and what they’ve learned from those posts. Discussions

• Another randomly groups students and assigns them to a pro or con stance on a topic, each group has to defend their assigned stance. This strategy gets them out of their comfort zone and through the discussions during this activity students get to see multiple facets of each topic or problem. Discussions
The topic of group projects brought out mixed feelings. Most instructors felt that students learn best from each other, but that the logistics of doing group projects in the online setting is not worth the outcomes. One instructor noted that feedback on course surveys indicated that students don’t like group projects. Adult distance learners want to show up on their own time, complete their work and move on. They don’t want to depend on others to complete projects. Groups

Grouping students together can be a logistical puzzle for instructors who find it difficult to get to know their students to understand who is a good fit to group together. Groups

One instructor stated that based on their observations of students perhaps students need to be taught how to effectively work together online. Adult learners may be comfortable collaborating in their work environment, but have difficulty transferring that to the online environment. Groups

The introduction/icebreaker posts is intended to set the tone for the class, demonstrating that students are not alone, there are many others in the same boat. It helps them feel they are in a safe environment where they are encouraged to share their thoughts. Icebreaker

Some have a Q&A or “Café” discussion area for students to ask questions about the course or chat about things outside of the course. Instructors report mixed participation in these forums with more students posting to the Q&A section than the “café” areas. This corresponds with literature that perhaps students are too busy to participate in this area.

How do you encourage learners to develop a sense of community within your online classes? (3)

The main thought was through the discussion forums. After observing a few weeks of discussion post exchanges, instructors report that they can see groups forming, the same students responding to each other. Often times this is spurred by the icebreaker/introduction activity, students learn who is in a similar field or has similar interests and begin discussions with each other. Discussions - Icebreaker

One instructor said that once they begin to see the discussion groups forming, they can help that group expand by assigning them to discussions with people they haven’t interacted with yet. Discussions

Many indicated that they think it can be difficult to inspire a sense of community in an online course. In these programs there isn’t a typical cohort of students moving through the courses like there is on campus. Some students may take 1 course and then not another for a year while others may move through the program quicker. One stated they are sure that “many online learners don’t come away with a big sense of community.”
• Online student may not want to or have the time to build a sense of community with their classmates. They may be pressed for time, have many outside obligations, not be comfortable with their writing skills, or just be a introverted personality who is not comfortable with interacting with others. Students can be encouraged to interact, but they will only do so to the extent that they are comfortable.

• However, sometimes that sense of community just naturally happens. Sometimes group work helps with this. So do activities where students use video tools so they can see and hear each other, and the use of synchronous sessions. “Sometimes at graduation students will show up and they’re like, oh, I’ve known you for 4 years online, yet they’ve never met”.

**Within your practice, what do you think is your most effective strategy for supporting student learning?**

• Three themes emerged, timely feedback, presence, and flexibility.

• Presence and being available for students when they have questions. Most have stated that they give students their cell phone number and encourage them to text or call with questions. Most indicated they strive to answer emails immediately or at least within 24 hours.

• Providing feedback that is specific and relevant and shows that their work is being read by the instructor. One said, “you must be responsive to those students”.

• Another said asking questions to keep them thinking, “perspective busting; we all have a way of looking at the world and I ask questions that usually upends their perspective a bit.”

• Understanding the online learner and being aware of their lives. “it's amazing to hear these students, there's not one that has a silver platter that I’m aware of, they are all juggling 2-3 jobs, spouse, children, pets, and I’m not even talking sleep”. Understanding that life happens and being flexible in deadlines when possible. Being able to work with these adult learners instead of being so stringent that it creates barriers for them to succeed. “Letting them know I care about them as people”.

• Giving them choices so they can make learning their own and apply it to their lives, that’s the main goal; application.

**What is the most important thing that your students need from you?**

• They need their instructors to be present, to be responsive when they have a question, to be able to count on their instructors and know they care.

• They need the learning materials organized in a structured consistent manner. They need simplicity in its presentation, so they don’t have to spend time trying to find materials or
figure out what an assignment requires. It needs to be user friendly. They need clear
directions ahead of time so they can schedule what they need to do into their already busy
lives. It needs to be relevant. **1 - Design**

- They need timely, constructive feedback and support to help make them better learners. **2**
- Some students will tell you what they need, but many others won’t. Adult learners don’t
  always disclose their needs for accommodations, one instructor reflected that they’ve had
  students with legitimate needs for accommodations but never asked for them. They
  asked, “how do we know we are providing for the largest possible audience to engage
  them? I don’t know that we do that well”.

**How do you identify the engaged learners in your class?**

- The main way of identifying engaged learners in the online setting is through their work
  and participation in the discussion forum. Students who thoughtfully answer more than
  the required number of classmates’ posts appear more engaged. They willingly interact
  with their classmates.
- The students who post early seem to have higher motivation and higher engagement.
  “They post early, often, frequently , the first people to post I’m never worried about in an
  online course”. However, one instructor had an interesting point about those who are
  more active in the discussion forums: “maybe these are people more likely to think on
  that social scale, the ones that are social maintainers, at a party they're going around, “is
  your drink ok, do you need something more” , they're going around making sure
  everybody has met and you can see them do that in an online discussion, but maybe just
  naturally they're the more social.
- How do you engage that learner that is very shy, introverted, isolated, how do I get them
  part of that community when they're not the social butterfly that’s going to love doing all
  the discussion posts? Not everybody is that social, there are some that feel very awkward
  and they're even more of a challenge to engage.”
- Others identify engaged learners through how they synthesize the material, how “they
  thought about it and they internalized it and they made it their own”. Another said “It's
  effort. You can tell whose putting effort in and who's not”.
- “I think the greatest honor as a teacher is when the student tells you how they are going to
  apply what you're teaching in their real world; and to me that's the highest level of
  engagement, they get it, they're going to apply it” that is an engaged learner.
- Engaged students “will ask questions, they'll ask where to find more information”, and
  they will share resources that I haven’t asked for.
- “They’re present and I can see that they're reading and thinking and can see that they're
  presenting some of their own interpretations with support of other's ideas”
• One interesting perspective is “I can't say if they're engaged or not if they turn assignments in on time. I don't know your attitude even if you're a great student, I can't use that in terms of the engaged part. I think it's really hard to identify them and I think we have such limited ways in that online learning to really demonstrate that engagement. If I go back to think of that good assignment coming in, I have no idea if you're engaged. I know you can follow directions and complete an assignment, that's great, but I don't know if that's really engaged you, that gets hard. They haven't come into it thinking “oh, how am I going to be engaged in this”. You know I think it's easy to become very disengaged and remote and just go through the motions; turn in the assignment and move on.

• Similarly, another instructor reflected, “I think that because of the environment, it's challenging, it's difficult to truly get that engagement. Frankly a lot of teachers struggle in the f2f to get engagement, and in a way that should be so much easier I think, because the personality comes through, we get little side conversations, I can tell if you're sleeping in the back. And yet I don't know that we all do a real super job in the f2f on engaging them.”