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Community of Inquiry: Discovering Social, Cognitive, and Teaching Presence in a Hybrid Master of Divinity Program

Vincent J. Tango
University of Denver, vincent.j.tango@gmail.com

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First Advisor

Judy Marquez Kiyama, Ph.D.

Second Advisor

Laura Sponsler, Ph.D.

Third Advisor

Bridget Arend, Ph.D.

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Vincent J Tango

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Advisor: Judy Marquez Kiyama, Ph.D.

Author: Vincent J. Tango
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This doctoral research project examines how students and instructors define and build community and ascertains what role community plays in student learning. This research was conducted utilizing a qualitative embedded case study at a private graduate theological school. The theoretical framework of Community of Inquiry (CoI) provided the foundation in which to discover the elements of social, cognitive, and teaching presence in student learning. This project elicited stories that reveal how community is at the center of the learning experience and that community building should be a priority in developing the curriculum. Three main themes emerged about building and sustaining communities in hybrid courses: 1) *Faculty engagement*, which refers to the instructor's participation in student learning and growth; 2) *The impact of gathering days*, which refers to on-campus meetings as a part of the hybrid courses; and 3) the *development of a sense of community*, which refers to the feeling of being part of a group of people with a common purpose. The foundational conclusion of this study states that when community is prioritized as an essential aspect of the learning experience, students are enthusiastically motivated to learn, especially as it relates to their vocational development. This study demonstrates that students in hybrid courses learn in a robust academic environment, engage vocational relationship skills, and connect to their peers and instructors in meaningful ways.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The number of students enrolling in at least one online class increases every year (Allen & Seaman, 2018). There are more than six million students taking at least one online course from a higher education institution in the United States, which equates to 31.65% of all students (Allen & Seaman, 2018). Online education also attracts local students; more than 50% of all students enrolled in at least one online course also enrolled in an on-campus course, with 56.1% residing in the same state as the institution where they are enrolled (Allen & Seaman, 2018).

The trend of students enrolling in online programs in theological graduate schools is also growing at faster rates than residential programs (Tanner, 2017). According to survey findings from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), 64% of schools surveyed indicated that they currently offer partially online courses (Gin, Smith, & Brown, 2015). Today, more than 23,000 students enrolled at an ATS institution take at least one online course, compared to fewer than 8,000 students in 2006-2007 (Tanner, 2017). Theological schools that offer online theological degree programs experience increased enrollment and find they can serve the needs of students pursuing their dreams of full-time ministry without burdening them with the expense of moving on or near campus (Kennedy, 2010; Wheeler & Ruger, 2013).

With the decline of Master of Divinity (MDiv) enrollment nationwide, theological schools have begun to explore ways to increase access to their programs (Tanner, 2015).

Distance education is now commonplace, yet ecclesiastical administrators, accreditation agencies, and educators at theological schools raise concerns about whether online or hybrid graduate theological programs can achieve the same level of education as residential graduate theological programs (Hess, 2005; House, 2010; Kelsey, 2002; Shore, 2007). [1] As these issues are debated, students are often left on the sidelines without access to a way to pursue their vocational calling to ministry. Churches, nonprofits, social agencies, hospitals, and other service organizations need educated clergy and spiritual leaders. While a previous generation of learners possibly had to relocate to attend graduate school, today's students are less likely to enroll if they must relocate to a different state (Wheeler & Ruger, 2013). With the changing demographics of second-career students with life demands such as careers and families, there is an opportunity for institutions to implement creative teaching strategies to meet the needs of contemporary students.

Statement of the problem

Although online programs in theological schools are desirable for students, there are lingering questions about whether online/hybrid programs can accomplish the same academic and formational learning goals as residential programs (Kelsey, 2002; Hess, 2005; Shore, 2007; Wheeler, 2010). The curriculum in divinity degrees requires many relational skills, including counseling, pastoral care, spiritual formation, and preaching (Association of Theological Schools, 2012). Ecclesiastical leaders, accreditation agencies, and educators raise questions as to whether the learning of these interpersonal

[1] See the terminology section at the end of this chapter for definitions of ecclesiastical administrators, distance education, hybrid, online, hybrid, theological schools, etc.

skills is diminished in an online learning environment. Online coursework in theological programs should emphasize spirituality as well as academics, and coursework within an MDiv program should facilitate personal relationships between faculty and students (Hines, 2008). This would require a program that both provides academic excellence and includes a focus on spiritual formation and community building.

While a growing body of scholarship demonstrates that online learning is effective for the spiritual, theological, and professional formation of ministers (Holdener, 2010; Wiems, 2014; Ferguson, 2016), there has not been extensive research that examines a comprehensive and integrated hybrid approach within an MDiv program. Research on community building, spiritual formation, and vocational preparation in online theological education exists (Ascough, 2007; Lehman, 2014; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006), yet missing from this literature are studies that identify how a hybrid MDiv program achieves those goals. There is also a lack of evidence in the literature that indicates how both the on-campus classroom and the online classroom work together to foster students' sense of community and their ability to meet academic learning goals within an MDiv program. While there have been research studies addressing online theological education (Ferguson, Foster, & Trentham, 2016; Hege, 2011; Raybon, Gretes, Cathey, Lambert, & Lock, 2012; Wiens, Seymour, Hess, & Dwight, 2014; Shore, 2007), my study fills a gap regarding how community plays a role in learning in a hybrid MDiv program.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this qualitative embedded case study (Yin, 2014) is to discover how students and instructors define community, build community, and to ascertain what

role community plays in student learning. The following research questions guided this doctoral research project (DRP).

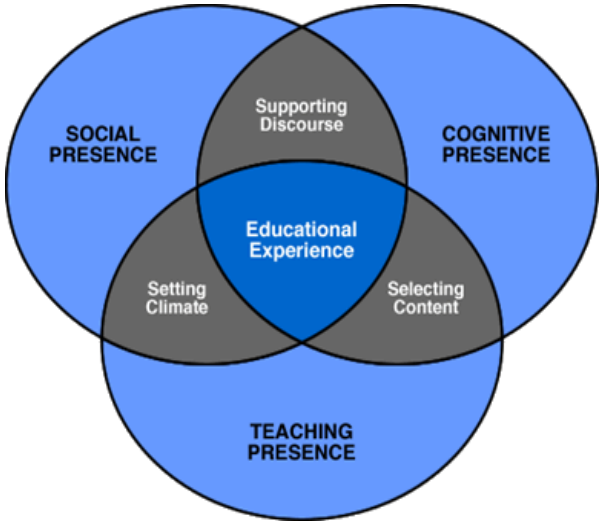
Research Questions

1. How is community defined among students and instructors in graduate hybrid theological education?
2. How is community constructed in graduate hybrid theological education?
3. How does community play a role in student learning in graduate theological education?

Framework: Community of Inquiry

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework describes the educational learning experience in a text-based computer-conferencing environment in higher education (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000). The CoI framework provides a foundation where social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence are interconnected to establish learning. Figure 1 shows the three presences based on this research and how the elements interact to create an educational experience (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

Figure 1 - Community of Inquiry Framework



This framework is based on a collaborative constructionist view of teaching and learning that recognizes that collaboration between teaching and learning creates an ideal educational experience (Garrison, 2017). The principle for social constructionism is that knowledge is discovered by students working together in the process of collaborative knowledge construction (Wu, 2003). From an educational perspective, a community of learners is composed of individuals interacting to facilitate, construct, and validate ideas (Garrison, 2011). Collaborative educational approaches are enhanced with information technology, which allows individuals to enhance the learning experience through sustained contact long after the educational experience (Garrison, 2017). This sustained contact creates an opportunity for individuals to continually learn and share knowledge (Garrison, 2017). Distance education is becoming more commonplace in higher education, and this includes theological graduate programs. The MDiv curriculum requires and assumes that students will develop interpersonal relationships and experience personal and spiritual formation in the program.

Significance of the study

Educators in theological education have found it difficult to consider the integration of electronic technology into their classrooms because of the assertion that theological education has something uniquely relational about it which the online classroom cannot replicate (Hess, 2005). As online programs continue to become more available, understanding ways in which to deliver online/hybrid programs with a relational element in place will be essential for the relevancy of theological schools. As enrollment in MDiv programs decreases, theological schools are tasked with finding new ways to attract and retain students (Aleshire, 2011). Distance learning has unique capabilities to support asynchronous, collaborative communication in a dynamic and adaptable educational context (Garrison, 2017).

My study reaches a broader scope of educators invested in teaching or administering online programs. A primary dilemma of online programs, particularly in the humanities, is a concern that the human aspect is diminished in an online classroom (Hoffman, 2011). Teaching and learning in online environments require different pedagogical assumptions and strategies (Hoffman, 2011). My study addresses issues about pedagogical practices and highlights the human aspects and benefits that justify online and hybrid education.

In my professional role in enrollment management in higher education, I talk to students regularly who ask about enrolling in a hybrid MDiv program. In some of these conversations, it is revealed that online education is not supported by the ecclesiastical bodies that endorse the ordination of ministers. This lack of support stems from the belief that online education is dehumanized and cannot be accomplished online (Hess, 2005). In

the United Methodist Church, for example, some jurisdictions require at least half the degree be on campus. These opinions assume that online education is insufficient for theological education; therefore, face-to-face learning is prioritized without a thorough understanding of the benefits of online and hybrid programs.

Theological schools are in enrollment decline, and some have been closing or merging with other institutions (Lovett, I., 2017). With declining enrollments, aging facilities, and lack of funding, theological schools need to be relevant in the future, and there needs to be research that provides new ways for these schools to grow and thrive. Stakeholders, especially in Protestant denominations, value a new generation of church leadership and recognize that these new leaders will have fresh ideas to move the church in new directions; however, these denominations generally fail to embrace the fact that hybrid and online theological education does educate these new leaders in fresh and relevant ways. The stories shared in my research study indicate how valuable, meaningful, and effective online learning can be for students who learn in a hybrid program.

This study benefits several constituents who are professionally invested in theological education, including presidents, deans, faculty, and administrators in theological education, accreditation agencies, and bishops, Boards of Ordained Ministry, and other denominational and ecclesiastical leaders. Since administrators are particularly concerned about increasing enrollment, understanding how to create and run a hybrid program effectively would benefit institutions seeking to enroll more students. Accrediting agencies, such as the ATS, could benefit from this information to set standards and expectations within online or hybrid degree programs. Since a qualitative study highlights

stories, and since educators in theological schools value testimony, the data in my research will be particularly useful and relevant. Finally, the information gathered in my study could be used for developing faculty training, curriculum, co-curricular activities, information technology, and best practices to serve students who enroll in these types of programs.

Overview of the project

For this project, I explored student and instructor experiences using a qualitative embedded case study design (Yin, 2014). From March through May 2018—over a 10-week quarter—I researched the three hybrid courses as individual mini-case studies. Three instructors and sixteen students participated. Further, I examined how students and instructors build community, how they define a community, and how community plays a role in student learning. The research was conducted at a private graduate theological school accredited by the Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada.

Each course, analyzed separately, provided insights for understanding the larger themes. Three primary themes emerged from this study: 1) faculty engagement, 2) the importance of gathering days, and 3) a sense of community. Faculty engagement refers to the instructor's participation in students' learning and growth; gathering days refers to the on-campus classroom meetings as a part of hybrid courses, and a sense of community refers to the feeling of being part of a group with a common purpose.

The findings revealed that community plays an important role in the learning experience. Instructors in the courses approached their teaching towards making connections with the students and designed their courses in a way that allowed for

ongoing class engagement. Faculty were intentional with their curriculum design by utilizing the tools and strategies available within hybrid courses. Online discussions were most effective when faculty were present and participated. When the instructors provide authentic and timely feedback, students were more motivated to participate more fully in discussion forums. When educators connected real-life vocational skills in the learning environment, students took risks and trusted each other.

This paper is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces my research and outlines the research questions and the purpose of the study. I conclude this chapter with terminology used throughout the paper. Chapter Two is the literature review in which I review the theoretical framework of Community of Inquiry, online theological education, community, and hybrid courses. In Chapter Three, I detail how I conducted this research, including classroom observations, interviews, focus groups, and reviewing documents such as course evaluations. In Chapter Four, I write about the findings. This chapter is divided into three sections: 1) findings in the hybrid courses, 2) themes, and 3) findings to the research questions. This DRP paper concludes with Chapter Five, where I offer interpretations and recommendations of the finding of this research project.

Terminology

Association of Theological Schools (ATS)

The *ATS* is the accrediting body of graduate theological schools in the United States and Canada. In addition to setting the standards of theological education, it provides research and training to faculty, staff, and administrators who serve in theological schools.

Denominations

Denominations refer to recognized branches of Christianity. Denominations are structured in various ways and can be led with a congregational structure where decisions are made at the local level or in an episcopal structure where decisions are made by Bishops or Boards. Examples of denominations include Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Methodist, and the United Church of Christ.

Distance education

Distance education is an umbrella term that captures education that is occurring using online technology. This could mean asynchronous or synchronous learning, online, hybrid, or correspondence using email, video, or other platforms**.**

Ecclesiastical administrators

Ecclesiastical administrators refer to leaders and decision-makers in denominations such as Bishops, Boards of Ordained Ministry, District Superintendents, Conference Ministers, and various other ecclesiastical leaders.

Gathering days (also *on-campus*)

Gathering days denote on-campus meetings when hybrid class members meet in person. This is a term specific to the site in this study.

Hybrid (also *blended, combined, modified residency*)

Hybrid courses combine online and on-campus instruction. The percentage of time spent in online and on-campus varies by program.

Master of Divinity (MDiv)

"The purpose of the Master of Divinity degree is to prepare persons for ordained ministry and for general pastoral and religious leadership responsibilities in congregations and other settings (ATS, 2012, p.1).

On-campus (also *in-person, residential, traditional, and face-to-face*)

Classes held in a brick-and-mortar location on campus and generally in a classroom.

Online (also *e-learning*)

Students meet asynchronously through email, discussions forums, and other online activities. Synchronous learning may also take place through video conferencing.

Theological education (also *seminary, theological school*)

Theological education refers to seminaries and theological schools. While there are slight differences, I use both terms to describe theological education in this paper.

Chapter Two: Literature

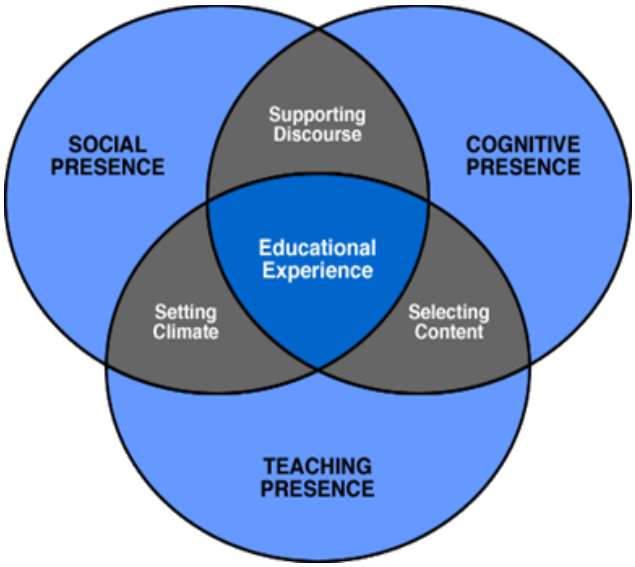
In this chapter, I review four areas: 1) community of inquiry, 2) community, 3) hybrid courses, and 4) online theological education. I begin by reviewing the literature of the community of inquiry (CoI), the framework that has informed my doctoral research project. The CoI framework is based upon the three interconnected elements of social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison, 2011, Garrison, 2017). The premise is that students within a learning community construct ideas and knowledge in online and hybrid educational contexts. I discuss each of the three elements in detail in this chapter. While reviewing the framework often comes at the end of the literature review, I begin this chapter with the framework to give readers a conceptual foundation about online and hybrid learning in community. The framework sets the groundwork for the literature review and thus I placed it at the beginning of this chapter, rather than at the end.

In addition to the CoI framework, I reviewed the literature about how community contributes to the online learning experience. Following the review of the community literature, I review the literature about how hybrid courses have a significant impact on the learning experience. I conclude the review with literature about online theological education and the requirements of a Master of Divinity degree.

Theoretical Framework: Community of Inquiry

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework was initially developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). These researchers studied critical inquiry and discourse as the foundation of an educational learning experience in a text-based computer-conferencing environment in higher education. They reviewed the issues of critical thinking in asynchronous communication in distance education, which differs from the spontaneous dialogue that happens in classrooms (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2000). In their initial paper, "Critical Inquiry in a Text-based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education," Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) presented research that learning experiences occur through three interdependent elements – social, cognitive, and teaching presence. This research study established a framework that has been cited more than 4,992 times (Google Scholar, 2019). Figure 2 shows the three presences based on this research and how the elements interact to create an educational experience (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

Figure 2 - Community of Inquiry



The three presences occur simultaneously. For example, online discussions involve instruction, critical thinking, and social interaction, all at once. Due to these cross-functional aspects, cognitive, social, and teaching presence should be understood as being intertwined (Xin, 2012).

Online learning is uniquely able to support asynchronous, collaborative communication in a vigorous and flexible educational context (Garrison, 2011). This model is most effective in describing how learning occurs in online classrooms, most notably when describing hybrid or blended models, which also include face-to-face learning. Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, and Garrison (2013) suggest that the combination of online and face-to-face learning provides new teaching opportunities for innovation to incorporate the learner more fully.

The CoI framework is rooted in the notion that learning does not occur individually but rather collectively (Garrison, 2017). Information is conceptualized with others in the learning environment to construct knowledge. The principle for social construction is that students learn by working together in a collaborative process (Wu, 2003). A constructionist view of teaching and learning is the foundation of the CoI framework (Garrison, 2017). Constructivists believe that rather than being passive in the learning process through acquiring knowledge solely from an instructor, students learn more effectively through a process of actively constructing knowledge through collaboration (Ainsworth, 2013). Both teachers and learners bring their lived experiences and prior knowledge into the classroom. Therefore, rather than acquiring knowledge primarily from an authority figure, a constructivist point of view holds that experimentation and previous experiences provide the necessary new context and purpose

(Ainsworth, 2013). A community of learners is comprised of individuals who have the roles of both teacher and student and engage in dialogue with the specific purpose of composing meaning and confirming understanding (Garrison, 2017).

From an educational perspective, a community of learners consists of individuals interacting to facilitate, construct, and validate ideas (Garrison, 2011). Collaborative educational approaches are enhanced with information technology, which enables individuals to enhance the learning experience through sustained contact (Garrison, 2017). This sustained contact creates an opportunity for individuals to learn continually and share knowledge (Garrison, 2017).

Social Presence

Social presence refers to the immediate personal interactions. This concept is based on the facts that human beings are social, and learning is a social endeavor (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Within the CoI framework, *social presence* refers to the ability to create the human dynamic within online spaces. Garrison (2017) defined social presence as "the ability of participants to identify with the group, communicate openly in a trusting environment, [and] develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison, 2017, p. 25). Social presence is a natural occurrence in face-to-face on-campus activities, but online classrooms create unique challenges to establish a social presence. Generally, text-based communication lacks the immediacy that is important for establishing a social presence (Garrison, 2017). Social presence has thus become an established indicator for improving learning and cognitive development in online classes. It is evident when educators and students are in a trusting learning environment where personal and

collegial relationships are created (Garrison, 2017). Learning creates effective, open communication, and cohesion that support the achievement of the intended academic goals (Garrison, 2017). This is more likely to be achieved when an environment of open communication and group cohesion is established (Garrison, 2017).

With meaningful socialization, students are permitted to share personal experiences, and that help creates a reflective dialogue about professional issues (Cox-Davenport, 2014). Utilizing a grounded-theory qualitative approach to study the way faculty establish a social presence in an online course, Cox-Davenport (2014) found that student perceptions of meaningful socialization, facilitating connections, and student control provided an opportunity in the online space for student-centered learning. The faculty in this study perceived that students thrived when they were able to regulate their course activity and thereby had greater ownership of the course (Cox-Davenport, 2014).

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is linked with critical thinking (Garrison, 2017). The cognitive presence aspect of the CoI model is based on the Dewey (1933) framework for critical thinking. For Dewey, critical thinking is a practical endeavor that enhances the meaning of learning (Dewey, 1933; Garrison, 2017). Critical thinking involves the relationship between private and public knowledge (Garrison, 2017), which "is a core concept in developing a cognitive presence for educational purposes" (Garrison, 2017, p. 51). In an online environment, to be a critical thinker is to demonstrate one's independence of thought (Garrison, 2014).

Cognitive presence occurs when knowledge is generated within a community of learners through sustained reflection and discourse (Garrison, 2014). There are four

phases of cognitive presence stemming from the Practical Inquiry method (Garrison, 2014). A first phase is a triggering event that occurs when an idea or problem arises (Garrison, 2014). The triggering event stimulates students to begin exploring a particular problem, issue, or question. Once the problem has been identified, students move into the next phase, which is a problem-solving discussion among the learners (Garrison, 2014). This phase includes the exploration of and brainstorming about relevant information and ideas (Garrison, 2014). The third phase consists of an integration process whereby knowledge is synthesized. This phase includes expanding upon or testing the ideas (Garrison, 2014). In the fourth phase or resolution, the learners test and attempt to apply what has been created through the collaborative classroom experience. Cognitive presence has been shown to support learning processes and outcomes (Akyol & Garrison, 2011).

Course design and faculty engagement impact students' critical thinking in both face-to-face and online courses (Hosler & Arend, 2012). By administering the CoI survey (see Appendix A) and with qualitative methods, the researched found that students achieved success when assignments were both relevant and interesting and that students appreciated being challenged by instructors who directly stimulated them with relevant, open-ended questions (Hosler & Arend, 2012). The conclusion in their study was that students thrive when they receive direct feedback from their instructors, especially when the feedback is given in a timely and responsive manner. Furthermore, students anticipate that instructors will actively participate in discussions that provide direct instruction about course material to encourage everyone to participate (Hosler & Arend, 2012).

The research indicates that cognitive presence occurs when learners construct and identify meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. While cognitive presence requires an ability to think critically, communication and discourse rely on trust, open dialogue, and communication focused on understanding the problem (Garrison, 2017). Finally, for cognitive presence to be evident, the instructor needs to connect ideas being presented with the participating students.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence is defined as a "strong and active presence on the part of the instructor – one in which she or he actively guides and orchestrates the discourse" (Shea, 2006, p.185). Teaching presence is cultivated when educators provide an environment in which participants actively engage in shaping the learning experience (Garrison, 2017). Teaching presence focuses on facilitation, course design, and presentation of course content for students to thrive in the online environment. Teaching presence establishes consistent and visible access to the instructor, which in turn enables students to structure their presence proactively. Establishing teaching presence is based on the instructor's ability to collaborate and stimulate intellectual risk-taking (Garrison, 2011). An online course is not intended to be an electronic version of a face-to-face class. Instead, it must incorporate the learning styles of the students in the online classroom. A primary dilemma of online programs, particularly in the humanities, is a concern human presence and interaction are diminished in the online classroom (Hoffman, 2011). Teaching an online environment requires different pedagogical assumptions and strategies (Hoffman, 2011), and creating an accessible online environment involves thoughtful planning and intention that immerse learners in critical reflection.

Shea (2006) developed a teaching presence scale to measure student perceptions of online course design and instruction. The study assessed students' level of connectedness and learning and the link between teaching presence and the online classroom. The purpose of this research was to create an understanding of online pedagogical procedures and to explore how those procedures could improve the quality of instruction and learning (Shea, 2006). The results showed that there was a rise in student connectedness when the course was well designed and organized (Shea, 2006). However, what was salient in this study was that course design was not as important as teaching presence. When teaching presence was consistent and evident, students adapted to the course structure.

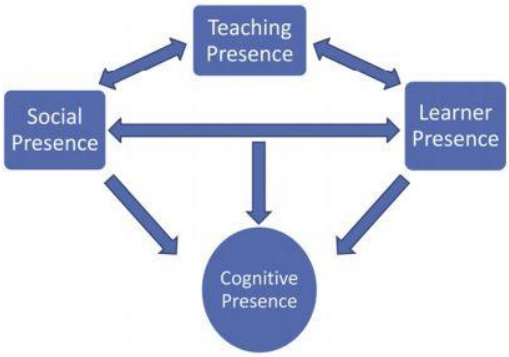
Teaching presence is a mindset of a pedagogical approach that have both social and cognitive elements. It includes "extending activity between student, instructor, and content beyond just being there" (Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). Teaching presence establishes a social connection that allows for a supportive environment in the online course. In a research study with faculty, Orcutt & Dringus (2017) showed that intentional relationships between instructor and students inspired intellectual curiosity.

Updated models of CoI

The CoI model specifically addresses online education and introduces the notion that social, cognitive, and teaching presence collectively contribute to the overall educational experience. With the enhancement of technology, improvement of online education, and increased research in these areas, newer models have been introduced to expand the original CoI framework.

The learner in the online environment needs to have an element of self-efficacy and self-regulation for the construction of knowledge to take place (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). *Learner presence* in this research refers to students accomplishing learning goals by bringing themselves as learners into the educational environment. For example, in online discussions, students were observed to divvy up tasks, manage time, and provide leadership to complete group projects (Shea and Bidjerano, 2010). These findings indicated that the learner presence has a role in the educational experience. Figure 3 shows how the learner presence informs the three presences in the CoI framework (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010).

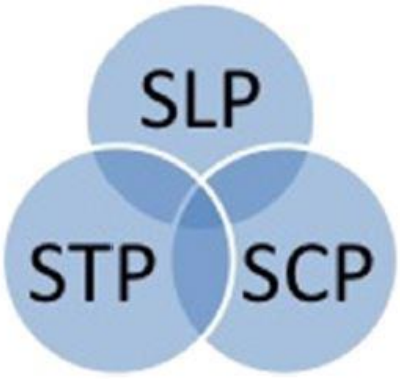
Figure 3- Learner Presence



Shea, Hayes, Uzuner-Smith, et al. (2014) contributed further by adding that social presence is embedded within each of the teaching and cognitive presences. In this model Social Learning Presence (SLP), Social Teaching Presence (STP), and Social Cognitive Presence (SCP) were introduced to emphasize the social aspects evident in the other presences. SLP refers to the students' personalities and behaviors that contribute to their self-regulated online learning. STP refers to the instructor's online social emphasis in the teaching and learning experience. SCP refers to the cognitive development that occurs

within a social exchange of ideas. Figure 4 shows how SLP, STP, and SCP overlap to create the learning experience (Shea, Hayes, Uzuner-Smith, et al., 2014). Within this model, social presence is embedded within the learner, cognitive, and teaching presences.

Figure 4 - Social presence within cognitive and teaching presence



Social presence plays a much larger role in the cognitive and teaching presences than the original CoI framework had indicated (Armellini and De Stefani, 2016). The evolution of the CoI framework has occurred in the following ways: 1) Social presence interact with teaching and cognitive presences; 2) Social presence leads to enhanced peer support; and 3) Teaching presence and cognitive presence have social attributes embedded within them (Armellini and De Stefani, 2016). The implications of the research suggest that social presence has a central role in the construction of knowledge and consequential teaching (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016). Social presence in online learning is not a separate entity but rather is embedded in the learning process. Six core areas are introduced in this model: 1) interactions for learning, 2) socialization of content, 3) community development, 4) course design, 5) self-study, and 6) learning experience (2016). Figure 5 shows an updated CoI model indicating how social presence is

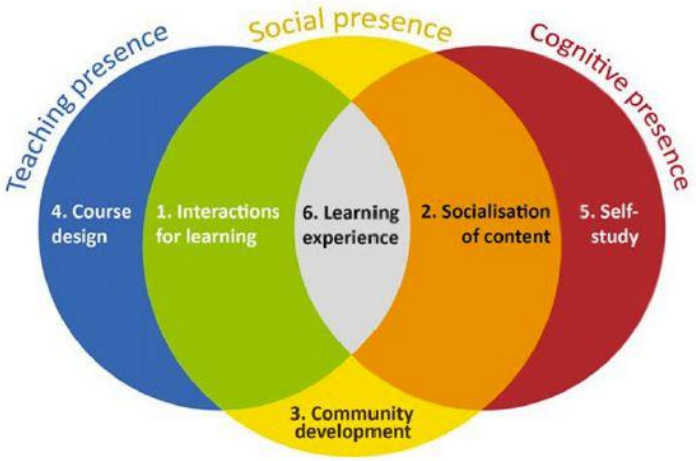
embedded and how the six areas intersect. The six areas in this model are as follows (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016):

- Area 1: Interactions for learning. This area reflects the pattern that teaching is social. Teaching in online environments contains a markedly social component that is essential for the meaningful engagement of participants and colleagues.
- Area 2: Socialization of content. This area focuses on the fact that learners utilize online course content based on their existing knowledge to build new impressions. Students contribute using informal social exchanges that contribute to academic rigor. When incorporating life experiences that are not directly related to the course, for example, family, friends, hobbies, etc., knowledge is exchanged more spontaneously and quickly.
- Area 3: Community development. This area in the study indicates that socialization outside the teaching and cognitive presences is not solely for socialization itself. Socialization occurs most prominently within the cognitive and teaching presences.
- Area 4: Course design. While course design is directly related to teaching presence, there are also elements of communication that occur socially, which communicate information and understanding to the students.
- Area 5: Self-study. This area suggests that learning occurs individually outside of the classroom and is distinct from group work. Self-study is most closely related to cognitive presence. When group work and classroom

dynamics are established, there is evidence that social interactions enhance critical thinking and the evolution of knowledge.

- Area 6: The learning experience. This matter is at the center of the framework, just as it was in the original CoI framework. The learning experience is the object of the model that incorporates social, teaching, and cognitive presences.

Figure 5 - The role of social presence



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Summary of CoI Framework

To conclude this discussion, the CoI provides a framework that has its origins in the pivotal research study by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). The educational learning experience is created when the three interlocking elements of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence come together. CoI was developed when online education was first making its way into higher education and was mostly delivered by text. Researchers wanted to know how learning could be effective in a text-based environment. Since then, the CoI network has been implemented in higher education, and its effectiveness has been cited in numerous research articles. Newer models have since

been developed by researchers who argue that social presence may have a bigger impact on the other two presences than originally suggested (Armellini & De Stefani, 2016; Shea, Hayes, Uzuner-Smith, et al., 2014).

The CoI framework and my DRP. The CoI framework was suited for my DRP because my research questions were centered around the notion of community, specifically in a hybrid learning environment. Since the CoI framework was designed for online and hybrid learning environments, it provided an appropriate foundation for understanding the three presences that supported one another umbrellaing the context of community. The framework was thus central to my research study with regard to my methods, data collection, analysis, and presentation of the findings.

For data collection, I referred to the literature and previous research studies that pointed to this framework. While my study was not intended to prove the significance of CoI , the literature provided a foundation for the types of questions to ask participants and what was likely to be observed. Specifically, I relied on such analytical tools as the surveys and rubrics that have been developed for use with the CoI framework (Arbaugh et al., 2008; Garrison, 2017).

For data analysis, I relied on the CoI data-analysis table developed by Arbaugh, et al. (2008). Table 1 shows the categories and possible indicators for social, cognitive, and teaching presences. The indicators in the chart provide examples of what a researcher may observe in an online or hybrid course. For example, teaching presence in the chart consists of three categories: 1) design and organization, 2) facilitating discourse, and 3) direct instruction (Arbaugh et. el., 2008). When researching design and organization in a course, a researcher could plan to observe how the curriculum is determined and

communicated to students. I write about this use of the CoI framework in more detail in Chapter 3.

Table 1 - Community of Inquiry categories and indicators

ELEMENTS	CATEGORIES	INDICATORS (examples only)
Social Presence	Open Communication Group Cohesion Personal/Affective	Learning climate/risk-free expression Group identity/collaboration Self-projection/expressing emotions
Cognitive Presence	Triggering Event Exploration Integration Resolution	Sense of puzzlement Information exchange Connecting ideas Applying new ideas
Teaching Presence	Design & Organization Facilitating Discourse Direct Instruction	Setting curriculum & methods Shaping constructive exchange Focusing on and resolving issues

The CoI framework is centered around the notion that learning occurs in community. In the following section of this literature review, I highlight the publications that address learning in community, specifically as it relates to online courses and degree programs.

Community

A community is a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another, which is distinct from a group of members who share ideas an interest, but do not necessarily have a concern for one another (Vogl, 2016). An online learning community has frequently been described in the following ways: 1) “a sense of shared purpose, 2) establishment of membership boundaries, 3) establishment and reinforcement of rules regarding community behavior, 4) interaction among the members and 5) a level of trust, respect, and support among the members” (Vesely, Bloom, and Sherlco, 2007, p.235).

These descriptions are relevant in an educational environment. A class naturally has participation boundaries set by enrollment the course.

McMillan (1996) defines a sense of community as "a spirit of belonging together" (p.315) and having a shared emotional connection and a feeling of membership to the group. McMillan categorizes a sense of community into four areas: membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connection (McMillian & Chavis, 1986). In this context, membership is defined as a feeling of relatedness to others in the group. Influence is a quality which affects the behavior of someone else. Reinforcement is the integration of a shared emotional connection; and a shared emotional connection occurs when there are commonalities of beliefs and similar experiences (McMillian & Chavis, 1986).

In a higher education learning environment there four dimensions of learning expectations and goals: 1) the recognition of being a member in community and where there is friendship and cohesion among students as they look forward to spending time together, 2) having confidence in another person and showing concern for others, 3) task-driven communication by the instructor which fosters a community of collaboration, and 4) commonality of learning is when students form a community by a natural extension of committing to learning together (Rovai, 2002). When these dimensions are strengthened, a better sense of community is formed.

Vesely, Bloom, and Sherlco, (2007) conducted a study with fourteen online courses with the goal of understanding instructor and student perceptions about community in online education. Salient from this research were the perceptions that students and instructors had about the leadership role that faculty played in their online classrooms.

For example, the students ranked instructor modeling as most important in building an online community, whereas the faculty ranked it fourth (Vesely, Bloom, and Sherlco, 2007). Both students and instructors felt that open-ended questions and conversing with classmates by reading each other's discussion posts enhance the online learning environment. While the findings revealed that building an online community is more difficult online than in person, online learning communities achieve learning through collaborative engagement. Furthermore, the findings of this study revealed that students want to experience and instructor presence in the course (Vesely, Bloom, and Sherlco, 2007).

The literature suggests that building a sense of community in online classrooms is also beneficial for increased retention rates (Rovai, 2002). Rovai and Wighting (2005) researched students' feelings of alienation in online learning environments. The results showed that lack of community led to lower student achievement and higher student attrition. Furthermore, it was found that African-American students felt a lesser sense of community in an online environment than Caucasian students in a predominantly white virtual classroom community. African-American students placed a higher emphasis on the communal values of sharing and honoring knowledge (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Online professors who made it a priority to encourage discussions in which students spoke to their values increased the sense of connectedness among the students and reduced any feelings of alienation (Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

In a one-year study Haythornthwaite, et al. (2000) showed that belonging to a community supports efforts by educators who find it beneficial to provide such a community for their distance learners. The study found that students who did not make

connections felt isolated and more stressed than those who were more active in the community (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000).

Hospitality is another essential community building component for student's learning (Ascough, 2007). Addressing issues like honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness, and empowerment helps achieve success in online classrooms (Ascough, 2007). These are not technological issues but interpersonal ones (Ascough, 2007), and instructors should provide an informal social discussion area and a space for private conversations. Ascough argues that courses should include some collaborative projects with instructors ensuring that there are connections the students can make between the class and their own life situations.

Lehman and Conceição, (2014) name four main attributes essential for successful online classes: 1) consistency, 2) variety, 3) relevance, and 4) content prioritization. Consistency of communication allows students to know what to expect in their online class (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). Sending emails and announcements twice a week kept students engaged and on task while helping them manage their workloads (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). In addition to consistency, using a variety of content kept students motivated (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). Examples include varying content (i.e., text and video lectures), group and individual assignments, discussions, and team projects, as well as technology and social media in the courses (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). Allowing students to make choices about their assignments also made a difference regarding student satisfaction with an online course (Lehman & Conceição, 2014).

Course content should also be relevant when applicable to students' lives. For example, when content is geared to career or professional development or can be applied

to real-life problems, students become excited to learn (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). In addition to relevant course content, instructors that prioritize, plan, and design the course in small components have the most success in the online classroom (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). Arranging course content in modules or other smaller units made it easier for students to engage with and understand the material being presented to them.

Finally, an aspect of building a student community through instruction occurs when there is an opportunity for both online and on-campus activities. The next section contains a literature review about hybrid courses which combine both online and on-campus instruction.

Hybrid courses

Research of 149 undergraduate and graduate students at a private university suggests that students preferred hybrid courses to traditional residential courses and that their achievement tended to be higher than in traditional residential courses (Mosca, Ball & Buzza, 2010). This study provided an understanding of how students achieve success in hybrid courses, with the results indicating that the latter had a statistically significant preference for hybrid classes. Furthermore, Garcia (2014) found that 95% of the participants chose a hybrid course over a solely face-to-face or online course and Kumrow (2007) found that students in hybrid sections earned higher grades by the end of the course than those in the residential section.

Chen and Chiou (2014) utilized a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the effects of hybrid learning about learning outcomes, student satisfaction, and the students' sense of community in the classroom. In this study, two face-to-face classes served as the control group, and two hybrid classes were selected as the experimental one. There were

seven hypotheses tested in this study that measured whether there were differences in student learning outcomes, learning styles, and felt a sense of community. The results found that students in the hybrid course had higher scores and greater satisfaction than the students of the face-to-face courses. Additionally, students in the hybrid courses felt a stronger sense of community than the students in the face-to-face ones (Chen & Chiou, 2014).

The literature indicates that administrative support is also essential for student success in online programs. For example, Hoey (2014) conducted a study that consisted of 120 nonprofit private Christian colleges with affiliated with the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities. The purpose was to determine the best way to structure the administration of online programs to achieve successful outcomes. Their research affirmed that institutions with separate administrative structures are more efficient in proposing and developing new programs and creating innovative curriculum than institutions that do not have dedicated administrative support. Institutions that had a designated administrator, such as a dean or director, had significantly more enrollment and increased retention than other institutions that did not have this structure (Hoey, 2014).

Online theological education has been growing steadily (Tanner, 2017). In the next section, I review the literature about online theological education and the accreditation requirements for graduate theological degree programs.

Online theological education

Whether an MDiv degree program is in an on-campus or an online environment, educating future leaders relies on the effectiveness of the education. Personal and

professional formation requires sophisticated relationality, self-reflection, and a deepened understanding of ministerial responsibility. Coursework within an MDiv degree program should facilitate a deepened understanding of one's faith and enhanced spiritual leadership. Online coursework in theological programs should additionally emphasize spirituality as well as academics that include a focus on community building (Hines, 2008).

The degree standards for online theological education are authorized by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS). The ATS is a membership organization of more than 270 graduate schools of theology or divinity schools that encompass a wide range of religious traditions including Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, multidenominational, and nondenominational (ATS, n.d). The purpose of theological graduate degree programs is to train individuals for the ministry as well as for teaching and research in the theological disciplines (ATS, n.d).

In 1999 the ATS approved the first online MA degrees, and in 2002, the first online MDiv program (Tanner, 2017). There has been a substantial, steady growth of online theological degrees ever since. Between 2002 and 2012, over 110 schools have come to offer online programs, with the current number of schools offering online degrees now outpacing the growth of residential programs (Tanner,2017). Over two-thirds of all the ATS schools at present offer online programs (Tanner, 2017).

The MDiv is the industry-standard degree for the education of persons for ministry in a variety of contexts such as congregations, hospitals, and nonprofit organizations. There are specific standards for the degree, including professional and spiritual formation. This emphasis on formation is so prominent that the words

"formation," "spiritual," and "professional" are used numerous times throughout the accreditation standards (Wein, 2014). Formation in this context indicates that the formational goals of the program require that academic and vocational outcomes are among the many facets of students' formation addressed within a broader curricular framework (Weins, 2014). Whether learning takes place in an on-campus classroom or an online learning community, spiritual and personal formation is an essential learning goal in an MDiv program. The ATS accreditation manual makes this point as follows:

> The MDiv program should educate students for a comprehensive range of pastoral responsibilities and skills by providing opportunities for the appropriation of theological disciplines, for deepening understanding of the life of the church, for ongoing intellectual and ministerial formation, and for exercising the arts of ministry (Association of Theological Schools, 2012, p.3).

The ATS accreditation manual further suggests that learning outcomes for the MDiv should emphasis "personal and spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial and public leadership" (Association of Theological Schools, 2012, p.3). With these accreditation guidelines in mind, one finds that the literature about online education articulates how to meet the goals of educating to a comprehensive range of ministerial responsibilities that also provide personal and professional formation.

When instructors commit to developing learning communities, the robust dialogue is fostered. Maddix (2013) suggests that to develop online communities, faculty should model communication that encourages interactive activities which foster consistent dialogue. Best practices of online learning communities must 1) provide stated guidelines for online discussion, 2) develop a supportive learning environment, 3) foster online

presence and faculty involvement, and 3) create learning activities that foster interaction and dialogue (Maddix, 2013). There should clear discussion-assessment strategies that provide an avenue for critical thinking and social interaction (Maddix, 2013). This development, in turn, enables students to feel more connected and supported in their learning. Maddix (2013) argues that this type of intentional community building provides an avenue for students to be "formed and shaped through the influence of their Christian professors and classmates" (p. 147).

The online environment creates a unique opportunity for students to be more interactive with each other by demonstrating their knowledge in the course of responding to their peers. A highly interactive online environment is advantageous for students studying theological concepts and skills. For example, Doehring (2018) suggests that students in an online Pastoral Care course can exhibit advanced intercultural empathy online. Empathy is a pastoral-care skill that requires trust and vulnerability. It is a relational skill in various ministry contexts. The online classroom provides a unique opportunity for students to engage in this type of empathy building (Doehring, 2018). The following are teaching strategies that foster theological empathy (Doehring, 2018):

- Weekly forum discussion groups of five students that change each week;
- Readings about theological empathy and extended case-study reflections;
- Reporting on spiritual practices, especially in reflecting on suffering;
- Using forums on micro-aggressions to reflect intersectionally on social privileges, and disadvantages;
- Using poetry, art, and music to lament suffering;
- Using personal experiences and case studies to integrate learning;

- Receiving interactive feedback and immediate grading.

Doehring (2018) further suggests that instructors can model pastoral care by how they respond to students' discussion posts. By setting up weekly small-group discussions that change every week, students can interact with each other at a deeper level (Doehring, 2018). The online environment encourages students to take on new roles, witness verbatim role-plays on video, and demonstrate their spiritual integration and theological understandings of significant issues of pain and suffering that require skilled pastoral care (Doehring, 2018).

Weins (2014) conducted a qualitative study that reviewed the disciplines of theological education, spiritual formation, and online learning. The study, Weins' doctoral dissertation, included interviews with 14 faculty from 11 theological institutions. An important finding revealed that online theological education has a direct correlation to spiritual formation and the practice of ministry. Wein's research 1) explained learning goals for spiritual incorporation, 2) provided a pedagogical map for instructors to guide course design and assessment, and 3) clarified the relationship of theological institutions and the faith communities. The salient finding in this study was the pedagogical map created to approach spiritual formation.

Building an online community of learners that allows for formation among students is essential to an MDiv program. Hege (2011) suggests that to develop this type of community, instructors should be cognizant of creating a sustained, engaged learning environment which includes regular interactions with students through blogging or discussion boards and other, similar activities. Assignments and activities should be

specifically tailored to create trust and open dialogue that invite students to learn about the instructor's personality and course expectations (2011).

Social presence in an online course is enhanced when students have a better understanding of the instructor. Shore (2007) noted that social presence is a crucial element for inviting students to approach difficult questions in an online course. Shore implemented the following social-presence strategies when teaching Bible courses in a mainline seminary: a) create an online forum where a prayer and devotional texts are read out loud to invite students to engage with one another, b) provide opportunities for students to attend chapel through streaming services, and c) create small, optional discussion groups that allow students to ask questions about the course, talk about nonacademic pursuits like music and movies, and pray for one another.

Conclusion

CoI, the theoretical framework for my DRP, is comprised of the three interlocking elements of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. CoI is a framework for describing and evaluating critical thinking and discourse primarily in online and hybrid education. I reviewed the literature about how community enhances online education. The literature suggests that creating an interactive learning environment involving instructors and students enhances student motivation and critical-thinking skills. The literature I reviewed showed that hybrid courses are a preferred method for students to achieve learning goals. I concluded this chapter with a review of online theological education. The literature showed that such courses in an online theological program provide the sophisticated relational skills needed for pastoral care by future ministers.

The MDiv has requirements that assume that students will develop interpersonal relationships and receive personal and spiritual formation in the program. Community brings students and educators together to create relationships and facilitate thoughtful discourse and communication exchanges. As online education has become more prevalent and as technology has become more sophisticated, new models in CoI have emerged to suggest that social presence may be more prevalent in the online educational experience than suggested initially in earlier research.

Chapter Three: Methods

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover how community is defined, constructed, and experienced in hybrid courses in graduate theological education. I examined how students and instructors build community, how they define a community, and how community plays a role in student learning. Since the curriculum in master's theological programs requires sophisticated relational skills that are often experienced through in-person learning environments, this study had its purpose of determining if students experience these skills in hybrid courses. I explored the student and instructor experiences using a qualitative embedded case study design.

I collected qualitative data by observing three classes, conducting one-on-one interviews, facilitating focus groups, and reviewing syllabi and course evaluations. In this chapter, I describe the rationale for a qualitative study and the methods of data collection and analysis. I begin by describing how the Community of Inquiry framework informed my research questions, data collection, and data analysis. I conclude with ethical considerations, limitations, and my positionality as the researcher.

Research questions

1. How is community defined among students and instructors in graduate hybrid theological education?
2. How is community constructed in graduate hybrid theological education?

3. How does community play a role in student learning in graduate theological education?

Conceptual Framework

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a structure that creates the foundation for participating in meaningful learning experiences through three independent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, 2017; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). The evolution of online education created the necessity to enhance curriculum and course design; the CoI model was thus developed to understand text-based distance learning. Understanding how a learning environment changes from in-person to online education is essential for establishing the social interactions necessary for cognitive development. The CoI framework has been particularly beneficial in designing and teaching hybrid or blended courses (Garrison, 2011). The growth of online education has given rise to the need to increase student participation in meaningful ways, which includes giving language to and strategies for constructing and enhancing knowledge.

A constructionist view of teaching and learning provides the basis for the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, 2017). Constructivists believe that rather than being passive in the learning process through acquiring knowledge solely from an instructor, students learn more effectively through a process of actively constructing knowledge through collaboration (Ainsworth, 2013). Both teachers and learners bring their lived experiences and prior knowledge into the classroom. Therefore, rather than students' acquiring knowledge primarily from an instructor, the constructivist point of view holds that experimentation and previous experiences provide a necessary new

context and purpose for learning (Ainsworth, 2013). The creation of ideas with others comprises a reciprocal process. The principle for social constructionism is that students learn by working together in a collaborative process (Wu, 2003). From an educational perspective, a community of learners is individuals interacting to facilitate, construct, and validating ideas (Garrison, 2011).

The CoI framework was suited for my DRP because it is a well-established framework for understanding the phenomena in online and hybrid education (Befus, M., 2014). CoI researchers have developed analytical tools like surveys and rubrics that guide research involving teaching and learning methods (Arbaugh, Cleveland-Innes, Diaz, Garrison, Ice, Richardson, Shea, & Swan, 2008; Garrison, 2017).

I made use of the CoI survey charts, and rubrics to develop the interview questions and observation protocols for my DRP. I adapted the CoI data-analysis chart, which is most commonly used with quantitative CoI assessment research. In quantitative studies, the researchers ask participants to respond using a Likert scale to questions posed on the CoI survey. I did not use the CoI survey in my study for two reasons: a) It is meant to provide quantitative data analysis. Since my project was a qualitative study, I was committed to staying within the bounds of qualitative case-study protocols. b) The survey is often used to assess the effectiveness of CoI in courses and online programs (Arbaugh et al., 2008). The goal of writing this DRP was to utilize the CoI framework as an anchor in my research, not for assessment purposes.

I've included two tables that show my organization and thought the process in adhering to this framework. The first is the CoI chart (Arbaugh et al., 2008) that researchers use to determine the presence of the three elements in the CoI. The indicators

in the chart are examples of what a researcher may observe in an online course. For example, the element of social presence has the categories of open communication, group cohesion, and personal/affective. In this example, a researcher may observe social presence within the category of open communication. The indicators of open communication might be observed if the learning environment included a sense of trust that allowed free expressions of ideas.

Table 2 is the CoI chart that I referred to for developing interview questions, coding, observation protocols, and data analysis (Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, Garrison, 2013).

Table 2 - Community of inquiry categories indicators

ELEMENTS	CATEGORIES	INDICATORS (examples only)
Social Presence	Open Communication Group Cohesion Personal/Affective	Learning climate/risk-free expression Group identity/collaboration Self-projection/expressing emotions
Cognitive Presence	Triggering Event Exploration Integration Resolution	Sense of puzzlement Information exchange Connecting ideas Applying new ideas
Teaching Presence	Design & Organization Facilitating Discourse Direct Instruction	Setting curriculum & methods Shaping constructive exchange Focusing on and resolving issues

In addition to the table above, I utilized information from the CoI survey (see Appendix A) and incorporated it into the categories and indicators table. Table 3 shows an example of how I use the statements from the survey to develop interview questions.

Table 3 - Interview questions example using the CoI framework

CoI ELEMENTS	CoI CATEGORIES	CoI INDICATORS	CoI Survey Statements	Observation Questions	Interview Questions

Social Presence	Open Communication	Learning climate/risk-free expression	Knowing other students gave me a sense of belonging in this course.	How do students get to know one another to feel a sense of belonging in the course?	How do you get to know other students in the course?
Cognitive Presence	Triggering Event	Sense of puzzlement	Course activities piqued my curiosity	What types of course activities pique interest for students to learn?	How does the instructor guide the class towards understanding course topics in a way that stimulates your learning?
Teaching Presence	Facilitating Discourse	Shaping constructive exchange	The instructor provided clear instructions on learning activities	How does the instructor provide feedback to students that help the learner understand their strengths and weaknesses relative to the course's goals and objectives?	How does the instructor provide feedback to you that helps you understand your strengths and weaknesses relative to the course's goals and objectives?

Methodology

A qualitative case study is a preferred method when the researcher's objective is to describe and understand people, situations, and experiences (Frankel and Devers, 2000). This study aimed to capture the real-life experiences that students and instructors have in graduate theological hybrid courses. This type of inquiry is best captured when researchers interview and observe participants. It is useful in discovering nuanced understandings of people's feelings, thoughts, opinions, and motivations and in capturing participants' stories (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is conducted when there is a

problem or issue to explore using data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013). This type of evolving research provided the flexibility needed for me to ask open-ended questions that led to an in-depth understanding of the complexities in which participants experienced in their learning and teaching in hybrid classes.

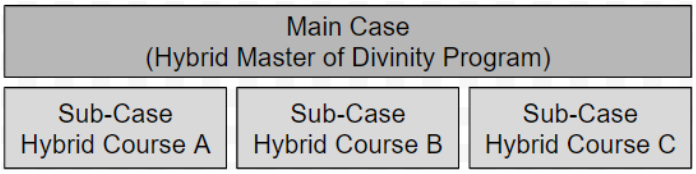
Case study. A case study is used to develop an in-depth understanding of a particular bounded setting (Creswell, 2013). Further, it seeks to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of the case under investigation (Stake, 1995). Case studies are appropriate for examining particular phenomenon within the setting. Generally, case studies are not intended for comparisons in other settings, but rather help researchers understand the uniqueness of a program or setting. A case could be a large organization, a program, a class, or even one person. Conducting a qualitative study for this topic was an effective way to capture the understanding of a complex social phenomenon (Yin, 2014) that occurs in hybrid courses taught in theological education. The purpose of a case study is to answer questions of "how" or "why" (Yin, 2014, p. 2). Since I sought to answer "how" students and educators experience hybrid courses, this methodology was well suited. It was essential to capturing the narratives and lived experiences of the participants by using qualitative methods.

Embedded case study. A case, to reiterate, is one studied unit. In this study, I chose to research the three sub-units (e.g., courses), as individual mini case studies. Like a case study, an embedded case study involves research methods to understand the uniqueness of a particular case. An embedded case study entails researching smaller units of analysis that contribute to the main case (Yin, 2014). An asset of this approach is that it allows the researcher to analyze a variety of documentation, including interviews and

observations from the sub units. The benefits of embedded cases are coming to understand similarities and differences within the subunits to provide stronger evidence for a reliable case and to discover the phenomenon in the larger case (Yin, 2014). This is particularly beneficial with data analysis to triangulate information and adds trustworthiness to the research study.

When I was designing my research study, I thought about whether to conduct a case study with a broad range of students and faculty throughout the entire school or to interview students and faculty within certain classes. I decided on the latter to understand the details and subtleties that occurred in the hybrid learning environment. The following figure **s**hows how the sub cases in this study inform the larger case.

Figure 6 - Embedded case study



Site

For purposes of confidentiality, the site and the participants have remained anonymous without identifiable information cited. The pseudonym name for the site is "Colorado Theological School" (CTS), a private graduate theological school accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. It is a graduate theological school for students entering the ministry, pastoral leadership, social-justice advocacy, and other related vocational careers. The school offers four master's degrees and a Ph.D. degree.

Demographics. Students at CTS are 63% female, 37% male; 82% Caucasian, 2% Asian American, 8% African-American, 3% Hispanic American, and 3% Native American. Religiously, CTS serves students in over 30 different faith traditions and denominations, including those who identify as not affiliated with any particular faith tradition. Geographically, students come from 44 states. There are 18 full-time faculty and 275 students.

Rationale for site selection. The site was chosen because the school was one of the first institutions to offer a comprehensive hybrid master's program that was accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. The school has a unique course scheduling curriculum. For example, each hybrid course requires two days of on-campus meetings. All hybrid courses offered during a particular term meet during that week. This is unique to this particular site because multiple courses are offered during the same week.

Another reason was the eagerness of educators at the site to receive information about the hybrid program. While the personnel at the site have been aware that community occurs in co-curricular spaces for retreats, meals, activities, events, and social media, less has been understood about the existence of community in the classroom and its impact on student learning. When the program started in 2010, courses were primarily taught by adjunct faculty. As the program expanded, more faculty started teaching in the program and currently 100% of the faculty at the site teach online and hybrid courses.

The notion that community could have an impact on student learning prompted further research at this site. My interest in this topic began in 2016 when I, along with a faculty colleague, distributed a survey to solicit students' experiences of the courses,

schedule, and the faculty. The results of the survey provoked questions for further research and sparked an interest in me to discover more about student learning experiences. The students indicated in the initial survey that a community experience was indeed a valuable factor in their educational experience. Therefore, given all the reasons mentioned above, the site seemed ideal for researching how community contributed to students' educational experience within online classes.

Participants

Instructors. The three hybrid courses that were included in this study were taught by faculty at the site in the spring quarter of 2018. Hybrid courses entail a combination of online and on-campus aspects of the course. Each course, analyzed separately, provided insights for understanding the larger themes. The instructors were selected based on the courses they were assigned to teach during the 2018 spring term, the subject matter, the faculty members' willingness to participate, and the on-campus class meeting times. Before recruiting the instructors, I first consulted with the Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs/Dean of the Faculty and the President/CEO of the school to ensure they were both aware of my research. They were thus able to discuss any concerns they might have throughout the project. Once the proposal was approved by the administration, I met with each of the selected instructors to discuss the parameters of my research, describe the protocols and timelines, and answer their questions. When the instructors agreed to participate, they signed a consent form and graciously granted me access to their courses, syllabi, and course evaluations. Three faculty members participated in this study. Each of the faculty members had experience teaching in the hybrid format.

Table 4 - Participants (instructors)

	Pseudonym	Course	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Faculty/ Rank	# of years of teaching experience
Instructor A	Dr. Elizabeth Percy	Hybrid Course A (Christian Worship)	F	Caucasian /White	Associate Professor	18
Instructor B	Dr. Edward Williams	Hybrid Course B (New Testament)	M	Caucasian /White	Assistant Professor	12
Instructor C	Dr. Camilo Franco	Hybrid Course C (Pastoral Care)	M	Mestizo /Latino	Assistant Professor	15

Students. The students were recruited based on their enrollment in one of the three selected courses. All the students within these courses were eligible to participate. Students were informed of the study by the course instructor, who announced with a flyer and a letter that outlined the parameters of the study along with my contact information in Canvas, the learning management system. Students were invited to contact me directly about their willingness to participate in any or all of the three data-collection methods: class observations, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews. On the consent form, students were asked to submit their name, degree program, and the course they were enrolled. I did not collect any other demographic information. See the table below for the sample size and student participants.

Table 5 - Participant sample size (students)

	Number of students in the course	Number of students who participated
Hybrid Course A	18	5

Hybrid Course B	19	7
Hybrid Course C	15	4
Total	52	16

Sixteen students participated in at least one of the three methods. Eleven students participated in a one-on-one interview and eight in one of the focus groups, while fifteen consented to classroom observations. See the table below for student participants.

Table 6 - Participants (students)

	Pseudonym	**Interview Consent**	**Focus Group Consent**	**Class Observation Consent**	**Hybrid Course**
Student 1	Nick	YES	YES	YES	A
Student 2	Christopher	YES	YES	YES	A
Student 3	Teresa	YES	NO	YES	A
Student 4	Larry	NO	NO	YES	A
Student 5	Steve	NO	YES	YES	A
Student 6	Clara	YES	NO	NO	B
Student 7	Melissa	YES	YES	YES	B
Student 8	Pamela	NO	NO	YES	B
Student 9	Caleb	YES	YES	YES	B
Student 10	Kat	YES	NO	YES	B
Student 11	Brenda	NO	NO	YES	B
Student 12	Carolyn	YES	YES	YES	B
Student 13	Jason	YES	YES	YES	C
Student 14	Catherine	YES	YES	YES	C
Student 15	Betty	NO	YES	NO	C
Student 16	Cindy	YES	NO	YES	C
Total		11 students	8 students	15 students	

Description of hybrid courses and schedules. Hybrid courses at CTS follow a 10-week format, with online education in Canvas, the learning management platform, during weeks 1-4 and 6-10 and on-campus meetings during week 5. In addition to

attending courses during the fifth week, students have opportunities to participate in such on-campus activities as meals, worship, academic presentations, and social activities. The on-campus times for hybrid classes are scheduled within an 8-hour timeframe, with attendance mandatory for enrolled students. The table below shows an example of the hybrid on-campus schedule. Classes are organized into sections referred to as Hybrid A, Hybrid B, and Hybrid C. The schedule is designed so that students may enroll in any combination of the A, B, and C sections. This design is explained more fully in the data-collection section of this chapter.

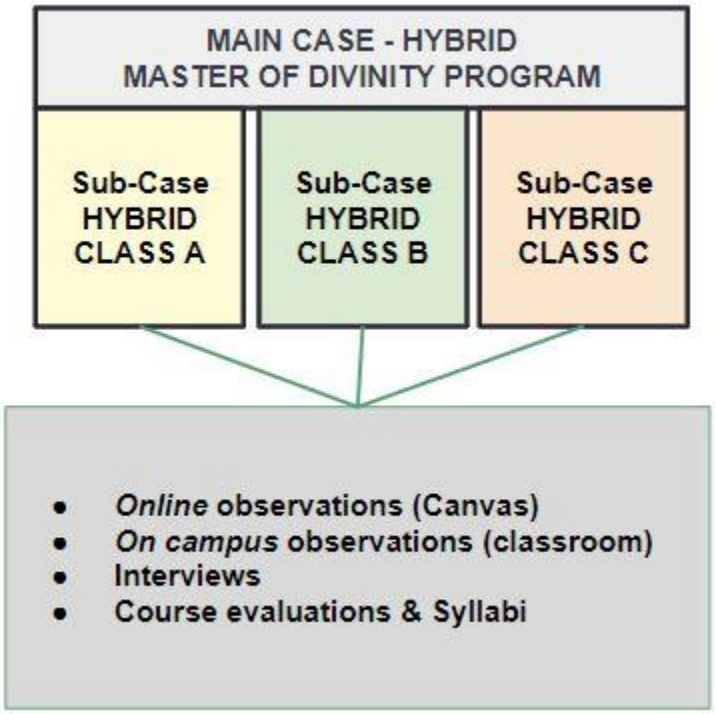
Table 7 - Example of the Gathering Days (on-campus) hybrid course schedule

	Wednesday	**Thursday**	**Friday**	**Saturday**
8:00am-12:00pm		HYBRID (A) COURSES	HYBRID (B) COURSES	HYBRID (C) COURSES
1:00pm-5:00pm	HYBRID (A) COURSES	HYBRID (B) COURSES	HYBRID (C) COURSES	

Data Collection

The research was conducted over the 10-week quarter, March through May 2018. The methods used for data collection consisted of class observations, student interviews, focus groups, faculty interviews, and course evaluations. Figure 7 indicates an overview of the data collection.

Figure 7 - Overview of data collection



Observations. Class observations were conducted both online and in person. Observations are a way to collect data in a setting where participants naturally gather (Merriam, 1998). Observing students both online and in person presented an opportunity to see them interacting in their natural learning environment. I observed the participants online through the learning-management system available on Canvas, as well as on-campus for the eight hours of class time scheduled in the middle of the term. See Appendix B for the observation protocol.

Online observations. The purpose of observations in Canvas was to observe student interactions with each other and with the instructor, which occurred primarily through text and occasionally through video. Students participated in discussion boards in both large and small groups. I observed student discussions, assignments, and comments between the instructor and the students. I captured data from the students who gave

consent and kept the information gathered private and confidential. Viewing student grades was not a part of this study.

As an observer via Canvas, I followed along with the rhythm and pace of the course. I focused my attention on reading discussion posts, watching videoed lectures the instructors made available, and reading through instructor comments to students. Using the CoI framework, I developed an observation protocol to seek information regarding the three elements of the CoI framework of teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence. As noted in the conceptual framework section earlier in this chapter, I adapted the CoI chart to develop my observation protocol. I reviewed the courses multiple times after I had conducted interviews. In this way, I used Canvas as a background to substantiate what the students shared in their interviews. For example, when students described a particular learning experience, I returned to the discussion to view what they were sharing in a larger context. This approach provided me with a broader understanding of how the students were experiencing the course.

On-campus observations. I observed the courses when the classes met on campus in the fifth week of the quarter. Each class met for eight hours over two days. The table below indicates how the classes were scheduled. I immersed myself in the setting and observed the classroom dynamics as a "participant observer" (Merriam, 1998, p. 101). As an observer, I was seated among the students but did not actively participate in the activities. For each of the classes, I arrived early to talk with the instructor about classroom logistics, including where to sit and how I was to be introduced to the class. In all three courses, I was invited by the instructor to be seated among the students.

I thus embedded myself in the classroom environment for each of the classes. I observed the classroom dynamics, body language, and facial expressions of the students. I observed patterns of behavior, mainly as they related to building community, establishing trust, creating a social environment, and forming shared knowledge. I observed firsthand the course material, teaching methods, and student interactions. With each of the courses, the instructors provided lecture, explanation, and facilitation. All three courses included group activities, hands-on learning, and embodied experiences. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 4.

Table 8 - On-Campus class meeting schedule

Time	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
8:00am-12:00pm		Christian Worship	New Testament	Pastoral Care
1:00pm-5:00pm	Christian Worship	New Testament	Pastoral Care	

Interviews. I conducted 11 student interviews and three instructor interviews. The student interviews were conducted by video conference on Zoom. I held the instructor interviews on campus at the site. Each interview, approximately 60 minutes in length, was digitally recorded. To schedule the interviews, participants self-selected interview times from a web link connected to my calendar. I confirmed each participant's interview time and sent an email reminder the day before the interview, along with the Zoom link.

I asked predetermined and open-ended questions (Litosseliti, 2003). The interview protocol for the faculty included questions about their pedagogy, teaching philosophy, teaching approaches in hybrid courses, and experience with developing community in the learning environment. The interview protocol for the students included questions about their learning, the effectiveness of course assignments, definitions of

community, and their experiences as learners in a hybrid course (See Appendix C, D, and E or interview protocols.).

Focus Groups. I facilitated two focus groups online via Zoom and recorded the conversations. Focus groups are organized groups utilized to explore specific themes, individuals' views and experiences, and group interaction (Litosseliti, 2003). To schedule the focus groups, I emailed participants possible dates and times and asked them to fill out an online form indicating their availability. Once I collected the latter, I inform them of their scheduled time. One group had three students, and the other group had five.

The rationale for conducting focus groups in addition to one-on-one interviews was that focus groups give the researcher access to participants' experiences that they are willing to share within group situations (Barbour, 2007). Focus groups differ from one-on-one interviews, where the aim is to solicit private responses. Focus groups can also provide parallel data to interviews where similar and contrasting data sets can be compared (Barbour, 2007). I developed predetermined open-ended questions to observe group dynamics and peer responses (Litosseliti, 2003). For example, throughout the group conversations, students would often respond to a question from one of their peers by either affirming that they felt the same way or indicating that their experience was different. I followed up with questions for clarification. The students seemed to naturally state in the conversation when they felt the same as or different from a peer.

While I did not anticipate that some students would sign up for both focus groups and interviews, this eventuality turned out to be effective in providing additional information. This overlap of some students participating in both one-on-one interviews and focus groups allowed me to ask a slightly different set of questions in each. The table

below provides an example of a set of one-on-one interview questions and how it differed slightly from a set of focus-group questions.

Table 9 - Example of interview question and focus group question

CoI element	**Interview question example**	**Focus group question example**
Social	How do you get to know other students in the course?	How do you know that there is trust established in the course?
Cognitive	How does the instructor provide feedback to you that helps you understand your strengths and weaknesses relative to the course's goals and objectives?	Talk about a time when the class reached a resolution to a problem or concern about a particular topic.
Teaching	Describe how you learn most effectively from the instructor?	As you think about the instructor's presence in the course, what is most important to your learning?

Documents

I reviewed the syllabi from each of the courses. In addition to the usual aspects of a syllabus that includes assignments, due dates, and learning goals, it is usually the first entry point that students have with their instructors. Reviewing the syllabi offered insightful data on how instructors communicate with their students. I reviewed course readings, handouts, and other materials from the classes. I also examined the course evaluations at the end of the term that provided additional validation of the data that I had collected from the students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process by which one searches for meaning in the data, to understand the case (Stake, 1995). Specifically, data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or combining evidence to determine findings (Yin, 2014). My data-analysis process included transcribing interviews, organizing and preparing data, reading through transcripts multiple times, coding the data to discover themes and descriptions, and interpreting the meaning of these themes and descriptions (Creswell, 2014).

The recommended way to conduct data analysis without becoming overwhelmed is to analyze them simultaneously with their collection (Merriam, 1998). Given this advice, I captured early themes by creating memos and writing down possible themes that were emerging. While I did capture some themes early on, data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the research project. Most of my data analysis was conducted after all the data was collected, and I had transcribed all the interviews by verbatim.

Dedoose. The web application I used was Dedoose, a qualitative data-analysis software tool to organize all the data (Dedoose, n.d). With the amount of data that was collected, Dedoose was an effective aid to categorize, organize, and connect similar codes, frequencies, and co-occurrences. The following is a summary of the actions I utilized in Dedoose:

- Uploaded the transcribed interviews
- Created codes
- Linked codes to excerpts in each document
- Reviewed coded data associated with excerpts

- Viewed different code frequencies and co-occurrences
- Exported the information in Word and Excel
- Downloaded tables
- Interacted with the hot links in Dedoose that excerpted to themes and codes.

Coding. Coding is the process of organizing data from the interviews and observations in descriptive words (Crewwell, 2014). Codes are a short word phrase that "symbolically assigns" an essential and salient descriptor of the data (Saldaña, 2009, p.3). The coding data comes from interview transcripts, observations and field notes and other correspondence and documents (Saldaña, 2009). I developed codes based on participants comments from interviews and from my observations. Most of the coding relied heavily upon emerging data from the participants stories.

Before analyzing the data from the data collection, I utilized coding strategies that guided me in understanding and organizing the findings into themes and conclusions. Coding generally occurs in one of three ways 1) determine codes organically through data collected from the participants through interviews and observations 2) utilize predetermined codes, or 3) use a "combination of emerging and predetermined codes" (Creswell, 2014.p. 199). My overall strategy included the latter by combining predetermined codes from the CoI framework and by identifying codes that emerged from the data.

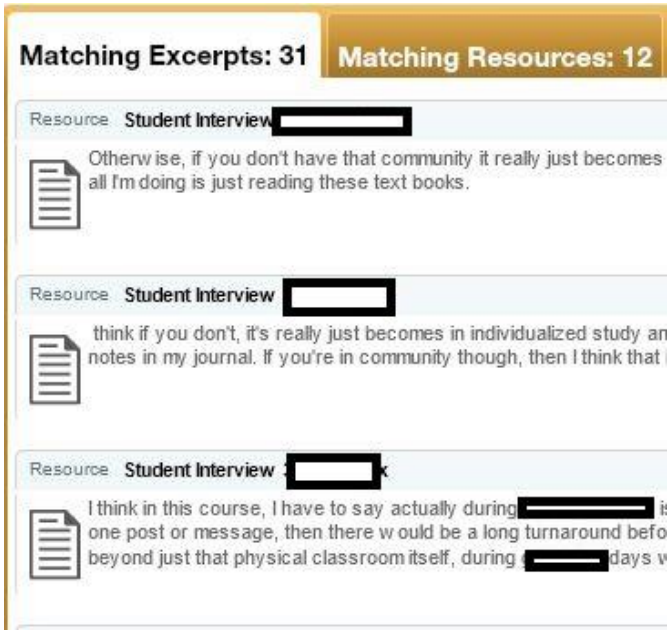
Analysis began with listing words and phrases from the CoI framework. As mentioned earlier, the CoI framework comprises code words that have been well researched. I used these codes as a starting point and then added other codes to the list as needed. Table 3.9 indicates the CoI data-analysis codes along with my own.

Table 10 - CoI and DRP combined codes

CoI ELEMENT	CoI CATEGORIES	CoI Descriptors	DRP codes
Cognitive Presence	Triggering Event	An issue is identified.	Curiosity
	Exploration	Students move between the private world of reflection and shield world of social knowledge construction.	Applying new ideas
	Integration	Students filter relevant information and synthesize new knowledge.	Information exchange
	Resolution	Students analyze practical applicability.	Applying new ideas

The figure below captures a snippet of the code "community definition." In this example, there were 31 matching excerpts that came from 12 resources/interviews. All the excerpts were linked to the codes which enabled reviewing all the excerpts in one place.

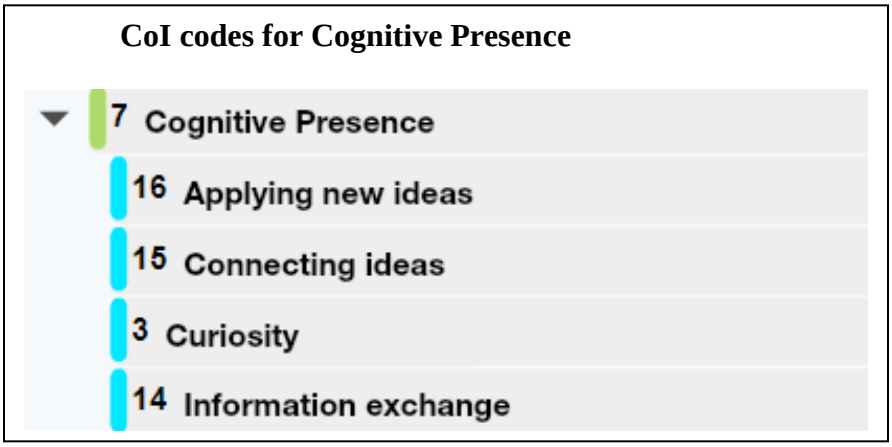
Figure 8 - Snippet of the code, "community definition"



Categories and themes. The data analysis included classifying the data from the interviews, documents, focus groups, and memos into codes, clusters of codes, and themes (Creswell, 2013). I read the first interview transcript to get a sense of the codes (Merriam, 1998). As I continued to code, I added more words to the list. During the coding process, I compared my initial grouping of codes derived from the CoI framework with the new codes. I added multiple codes as I read each transcript. In addition to coding excerpts, I also wrote memos in Dedoose. I indicated possible themes and categories that were emerging from the codes. By the end of the coding process, there were 98 codes with 485 excerpts.

Many of the excerpts contained more than one code. Figure 9 is an example of a code, namely, the one for "cognitive presence." Under "cognitive presence," I placed four subcodes. The numbers beside the code indicate how many excerpts are connected to that code. In Dedoose, these codes are linked to the excerpts, a feature which provided me with the opportunity to review the data in multiple ways.

Figure 9 - CoI codes for cognitive presence



Dedoose was particularly helpful in analyzing co-occurrences within the excerpts. Co-occurrences indicate when the same excerpt is coded with more than one code. Figure 10 is an example of an excerpt that I analyzed with five unique codes. The example shows that I applied the following codes to the same excerpt: Community Evident, Community Building, Facebook Groups, Cohort, and Peer Support.

Figure 10 - Example of an excerpt with multiple codes applied

Example of an except with 5 codes applied

Title: Student Interview 7
Codes Applied: **Community evident, Community building, Facebook groups, Cohort, Peer support**

"I think that we . I know at least with people in my cohort and maybe some other people. We start this conversation within Canvas within our classes, but then we'll also be outside messaging each other on Facebook, like 'Hey, I have a question about this or help me process through this'. I feel like that's super important that we don't feel like we're just restricted to the classroom space."

Interpreting themes. After coding and charting, I read the interviews many times and further analyzed the data to understand the more significant themes. To organize the data into larger themes, I returned to the observations and interviews and organized longer bodies of text into categories. I identified words and phrases and organized them into tables; then, I focused attention on the stories. I followed qualitative-analysis procedures that started with codes, followed by categorizing common themes and conclusions (Creswell, 2014, Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). To understand the data collected requires a search for patterns and consistency (Stake, 1995). To find the patterns, I reviewed the data numerous times to discover common themes and categories.

I organized the data into three-ring binders as well as into digital files in Evernote and Google Drive. Once I identified the more significant themes, I organized the content

for the written project. I used the themes in the writing of the Results chapter of this dissertation. I started by writing about the most frequent codes and the larger themes proceeding from them. After collapsing all the codes, I reflected upon the story being told. Interpretation and conclusions involved an ongoing creative process of analyzing the data and writing up the results in tandem.

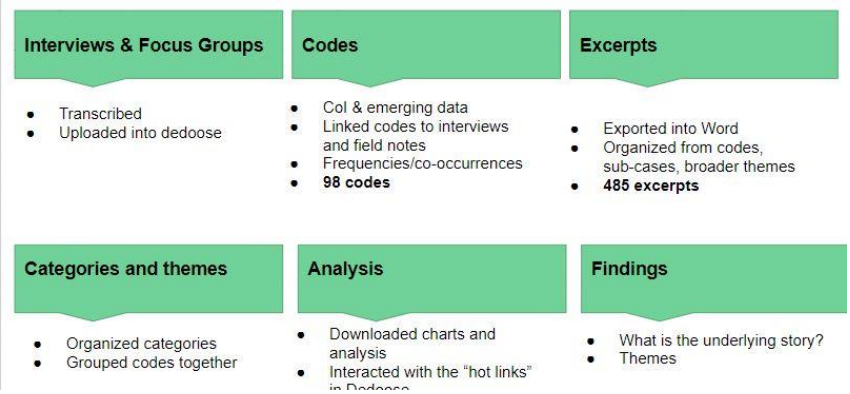
Visualizing Data. Dedoose is an effective tool for visualizing data. In addition to the hot links mentioned earlier that are clickable to all the data, charts and graphs can also be downloaded. The following figure shows how Dedoose generates a word cloud with the frequency of the codes. The bigger the word, the more frequent the code was in the data. In Figure 11, the most frequent codes were professor engagement, gathering days, community building, and social presence. In Dedoose each of the words are also hot-linked to the data collection documents.

Figure 11 - Word Cloud from the data

Case by case. I approached data analysis for each hybrid course at the end of the data analysis procedures. I wanted first to review the data, then look at all the codes, memos, and themes that were evident throughout all the excerpts. When I had the codes and themes organized, I returned to the observations and interviews about each hybrid course. The subcases in this study provided the boundaries of the three courses and the students and instructors associated with them. Through analysis of the data, the excerpts were combined with all three courses. For example, I wrote in Chapter 4 about the results of the definition of community that students and instructors shared from all three courses. I did not make distinctions, for example, that students in one course defined community differently from students in another course. While there were distinctions in course design and pedagogic philosophies, there were no other significant areas of difference that required analyzing each case separately. I addressed the differences and similarities with each case in Chapter 4. Overall data analysis occurred across a broad spectrum of all three courses combined.

Summary of data analysis. Figure 12 indicates the trajectory of the data analysis. It began with transcribing interviews and focus groups and uploading them to Dedoose. From there I developed the codes with the CoI codes along with the emerging data. I reviewed the frequencies and co-occurrences of the codes and also exported the 485 excerpts into a Word document. I organized codes together and downloaded tables or further analysis. I contemplated and reviewed the data to determine the underlying story and themes.

Figure 12 - Data analysis summary



Ethical considerations

Conducting a qualitative research study requires approval from the IRB, which involves evaluating the potential risk of physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal harm to participants in a study (Creswell, 2009). I received an expedited approval, indicating that my study was determined to have minimal risk to research participants. Participants in a qualitative study expect that the researcher will protect their confidences and preserve anonymity (Glesne, 2006). I kept individual identities and data collection, private and confidential. I stored electronic notes, interview transcriptions, interview and focus group recordings, and any other identifying participant information on a password-protected computer. The IRB also outlines that research subjects should have sufficient information to make informed decisions about participating in the study and must be able to withdraw their participation at any point. I informed participants that they were able to decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any point.

Table 11 - IRB Timeline

IRB approved	February 2018
Participants recruited	March 2018
Participant consent forms	March 2018
Data Collection	March-May 2018

Researcher Positionality

An important aspect of qualitative research is identifying that the researcher is the human instrument collecting and analyzing data. Positionality describes how identity, background, history, and views inform the researcher's approach to their study. Choosing the research topic and interpreting the results were informed my background, history, identities, experiences, values, and assumptions.

I have been employed at the site for over 13 years. My role is to oversee the enrollment department, which includes cultivating prospective students and admitting new students into the program. I am also the primary administrator overseeing the co-curricular elements of the hybrid program. These responsibilities include facilitating orientation, establishing cohort communities, planning activities and events, and coordinating other logistics. In this role, I work with colleagues to create policies, procedures, and initiatives that are significant for student satisfaction, retention, and engagement in the program. As someone who frequently meets with students and who understands the broader vision and goals of the program, I was an ideal researcher to understand it in new ways. At the same time, I was cognizant of my position of influence and authority, which meant that I needed to take extra precaution. I maintained participant anonymity, stayed within the bounds of the research questions, and informed participants about the research to ensure that they understood and trusted the project.

As the director of the hybrid program, I am aware of the community that is built in co-curricular spaces. I facilitate orientation activities, including leading a retreat when the students gather on campus for the first time. While I have heard from students in anecdotally about their experience in hybrid classes, I approached this project with an open mind, prepared to learn something new. I was not aware of how, or if, community is built and sustained in online and hybrid courses. I recognize that I may have had some bias in confirming that community is evident, but I was intentional about observing and listening for areas of disconfirming evidence. Unsolicited, students did comparisons across other classes at the school. These comparisons indicated areas of strength, as well as areas of potential improvement. However, I stayed within the scope of this project and did not decipher findings outside of the three courses that were a part of this study.

In addition to these administrative roles, I had earned a Master of Divinity from the site, and therefore, I had direct experience of having been a student at the school. However, I did not have experience of an online or hybrid program. My education was in a traditional on-campus classroom setting. By not having had experience as an online student, I could directly delve into understanding online and hybrid education from the point of view of a non-participant.

My teaching values, moreover, have been formed through positive experiences with collaborative and communal pedagogical approaches. I, therefore, prize learning communities that invite student participation with inclusiveness and hospitality. I believe that when students can bring their whole selves into the learning process, transformation happens. It is through this transformation that minds are changed, hearts are opened, and the soul comes alive. As an educator in graduate theological education, I intentionally

think about sacred space where students come to get to know one another, including their beliefs, life experiences, cultural traditions, and learning preferences. It is in this sacred space where humanity is incorporated into the learning experience. Education thereby increases our understanding of ourselves, our communities, and the broader world around us. I commit to establish supportive and collaborative environments that follow an inclusive model of excellence that honors multiple perspectives and diverse cultural experiences.

Validity and Trustworthiness. Validity in qualitative research is anchored in the researcher's data collection and analysis procedures. In qualitative research, a trustworthy project is based on determining whether the findings are accurate (Creswell, 2014). The specific strategies I utilized to ensure a valid and trustworthy project were triangulation, member checking, a pilot study, and awareness of my biases.

Triangulation. Triangulation refers to collecting different sources of information to build solid reasoning for the themes that emerge (Creswell, 2014). This strategy was at the forefront of my mind when determining what types of data I proposed to collect. One of the reasons I choose an embedded case study was that it entailed multiple interviews, observations, and documents. By observing the classes and interviewing students and instructors, I could create a full picture for this project.

Member checking. Member checking is how one brings the findings and specific descriptions and transcriptions back to the participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations are accurate (Creswell, 2014). To report accurate information, I shared the draft of Chapter 4 with each of the participants. I asked for participants to review the

excerpts that I included to ensure that I had accurately represented the participants' stories.

Pilot study. I conducted a pilot study with two hybrid classes taught earlier in the academic year. The pilot study consisted of online and on-campus class observations and instructor interviews. The pilot study did not include interviews with students.

Observing the classes give me insight into the type of interactions I might see in my research project. For example, I noticed that due to the number of posts in discussion threads, it might be challenging to discover some of the elements that I was looking for. Therefore, for the DRP, I asked for students to optionally consent to classroom observations, which included discussion boards. I focused my attention on the students that consented to the study. I also learned which types of interactions I would likely not observe in the classes. The latter helped me decide what sorts of questions would be best addressed in one-on-one interviews. I also tested the interview protocol with the instructors of the pilot courses and asked for their feedback about the questions.

The pilot study gave me an excellent foundation to build on, which ultimately led to a trustworthy doctoral research project. Because of the pilot study, I made the following adjustments for the final DRP.

1. I added the following questions in the instructor interview protocol.

    - Do you build a course with community in mind?
    - What is community to you? Then follow up, "What do you do to build [community] in your course?
    - How have you leveraged community to meet your teaching goals?

2. I attended and observed both on-campus class meetings during Gathering Days. In the pilot study, I only attended the first day. I realized in hindsight that did not give me the full context of the classroom dynamics.
3. I anticipated the number of interactions that occurred in the first week of classes and adequately prepared to begin observations on the first day of class. In the pilot study, I observed that the first week of classes is jam-packed with various types of interactions that include hospitality items such as the flow of the course and syllabus, along with academic items such as assignments, discussions, and readings. In the pilot study, it took me a couple of weeks to catch up and get organized. I made this adjustment to anticipate the amount of information to observe in the first week of classes.

Biases. It is inevitable that researchers bring a certain level of beliefs and philosophical assumptions to their work. A researcher's beliefs and values are reflected in the choice of research topic and methodology (Mehra, 2002). These assumptions are evident in the type of research questions that are asked, how data collection is conducted, and how the results are organized. While innate biases are inevitable, the interaction between the researcher and participants can provide a valuable contribution to the knowledge created (Mehra, 2002). My position at the site provided unique access to the participants. As an employee at the site, I enjoyed a level of trust with the students developed before this research project. This circumstance made it possible for students to feel comfortable sharing their stories with me.

I did not stray from the research questions. I needed to be cognizant not to overlook deficits in the program or to place greater emphasis on specific findings; therefore I

disciplined myself to stay within the parameters of the research and solicit data that captured all aspects of student experiences, whether positive or negative. It was essential for me to write memos about my feelings and reactions as I was collecting data. In this way, I remained conscious of my preconceived notions and opinions.

Limitations

This research was limited in a few ways. First, since this study was conducted with only three courses at one school, the findings should not be considered a generalization. Consequently, I was thus limited to only interpreting data that came directly from the three courses in the study. It should not be assumed that the three courses are representative of others at the same school, nor of students and instructors at other graduate theological schools.

Second, the classes in the study were hybrid courses that also required on-campus instruction. Since the courses were not solely taught online, my findings are limited in understanding community building in online courses.

Third, the data collection from the participants spanned a wide range of experiences and backgrounds, and participant selection was random based on the students choosing to participate in the three classes. Therefore, there are limitations in this study whether age, culture, race, ethnicity, gender, or other factors, affect the students' experiences in hybrid classes. Participant age, gender, race, and ethnicity were not specified in this study.

Conclusion

I conducted a qualitative embedded case study of three hybrid courses in a graduate theological school. My research questions were framed to discover how community is defined, constructed, and established in masters-level hybrid theology courses. I explored student and instructor experiences by observing classes both online and in-person and by conducting one-on-one interviews with both faculty and students and focus groups with only the students. Participants consisted of 16 students and three instructors. The Community of Inquiry framework provided the foundation which informed my research questions, data collection, analysis, and interpretations. Data analysis included creating codes based on the CoI framework, while the codes emerged from the data. The Dedoose web platform was used to manage the data. I adhered to the ethical standards for qualitative research, including following the appropriate IRB protocols. Finally, I identified my position as a higher-education professional and as someone with an innate passion for community.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter contains the findings of an embedded qualitative case study about how community is defined, constructed, and experienced in hybrid courses in graduate theological education. The findings show how students and instructors define community, build community, and contribute to it. The findings are based upon my observations of, and interviews of with participants, students and faculty, in three hybrid courses taught in spring 2018. The chapter also contains many quotations and excerpts directly from the students and instructors who participated in the study.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I describe each of the hybrid courses. This section provides an understanding of how instructors approach teaching a hybrid course and how students experience learning in such courses. I present the course descriptions, course design, and pedagogical approaches. I share how online and in-person class experiences work in tandem to create a robust learning experience.

In the second, I describe the three primary themes that were revealed in this study: 1) faculty engagement, 2) the importance of gathering days, and 3) a sense of community. Faculty engagement refers to the instructor's participation in students' learning and growth; gathering days refers to the on-campus classroom meetings as a part of hybrid courses, and a sense of community refers to the feeling of being part of a group with a common purpose. The final section of this chapter answers the research questions

directly. While all the findings point to answering one or more of the research questions, this last section provides a summary of the results that respond directly to each of the research questions.

Research questions

1. How is community defined among students and instructors in graduate hybrid theological education?
2. How is community constructed in graduate hybrid theological education?
3. How does community play a role in student learning in graduate theological education?

Part 1: Sub-Cases

In this section, I describe each of the courses that were in this research study. The courses followed the same 10-week format, with online education in the Canvas online platform during weeks 1-4 and 6-10, and on-campus meetings at the school location during week 5. See Chapter 3 for a detailed description of the schedule of courses and formats.

Case 1 – Hybrid course A

Introduction to the New Testament. This course introduced the literature of Christian origins from which the New Testament emerged. In the syllabus, Dr. Williams, the instructor, described the course as an examination of the earliest "extant texts of Paul's letters and covered the Gospels, Acts, and post-Pauline epistles." The instructor created a learning community that challenged and inspired students. The following statement from the course evaluation captures the positive experience that students had with this course and its instructor.

> Professor Williams is one of the all-time best [teachers] for his effective and skilled use of the Canvas online platform, for his fantastic and regular engagement with all students in the online forums, and for his communication regarding the syllabus, assignment due dates, and response time for grades. He is an expert with the use of the online platform and how to engage in genuine community with students.

The last sentence mentions the importance of engaging a genuine community. The emphasis on community captures the importance of this aspect when the student mentions "fantastic and regular engagement with all students." This comment suggests that community aided the students in their learning process. I observed that one of the ways that students engaged most consistently was based on a regular weekly rhythm of activities, lectures, and discussion posts. For example, the following table depicts a typical week of activities and assignments in this course.

Table 12 - Hybrid course A - an example of the weekly online schedule

Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
Course announcements (when applicable)	Lecture (video) Readings Discussion 1	Readings Discussion 2	Online class activity (i.e., exegeses of the biblical text) Discussion 3	In-depth and summary Discussion 4

Each week of the course began with a video lecture on Monday, followed by readings Tuesday and Wednesday, and an online activity to practice skills on Thursday. On Friday, the week concluded with a summary from the instructor and an online discussion that brought together the topic for the week. This schedule was consistent for

nearly all the ten weeks of the course, except for the in-person classes (week five), the midterm (week six), and finals week (week 10). The daily and weekly rhythm of the course supported the students' learning. For example, one student wrote in their course evaluation, "I learned an immense amount. I attribute this to Professor Williams' imaginative and varied assignments, and do not think I would have learned nearly as much if we had simply been given a single assignment each week."

When introducing the course design and expectation to the students, the professor used an engaging and supportive communication style, so students would not feel intimidated by the amount of reading and online discussions that were assigned each day. Furthermore, he emphasized that the course was designed to have sustained engagement with the course material throughout the week. For example, in a comment on the syllabus, the instructor wrote, "This is not a dissertation, so relieve yourself of the pressure to perform. Discussions are a conversation, and your voice is important." The grading structure was clear, with the instructor giving numerous examples about how students would earn grades and points throughout the course. He provided ample opportunity for students to comment and ask questions about the structure of the course.

Throughout, students enthusiastically engaged in the way the instructor based his teaching on the syllabus. There were multiple discussions each week with every student participating in all the assignments. Discussions often contained over 30 posts from the 19 students in the class. They questioned one another and kept the conversation going over several days. The instructor commented and responded to students as often as six-to-eight times within each discussion assignment. He provided clarity while asking questions that solicited more profound responses. He commented from his own life

experiences, which connected contemporary life to the subject of the ancient text of the New Testament. For example, in a discussion thread about Corinthians, the instructor posted a creative fictitious Facebook feed that included the apostle Paul bantering back and forth with other biblical characters. The students loved this piece of instructional creativity, which provided an opportunity for them to see the material in a completely new way. In the middle of the discussion thread, there were the required academic posts on Corinthians as well as chats about the Colorado weather going from 60° one day to snow the next. This type of conversation, which flawlessly ebbed and flowed between academic discussion and humorous banter invited students to bring their authentic selves to the course, something which opened up their capacity to learn.

In addition to the written online discussions, the instructor delivered video lectures in a similar down-to-earth style that captured the importance of connecting an ancient text to contemporary life. For example, one student commented in their course evaluation, "The weekly videos were really helpful to me. Fun, too! I looked forward to watching them. Professor Williams has a great way of making ancient history come alive and seem relatable and relevant to modern life."

When the students met on-campus, the instructor provided lectures, discussions, and other learning activities. He allowed ample time for introductions, often making comments to the students as they introduced themselves—something which created an additional relational connection. He pointed out that he already knew the students well based on the interactions that occurred online. Several on-campus class activities invited hands-on student participation. Two stand out. First, they had the opportunity to write on papyrus paper to practice being a scribe with a calligraphy pen. Students worked in small

groups copying letters and words in Greek onto the papyrus. The assignment was to copy the exact Greek words from the Gospel text. I observed several students commenting to each other how challenging it was to make decisions about deciphering the Greek letters to be copied. They learned by experience the difficulties of being an accurate scribe and how the very problems they encountered could have affected the writing of the Gospels.

The second activity occurred during the second day of the class. The instructor explained the activity, which was for students to remember everything from the day before about how the class started. Organized into groups of four or five, the participants had 15 minutes to jot down everything they remembered. Each group then shared with the entire class what they had written. While there were common memories, each group shared unique ones as well. The purpose of the exercise was to demonstrate the difficulty of remembering events from just the day before. This exercise introduced what would be studied for the rest of the day: how the writing of the Gospels was based on stories as they were remembered, not always perfectly, and passed down from generation to generation.

In summary, although the topic of the New Testament is generally appealing to MDiv students, Dr. Williams, by providing contemporary relevance, made it more so. In addition to the professor's expertise and personal experience, students felt his care for them and passion for teaching. Dr. Williams shared with me in our interview that his teaching philosophy is based on a conversational pedagogy. The following excerpt from that interview captures a glimpse of this philosophy about teaching online and hybrid courses.

> The way I approach hybrid and online teaching is to design the course to get people talking to one another. I assume that if we're having conversations with each other, and if students are having conversations with me, and all of us are having conversations with various kinds of texts that we look at in the class, then learning will happen out of that.

Case 2 – Hybrid course B

Introduction to Christian Worship. This course introduced students to the theological understandings of Christian worship and the liturgical year. It emphasized the leadership and pastoral functions that are required for congregational worship. Emphasis on creating distinctive elements and revitalizing spirituality and prayer was evident in the course. In her syllabus, Dr. Percy, the instructor, stated that the objectives were to develop a capacity to "conduct spiritually vital, historically grounded, and theologically coherent worship by integrating liturgical elements in effective and creative ways."

The professor started the course with an inspirational video in Canvas, where she talked about the importance of ritual and leading people in intentional, spiritual ways. She also emphasized the sacredness of the weekly gathering of the beloved. She discussed how the people who unite as a congregation has diverse needs, hopes, and expectations and are turning to the leader to bring them closer to God. She further stated that leading ritual worship is a "complex task of artistry, pastoral care, theological reflection, and spiritual leadership." Worship in community includes hospitality, educational moments, and service. She concluded by stating that "Leading worship is one of the most important things you will ever do, and you will do it in front of a crowd every week…moreover, it is worthy of your best self."

Consistent throughout the course, Dr. Percy provided a genuine and welcoming presence. She encouraged creativity from the students. Each week had a consistent rhythm of regular readings, discussion, skill building, and integrative reflection. The instructor designed the course for daily activity, with each week having a similar format. The weeks began with an introduction to the readings and activities followed by learning activities and homework assignments. This intentional pedagogical strategy immersed the students in reading, skill building, practicing, and discussing what they were learning. Each week had the essential elements of the theological implications and the pastoral skills required for congregational worship leadership. This schedule was consistent for nearly all the ten weeks of the course, except for the in-person classes (week five). The following table depicts a typical week of activities and assignments in the course.

Table 13 - Course B - an example of the weekly online schedule

Monday	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**
Overview	Readings Discussion	Skill building (i.e., Christian liturgical-year planning)	Practicing-ministry-skills assignment (writing prayers) Discussion	

Throughout the course, students submitted assignments that were directly applicable to their current or future ministerial vocations. The assignments focused on practicing ritual and worship activities grounded in theological theory and practice. The

major project of the course was for students to design a 15-minute worship service that they would lead during one of the in-person class sessions. The students worked online in small groups of three for the first four weeks of the course. Then they took turns leading the services in the fifth week during the two days that the course met on campus.

When students met on campus, I could sense that the community that had been building online was palpable and evident. They greeted each other warmly. Dr. Percy, for her part, greeted the class with a smile and said, "Good to see everyone in person." The two days included group exercises and discussion, but most of the time was devoted to the students leading their worship services. After each presentation, the instructor-led conversations about its theological and pastoral elements. Ample time was allotted for the students to offer each other both positive feedback and recommendations for improvement. They affectionately praised one another in addition to providing honest, constructive feedback.

Observing the groups lead their mini-worship services felt sacred and special. Included in the circle, I participated as applicable by reading along and singing hymns from the printed programs that the students created. There were eight groups of two to three students. Each group was assigned a worship service to design and lead for one of the events in the Christian liturgical calendar: Ash Wednesday, Baptism, Christmas Eve, Easter, Easter Vigil, Advent, and Good Friday. As an observer, I had the unique opportunity to experience how the students mindfully crafted and led their services. Whether a student was leading or participating, I noticed their profound engagement with the exercises. They were completely absorbed in the experience. They sang, prayed, performed rituals, and laughed. On a few occasions, students left their chairs to play the

piano that was located in the classroom, accompanying the others who were singing hymns and songs. This was a surprise and a delight to Dr. Percy, who later said to me, "You never know what will happen when students gather together in person. I didn't realize that we had so many musicians in the class!" The music added a wonderful feeling of the sacredness of being together. It was spontaneous and impromptu. As Nick noted, the common thread in the class was being together in the worship experience:

> We have a common thread in the worship regardless of the denomination or background. We come to learn and do this together. We build a community in the first couple weeks of class that builds up into the days when we come together. Many of us work in churches, and that was probably the first time we have worshiped outside of leading our congregations in a long time. I think that really builds a sense of community.

As Nick mentioned, students who were enrolled in this course had different levels of experience with leading prayers and worship. Several indicated that they had many years of experience serving in churches as a local pastor. Some of the students stated that they initially enrolled in the course to check off a degree or an ordination requirement. However, they soon discovered that their previous leadership practices did not thoroughly capture the theological depth and intentionality that is needed for meaningful worship. As noted in the following comment by Christopher, he thought he knew how to lead worship but learned that it requires much more than just merely putting together songs and prayers:

> I rely heavily on those canned lectionary resources that give you the prayers and hymns. This class challenged me to slow down and be more intentional.

> Everything that you do has theological implications, whether they are explicit or implicit, the language that we use, the placement of the prayers, even just thinking through where people move about the sanctuary. All of this affects faith formation itself.

Students also discovered that before they enrolled in the course they had lacked a thorough understanding of the "why" behind their decisions in leading worship. As noted by another student in the course,

> The professor taught us to discern why we sing certain songs, why we have a theme throughout the service, and why we give a sermon. She pushed us to go a little bit deeper by saying, "I wonder about…" or "Well, you're right and here's why, but dig more here."

Providing the students an opportunity to have experiential in-person learning, such as leading worship, is an embodying experience that is important to Dr. Percy's pedagogy. Being together in person provides the human experience that captures ritual and prayer in the body. This was demonstrated by both the instructor and the students who led the prayers, music, and ritual. She framed the importance of embodiment and how this was an essential aspect of being a pastor. For example, in a discussion about the Eucharist, she asked questions about how bodies come together for this ritual. Here are some: "How do we communicate that God is present?" "What are the explicit and implicit cultural understandings in the way bodies participate? (i.e., Do you clap after a song is sung?)", "What are the theologies that determine who gets to come forward for communion?" These questions would then lead to more extensive discussions about worship and prayer and how the students should pay attention to those notions.

I noticed that the instructor demonstrated how to embody being a spiritual leader. I wrote the following observations of the instructor in my field notes:

> I've noticed a few times now that when the instructor is teaching either in a large or small group, she inserts herself inside the circle among the students. She has established herself as the teacher without a sense of overbearing authority. She provides an authentic context about her experience as a lay leader within congregations. I have the sense that she is intentionally modeling what pastors do when they lead their congregations by being among the people.

In addition to having a robust teaching presence on campus, the instructor was attentive to students online. Dr. Percy's strategy for providing feedback to students was through the grading area in Canvas. She provided substantial, ongoing one-on-one feedback for each of the 18 students in the course. The students appreciated the personalized feedback. This was particularly important because students have their own leadership styles, religious backgrounds, and ways to approach corporate worship. Providing tailored comments geared to each student offered an avenue of learning that felt intimate and personal. As noted in a written comment by a student in their course evaluation, the feedback provided additional instruction that was relevant to the student:

> [It was] hands down the best feedback I've received in any course. There was a lot of teaching and interaction going on in the grading feedback, which was incredibly encouraging and helpful at the same time. [I was] blown away at the time, care, and energy put into this aspect. It shows a lot of passion for teaching and student enrichment.

This student's comment was confirmed in my interview with Dr. Percy. As the following excerpt from my interview indicates, Dr. Percy preferred to give feedback individually because she felt she could reach the student more effectively in this context than through writing a public comment:

> My feedback is primarily done in speed grader, so it's one on one. And that's where I do most of mine, partially because I can push people. I could probably push people in the forum more, but it's public and very different. Part of why I keep a lot of my response to students in speed grader is I can be more challenging and more personal and more vulnerable and more one to one in certain ways than I would be in the whole space.

Dr. Percy went on to contrast online feedback and in-person feedback. When the course meets on campus, for example, and the students have a live discussion, she is much more inclined to give public feedback. In this way, it becomes a teachable moment for everyone. However, she noted that the online discussion space does not quite feel the same way. The teaching is different online, so she adjusts her pedagogy style accordingly. In the online space, she is successful in giving feedback to each student individually.

Dr. Percy shared in our interview that her teaching philosophy includes respecting the experiences students bring to the course. She encourages them to try to solve significant problems that arise in their context so that they can practice and discuss solutions in the classroom. Making connections between their lives and what they are learning in the course, thus strengthens the educational experience for everyone.

Case 3 – Hybrid Course C

Pastoral Theology and Care. This course was an introduction to pastoral care to have students to develop confidence in their abilities to respond to various human situations that emerged in ministry and other similar settings. The instructor, Dr. Franco, wrote in the syllabus that the course was "an introduction to theories of care, counseling, and psychotherapy about theories of humanity and personhood." Students were expected to demonstrate the ability to reflect patterns of their family of origin and examine systemic dimensions of pastoral care. The course encouraged them to examine their sense of self and vocational identity. They were to bring their whole selves and their personal and professional experiences to the class. It was stated by the instructor that when students bring their previous experiences as well as their vulnerabilities, the learning is enhanced for everyone.

The instructor designed the course in modules in Canvas. Individually they corresponded to one week of the 10-week term. The instructor organized each page with a module that included a reading, an image, and a teaching insight that was relevant to the topic for the week. The instructor's use of imagery, photos, quotations, and videos enhanced every lesson plan. Each module had six mini-lessons. For example, the following table depicts the module course design in Canvas.

Table 14 - Example of a weekly module

Week 7 Grief and Loss
7.1. Readings
7.2 Introduction to the weekly readings and activities.
7.3 Disenfranchised grief
7.4 Film
7.5 Discussion: Grief and Loss

The following excerpt, Cindy, a student in the course, captures the effectiveness of this approach:

> The modules are really helpful because it gives you a linear progression of how the week is going to go. Each section talked about the readings, but it went deeper than that to have a better understanding, instead of just going from reading to reading.

This student further commented that designing the course in this way invited her to engage with and think about the course material before moving on to the next lesson. The expectations were clear, and the lessons were accessible. She appreciated the variety of readings, lectures, videos, and class discussions within the modules.

Each week there was a small-group discussion in Canvas. Through Canvas, the instructor randomly assigned students to small groups of five to seven. The groups randomly changed every week, an arrangement that invited students to engage with all their classmates at different points in the term. This proved an effective strategy enabling them to learn from one another and to be vulnerable and honest about themselves. The

instructor was active in all the small-group discussions, often commenting to each student during the session. As noted in the following comment in the course evaluation, the teacher's responsiveness aided in the student's learning in the course.

> The class was engaging, especially for an online class. I particularly appreciated how Dr. Franco always responded to each student's weekly posts. I always knew I'd have helpful feedback that was both thoughtful and encouraging. In doing this, I think he practiced good pastoral care of the class as a professor!

The professor genuinely connected with his students. By providing sincere comments, he demonstrated his care for them, which in turn created a more intimate classroom environment where the students participated in a heartfelt and meaningful way. The following excerpt from the course evaluation illustrates how important it is for students when they can learn from the instructor's own experience.

> Professor Franco is such a kind man willing to share his experiences and provide encouragement to the students with his responses to our assignments. And he remembers things about each student and incorporates how our assignment(s) might relate to our call and vocation.

This comment about the instructor having a genuine interest in the students' vocations was evident in other student comments. For example, another student said that the instructor had suggested a book that the student might be interested in reading, which was outside of the scope of the course. The student was touched by this gesture.

The on-campus components of the course consisted of lectures, case studies, and role plays. The main activity was for students to use relevant and challenging cases from their own contexts as role-plays. Students prepared the case studies by working in small

groups ahead of time during the online weeks of the course. They wrote up case studies that highlighted key systemic issues in a challenging pastoral-care situation. The instructor asked the students to create role-play scenarios that would be as realistic as possible by modifying a story based on a real-life situation. When the students gathered for class on campus, they acted out the various role-plays with fellow students taking on the roles in the case. The instructor dedicated substantial class time to prepare the students for the emotions that could arise and the feelings and inadequacies that might be felt during the role plays. The tension, challenge, and emotionally charged feelings were palpable in these role-plays. The cases proved quite relevant to what a pastor might experience in real life. In them, the students grappled with issues of death and dying, teen suicide, terminal health diagnoses, and other similar scenarios. I wrote the following observation in my field notes about these role-plays:

> I feel so honored to observe these incredible real-life scenarios that the students are grappling with. I am observing in real time how students are learning. I sense that they recognize their strengths as future chaplains as well as the areas for improvement. I am observing that the students want to be helpful and provide healing to people who are grieving and in pain. The students are keenly aware of their surroundings. The cases that the students are engaging with are emotionally charged and intricately complicated. The students are completely absorbed in these role-plays.

After class, a few students talked to me about their experience in the role-plays. They said that they had never experienced case studies in such a way that provoked so much vulnerability within themselves and for others. I also observed the vulnerability and

trust that was shared. Catherine, a student in the class, commented that she thought that trust was built online before the students came to class on campus. She also thought that by knowing some of the students before as part of her cohort allowed for deeper sharing. In the following, she captures her experience:

> I think a high degree of vulnerability and a willingness to be transparent is necessary for the class to be a successful learning environment. That wouldn't happen if we did the role plays in the first week of class and we hadn't known each other yet. Everybody would have their guard up because we're all strangers, or at least the people in the class you didn't know. So, I don't think that role play would have gone anywhere near where it did have if we did not build up trust for the first few weeks.

She went on to say that the role play prepared her and others to act in real-life situations in their vocations including chaplaincy. She said that their role-playing went beyond feeling like an "academic exercise" and that it was more like coming "together as a community that tries to make you better because you're going to be future pastor or chaplain."

A pastoral care course is usually required in divinity schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. It is a highly relational course that involves sophistication in emotional and psychological awareness. As a hybrid course where the class meets mostly online, the students experienced a profound sense of connection, trust, and vulnerability. In my interview with the instructor, Dr. Franco spoke about his teaching philosophy to build trust so that students could confide in each other. The following statement by him captures this aspect of his educational philosophy:

> Teaching is a process of collaboration. While there is a sense that the professor needs to have the expertise, I think that the day-to-day interactions with the students are just as important as what the instructor has to say. For me, it is very important to establish enough trust to allow students to be themselves and to be willing to share vulnerable aspects of their lives.

The instructor went on to say that in the course he attempted to build a level of trust that increases over time. In this way, he established his presence and supported early to give the students the confidence to build trust with one another.

Summary of Cases

Each of these courses provided substantial ways to engage the students both online and in person. With a sense of community evident throughout the ten-week quarter, the students expressed their appreciation of how they felt connected to the instructors, their peers, and the course material. The courses had similar but slightly different designs. New Testament and Christian Worship followed a similar pattern by having assignments due nearly every day. These followed a pattern of having activities due on each of the weekdays. For example, on Mondays, the instructors set up the course by giving a lecture or assigning readings that provided the activities for the rest of the week. The Pastoral Care course, on the other hand, was set up in modules and each week focused on a single topic. Within each module were several days of activities and content with which the students were to engage.

Similar in all three courses was that the instructors provided relevant hands-on experiential learning activities when their classes met on campus. The activities were directly related to course content, but most importantly, they provided practice for real-

life situations. Students entering a vocation in ministry are committed to preparing themselves to be effective in their communities. Many commented on how valuable experiential learning was not only to their professional development but also to become the best versions of themselves. The students, finally, were deeply committed to learning about the theological implications of their leadership skills and pastoral care.

While there were some similarities, each of the instructors approached connecting to their students differently. In the New Testament course, the instructor spent most of his time connecting with the students in the discussion forums. This adhered to his particular strength of his ability to provide substantial academic content along with casual conversation. When I asked the instructor about how long it takes for him to teach a hybrid course, he could not pinpoint the time involved. He said that its part of his workday. For example, he keeps several tabs open on his computer and checks the posts from students often throughout the day. Rather than waiting to respond, he responds immediately with regular short brief responses that encourages the conversation to move forward.

Conversely, the instructor of the Introduction to Christian Worship course spent her time connecting to the students in the speedgrader tool in Canvas. This allowed her to provide detailed and authentic feedback to the students. She connected the assignment to their personal and professional lives and often directly her responses to elicit further reflection from the student about the implications for their future vocation.

Finally, in the Introduction to Pastoral Care course, the instructor arranged the discussions to be in small groups. This was different than the other two courses in the study that relied on larger discussion groups. Small groups enhanced trust and provided

access for students to get to know each other more deeply. Most importantly, students felt like they knew each other and could do the deep work of pastoral role plays when they met on campus.

Part II: Themes

In the second section of this chapter, I will describe the three primary themes that were revealed in this study: 1) faculty engagement, 2) the impact of gathering days, and 3) the development of a sense of community. Faculty engagement refers to the instructor's participation in student learning and growth; Gathering Days refers to the on-campus classroom meetings as a part of hybrid courses, and a sense of community refers to the feeling of being part of a group of people with a common purpose.

Faculty Engagement: Setting the tone for dialogue and critical discourse

Prominent in this study was the importance of an instructor's presence in the course. Evident in the findings is that the instructor engagement sets the tone and models the way students will establish critical discourse within the class. Repeatedly it was stated that engagement is essential to establish an online presence that invites students to learn in meaningful ways. Students used the words *attentive*, *authentic*, *encouraging*, *attunement,* and *responsiveness* when referring to teacher presence and faculty engagement. This section expands upon which I described earlier in the sub-cases about faculty engagement. Three mini themes emerged within the faculty engagement theme: authentic feedback, vocational connection, and use of video.

Authentic feedback. How an instructor responds to students will impact the way the students respond to each other. The instructor sets the tone for dialogue and critical discourse, which if effective, encourages more engagement on the part of the students.

Students are more likely to actively engage in their responses when the instructor is also actively participating in the course. As the following comment from Melissa in the focus group illustrates, the more the instructor engages, the more the student learns. “If the professor is actively engaging and responding to us, it becomes much more collegial, and you have a lot more motivation to participate and to participate deeply.” She went on to say that she experienced a situation when an instructor made a seemingly “off-the-cuff response” that proved so meaningful that she cut-and-pasted the instructor’s comment to use later in a congregational context. The student explained that sometimes the responses do not need to be overly profound but should simply be there in one way or another to encourage participation and learning.

In another example, Nick commented in the focus group about how feedback in the discussions kept him motivated during the week:

> This engagement for me is really, really helpful in keeping engaged during the week because I know the professor is reading what I'm writing. I know that I am going to get some personal feedback that I can draw from through the comments in the grading system on Canvas.

Caleb commented in the focus group that faculty engagement is what students are relying on to learn the subject matter and is essential in the discussion boards in Canvas. “More than reading and books, it takes the professor to bring it all together and make sense out of it all.” The conversation moves forward in a way that could not be accomplished without the instructor. As the following excerpt from Cindy indicates, when professors took time to give helpful comments, it encouraged her to dive deeper into the material.

> In this class, the professor does an amazing job of replying to everything we post within 24 hours. If we have an initial post due by Tuesday, by Wednesday we all seem to have at least a paragraph or two responding to what we've actually said and tying that back into the material or picking up on a point. Like “You mentioned this. How about going deeper with that, continuing with that, and flushing out what you're trying to say." What's been great with this course is it's not just "good job; you got it." You can tell he's taking the time to read through our posts or watch our videos and compare it to the reading for the week and see if we are on track. And if we are off track, he will bring us back.

Cindy went on to say that it’s not just the commenting that’s important, but also the asking of probing questions, which moves students to think more critically.

When students know that the instructor understands them and what they are grappling with, it encourages them to grow in their understanding of the material. Another student, Christopher, put it this way:

> Most effectively from the instructor is she provides very good feedback that you can tell is not copy-and-pasted feedback, and that's an important piece. If it's actually directed at the content that I posted, then I learn how I can improve. I appreciate when she wrote, “I wonder about…”

Christopher said when he receives a quick turnaround with feedback, he knows that the “instructor is paying attention” to his contributions. Nick appreciates the feedback in the online environment when he’s not seeing the instructor face to face. He commented that “having a full range of participation” from the instructor makes a big difference, whether that’s individual feedback or a discussion post or announcements in Canvas.

In addition to an instructor's making valuable comments, students also appreciate when they receive constructive feedback from their peers. Students feel connected when they contribute to the discussion thread when the online conversation continues for more than one day. As Clara noted, "It's a connective type of feeling. It's a creative feeling when you and other students are learning from each other. I like that feeling." The following excerpt from Caleb expressed his appreciation for when both the instructor and the students base their comments on personal experience.

> Typically, a professor will ask you to respond to readings for the week, so we each post our responses. The exchange of thoughts comes in when I post a response, and somebody says, "Hey, I liked that. Did you think about this?" That's when the discussion takes place. It's not just the "Hey, me too" or "Good post." When people actually ask questions from what you've posted or add from their own experience or their own reading, it helps me learn where I may have missed something.

In addition to authentic feedback, commenting in the discussion forum corrects any misinformation that the students may be discussing. For example, as Caleb indicates in the following excerpt, if the professor doesn't join the discussion, students may not know if they are grasping the material correctly.

> The professor jumps in and joins in all the discussions. When questions come up, he answers them. We're all students here. Every single one of us could be wrong on the subject because we missed something. The professor has done a great job of clarifying things as the discussions go on, or even just throwing out interesting points. He's really added texture to the learning.

Additionally, students talked about how they can sense when the instructor cares about them and their learning when comments are directed personally rather than more broadly. For example, Catherine noted in the following remark that when the instructor affirmed this student's appreciation of the reading, she felt like the professor was teaching to her directly:

> When the professor comments on my work, and not just the work for the week, but comments about my future ministry, I feel like he knows where I'm going, and he knows what I've done. One of his comments was, "I'm not surprised that you liked that reading." He knew I would resonate with that particular reading and he was right. He gets me, and that's helping me learn.

Catherine continued by stating that when she receives non-personalized feedback, it feels like more of a checkmark of the assignment rather than an in-depth learning experience.

Vocational connection. When instructors comment regarding students' future vocational goals, it correlates what is being taught in the classroom to a student's real-life context. This is especially important when the feedback is personalized to the student. The following comment from Nick in the focus-group discussion highlights an example of when the instructor suggested a ministry skill that was directed specifically towards the student.

> The instructor is very good at giving very specific feedback. She suggested I create a weekly blog as a pastor to engage those who are present or not present on that Sunday. I've been exposed to this technology, and I practiced that technology. I got feedback and instruction to use in my ministry, so that's a direct connect.

Cindy noted that the instructor pointed out areas where she could improve in a pastoral care setting. She said, “Even though I'm not in a pastoral counseling setting right now, on some days I'm using the things that I'm learning to guide people in my current work with youth.”

Sometimes students get off track in a discussion post. When this occurs, it becomes a teachable moment for instructors to steer the conversation in a more productive direction. For example, Clara said,

> It is important for professors to comment on conversations, especially if someone's getting off on a tangent or saying something that maybe is not helpful or is contrary to what should be going on, and they need to lead us back on a different track.

In one of the focus groups, the students talked about how when they’ve commented in the discussion and the professor made a correction, it served as a useful example for their own work lives. For example, in the following excerpt, Caleb told a story about a discussion in the New Testament course based on a question they posted. The instructor responded with a direct question to the student within the discussion, which then created a conversation that applied to all the students:

> I made my required response in the discussion. My post was about how rulers of Jesus’ day turned their backs on everything they supposedly stood for. The professor responded with, "So does that sentiment apply to Christianity today. Are you saying that Christianity is good, but Christians are bad?” That got a whole discussion rolling on that subject where we ended up talking about colonialism and missionaries. That one piece out of my response was supposed to be two

paragraphs, and it ended up being 2 1/2 pages of responses. The professor found that one little piece in my post and got the whole discussion rolling.

In my interview with the instructor of this course, Dr. Williams said that his strategy was to continually go beneath the surface by asking probing questions of the students. The following statement by the instructor highlights an example of how this takes place in his course.

> The first reactions from students about the parable of the Good Samaritan is that this is a story about how we're supposed to help those in need. That's fine, but it's also a story that critiques systemic issues like religion or class or poverty or capitalism. I ask them, "Hey, what about this?" or "Hey, I heard you use this word. What do you mean when you say that?" It's redirects things to where I'm not preaching to them but rather asking them to clarify their points. I do that both in the discussion forums and in the grading in the Speed-Grader function in Canvas. If needed, sometimes I post a video to take the conversation further and to clarify things.

Video. The use of video is an effective tool to convey information, connect with students, and develop an enhanced learning community. The three instructors in the study utilized video in different ways to teach content, make announcements, clarify comments, and to set the foundation for the weekly activities. Students expressed that they really wanted to experience their professors. Seeing the instructor's facial expressions, hand movements, and body language created a deeper connection with the students. For example, Nick said that even though the instructor pre-recorded the video "and no one is talking back, it still feels conversational, as if sitting in a class." Sometimes a video is not

necessary if the instructor is communicating in a conversational style that comes through text. As Nick continued,

> The instructor does a great job of clarifying through announcements and gives great feedback. I don't think the lecture is needed at that point. But I think it would be a great addition if the instructor wanted to.

The previous comment is in line with what I learned from Dr. Percy. She noted that she often responds to students posts by saying “thank you” to honor that students have brought themselves into a shared space and are contributing by making connections from the readings. As mentioned above, she begins her feedback to the students by writing “thank you for bringing this up” or “thank you for this insight.” Dr. Percy said her feedback to students is geared towards graduate students who are adults and who are bringing in their own professional values and previous experiences to the class. In the following comment, Dr. Percy explains what she means in this regard.

> I think the first thing that's in the forefront when I'm thinking about teaching is that my students are adults. Part of that is basic respect for the skills they bring in and the experiences they have. I think I'm pretty convinced that the students don't learn things unless they feel they're personally invested in the problems they need to solve in their own personal and professional lives. Adult students are busy, and they tend to need those connections between their life experience and what they're learning in class.

While conversational style in text can bring forth a sense of connection and community among instructors and students, it was clear in the data that video is a preferred method for students to connect with the instructor aside from in-person classes.

Students appreciate video for two key reasons. First, video invites them to connect with the personality of the instructor, to ask questions, and to participate more fully in the course. Recording brief videos to clarify reading assignments, give announcements, or set the parameters for the week was extremely helpful for students to feel more connected with their instructors. Consider this comment by Christopher: "Community is being able to connect with more of who you are as a person. The video can help translate that because you can get facial expressions, so you get more of someone's personality there." In a similar vein, Catherine said that the video is a particularly good strategy for helping to integrate the readings for the week's topic:

> When I know why the professor has chosen particular readings, then I know what their thoughts are on the subject and what they think is important. It directs me to what to look for in the reading. I'll read everything regardless, but when I know why, the discussions flow better for me in that way.

The second way that videos work well is when the instructor video-records a traditional didactic lecture. While brief videos are helpful for announcements and framing the material for the week, students are also eager to experience the expertise of the faculty through lectures. As one student noted, "I personally want to hear from my professors. I can read a book on my own. Part of what I feel that I should be getting from my education is instruction directly from somebody who is an expert in that field."

The following statement by Jason provides an excellent example of an instructor using both methods of recording brief and longer videos.

> I like it when I get a little bit of information directly face to face via a recording because it sets the tone for the assignment and the module. He does brief

> introduction videos, and he also does a lecture. One week I took two pages of notes from his lecture, so when I did my readings, I knew where we were going. I would have missed this if it was only in a written word from the teacher.

Jason went on to say that the instructor prefers that the students watch the lecture before they read the required texts assigned. This was helpful for the students to understand why certain books and readings were assigned for the week. In another example, a student shared that she appreciated it when the instructor frames the readings for the week and that it was especially helpful when the instructor did so through video.

In another example, Melissa said, “It feels like the video is in real time as if I’m sitting in a classroom.” She continued to say that even though the instructor is sharing information on video, the style is very relaxed and conversational. An advantage of using video in the course is that students can review the video as many times as they would like. Melissa provides more context:

> With the [ARC] technology on Canvas, as you watch it, you can write comments and responses in the video itself, which then appears for everybody who watches the video next, including the professor. You can go back to it and see what thoughts were sparked in the group. It's a remarkably conversational experience, even though nobody watches it at the same time.

Even though the video is prerecorded, students felt very connected to the professor as if the student was watching the instructor in real time. The instructors in the study used video technology differently to fit their own teaching styles and personalities. The students will did not seem to prefer whether the video was used in particular ways. Salient in this study was that video created a human connection which brought teaching

to life. Students appreciated brief informal videos that set the foundation for the week, and longer or traditional lectures were students felt that they were receiving direct instruction.

In summary, this section has focused primarily on the importance of faculty engagement with the online elements of hybrid courses. This engagement is accomplished by the instructors through grading, providing authentic feedback, participating in discussion forums, and recording informational and instructional videos. Providing individualized and tailored timely feedback that relates to each student's interests, motivations, and vocational goals, however, has the most impact. When instructors connect ideas in the classroom to student's personal and professional lives, the results can be profound for students' learning. Being an engaged instructor in a course is to be responsive in a timely matter by commenting to students both individually and within the class promptly. Students appreciate when instructors highlight areas of vocational growth and discovery and by suggesting skills and tools that they can use in the context of their ministry. Using video technology is additionally an avenue for teaching content as well as making connections with the students. Being engaged with students is showing an overall concern for students.

Gathering Days: Bringing Avatars to Life

Gathering Days are what CTS refers to for the on-campus meetings when hybrid class members meet in person. Hybrid courses at CTS are a combination of online and on-campus learning with approximately 75% taking place online and 25% on campus. The courses follow a 10-week format, with the online portions occurring during weeks 1-4 and 6-10, and on-campus meetings on week 5. The on-campus times for hybrid classes

are scheduled within an 8-hour timeframe, four days per week. This section will address the students' thoughts, feelings, and observations concerning the on-campus components of the courses, or the Gathering Days. Being on campus and having experiential learning were prominent within the Gathering Days theme.

The benefit of hybrid courses is it provides ample opportunity for learning through two distinct learning spaces. Hybrid courses require the faculty to design activities accordingly to utilize online technology while simultaneously ensuring a valuable on-campus learning experience. The instructors in this study were cognizant of these dual requirements. To teach an in-depth understanding of complex concepts through readings, online discussions, video lectures, and written feedback worked well. For on-campus activities, effective pedagogy included experiential learning and such practice activities as role-plays and group presentations.

Prominent in the data was the number of times the students commented about the Gathering Days, which occurred in the middle of the term. In their comments, they spoke about it with high levels of enthusiasm. Without the on-campus meeting times, the students felt that the courses would not have enabled them to feel connected with their peers, nor would it have secured the hands-on, experiential learning that was important to their education. Christopher said that the on-campus meeting times were "very key to being able to develop those relationships." Melissa said, "I don't think it would be anywhere near as powerful to have community without those times in person."

Being on campus. The on-campus component of the hybrid courses is a significant factor in the students' overall educational experience. They shared about how important it was to be with others in person in the same physical classroom after they had

been communicating virtually for the first few weeks of the course. In some cases, the students knew each other from previous classes, but in others, they met each other for the first time when they gathered. Nick said that when he applied to the school, he was looking for a solely online program, but after experiencing the on-campus gatherings, he said, "The hybrid is very, very important. Being able to see people face to face is huge and more important than I first realized."

When the class meets on campus, there is an opportunity to work in small groups, practice skills, work on creative projects, and experience hands-on learning. The students also noted that it's helpful to grapple with a theory or problem when everyone is in the same room at the same time. The following excerpt from Catherine is as an example.

> The hybrid environment really works for me. Without saying, being in person is just the best, and the richest part of the course, especially if we can actually take what was a tough theological idea and unpack it together in conversation.

This student continued the student continued to express how it was to her learning experience to meet on campus with the class.

Students felt more connected to each other when they were able to meet face-to-face. Before the on-campus meetings, students admitted that they developed preconceived assumptions about their peers, but once they met their peer colleagues in person, they realized their assumptions were incorrect. Students noted that they try to imagine the personalities and intentions from their peers in the class, but unless videos are shared, the only thing the students have to rely on is the very small avatar photos and students' writings. Online personalities are translated differently than in person. Caleb said, "Up until on-campus day in any given class, it's just icons, floating heads and text

blocks, but then when we are together, you can understand personalities. You laugh together; you share stories." Caleb told a story where he thought his classmate's postings were not very engaging, but when he met him in person, he felt differently.

> For instance, I didn't know this other student before. I only knew from his online postings, which felt pretty dry, scholarly, not warm. But when we were sitting together in class and we'd lean over and make little comments on things and I got a totally different feeling. He was a really warm, comfortable person, who was fun to sit with.

Kat put it this way:

> Just walking into that room, I saw the little avatars are now sitting there in real life. It's like a deep relaxation that I'm with my people. You get through the first four weeks and then you come to campus, and suddenly these are living, breathing human beings who are all steeped in the same waters as you and excited to see one another. You have that comradery and shared experience.

Dr. Williams, one of the instructors, said that he noticed the student's excitement when they come together in the classroom for the first time.

> There is this sense of euphoria for the students that they see each other again or for the first time. There are people that you've known online, and now you get to know them in this new way. I think the community takes care of itself in some ways because it's a group of people who all care deeply about the similar things.

Experiential activities. While coming together and being in the same location is important, it's the activities that the students do together that make the difference in their learning. All the courses in this study provided considerable experiential learning

opportunities that were directly relevant to their personal and professional lives. Students noted how important these aspects of the course were to their learning. They also expressed that it was critical for them to build relationships with each other online before coming to campus to participate in these activities. Vulnerability and trust begin online and continue when the class comes together in person. Students take what they have learned online and put it into practice as they delve into real-life situations. In this way, they gain or sharpen skills they can take into their future careers. The following excerpt from Catherine, a student in the Pastoral Care class, indicates why vulnerability and trust are essential for class meetings.

> When you come for gathering days, you already know each other from the discussion posts. For this class particularly, I think a high degree of vulnerability and a willingness to be transparent is necessary for it to be a successful learning environment. That wouldn't happen if it was the first week of class and we didn't know each other.

Cindy, another student in the same class, said that it was important for her to feel comfortable with students in class because the role-play activities were emotionally intense.

> The role plays that we created were some pretty heavy situations. There were a lot of things in those role plays that I had lived out in my own personal life, so it was so important that we had a really strong group of people there and a strong community. I really felt like we had such a great sense of community there because we had such a great sense of support and understanding of each other and what we needed. I would just look at them, especially when I was doing the role

> play. and they calmed my nerves. I think that was probably the biggest place that I've experienced community in this class.

The instructor of the Pastoral Care course said that meeting on campus together "provides an opportunity for students to move from anxiety to comfort and greater knowledge and appreciation of each other."

The New Testament course also had experiential learning where students wrote as scribes on papyrus paper. The instructor, Dr. Williams, said that this activity sparked an "interesting conversation about scribal practices and the production of ancient manuscripts, which leads to the production of our modern Bibles." Melissa admitted that she was not sure at first how valuable the project would be, but she quickly discovered that it created a meaningful opportunity to build community with her classmates.

> We did the activity and two things happened. One, I learned a lot about the process of being a scribe and how it must have been in the ancient times that I would never have learned without the experiential part of that. The other thing that happened is that we got together in teams and we worked together and built a special rapport with one another.

The students' reactions to this activity created a feeling of vulnerability because they were all learning something new together.

In summary, Gathering Days are how the school describes the required on-campus meetings for hybrid courses. Meeting in person enhances hybrid courses in several significant ways. First, it builds upon the trust created by online interactions before the students meet on campus. Second, meeting in person provides an opportunity for the class to engage in group activities where students can practice vocational skills, as

in real-life role-play situations and other pastoral leadership activities. Finally, the opportunity to see classmates face to face creates a sense of community where students and instructors can get to know one another better, which enhances dialogue and critical thinking.

Sense of Community: Connecting learning with a spirit of belonging

In this section, I use the definition of a sense of community proposed by McMillian and Chavis (1986), namely, that a sense of community is a "spirit of belonging together" in a group (p.315). Later in this chapter, alternative definitions of community arising from this research project will be presented.

Online learning communities. Online education can cause students to feel alienated. The participants in this study shared that community removes this feeling of isolation. Without community, there is little motivation for learning, and students are not able to connect their ideas with other people. Community keeps students engaged and motivated to complete their degree programs with a feeling of satisfaction. When students feel that they are a member of a learning community in which they are studying similar ideas and grappling with critical issues together, they develop a commitment to themselves and each other. Nick stated that community is lifegiving and essential to staying enrolled in a master's theological degree program.

> If we're not doing this for some sense of community, why are we doing it? I don't think it would be as fruitful, as lifegiving, or as important. I think without the community, I'd have come maybe for one term and then quit. Knowing that we're not alone in this MDiv program is huge.

While students have every intention of finishing the degree, there can be a tendency to withdraw from online programs due to a lack of social interaction or a feeling of isolation. Online classes can cause frustration, dissatisfaction, and a lack of confidence and motivation (Lehman, 2014), but a sense of community increases retention rates in both online and traditional classrooms (Rovai, 2002).

The physical distance between the campus and the students is a real concern for students in online and hybrid programs. While reading, writing, and studying are individual activities regardless of physical location, earning a degree at a substantial distance from the school adds a layer of separation and alienation. Students said that they do not have the same access to professors as students who are on campus and see their instructors in class every week. This barrier is further complicated because students do not want to impose on their instructors and ask them seemingly unimportant questions. The casualness of asking a question before or after class is not the same as asking in an email. This following statement by Christopher captures the sentiment that this type of casual communication can be absent in the online environment.

> If I'm in a traditional lecture environment and I'm showing up to class every week, I may go up to the instructor and talk with them after the class and ask a particular question or ask them what they think about something. But online I don’t want to bug them. Those kinds of learning moments are lost in an online environment. Sometimes the way you communicate over an email doesn't quite get at what you want to ask the instructor.

Christopher continued by noting that the availability of instructors is critical. He felt that if there were continual and intentional one-on-one communication between teachers and

students in online and hybrid courses, students would feel encouraged to ask more questions that are on their minds.

At times students have some apprehension about earning a Master of Divinity from a distance. Participants in this study said that they did not find technology to be a barrier but felt hesitant to enroll because they wondered if they would feel isolated. Being part of a community and building friendships is important to students in a graduate theological program. Caleb, for example, said that he was "definitely worried" about online learning because he was primarily familiar with on-campus classroom environments where conversations occur in "real time" and where facial expressions and body language are easily accessible. He was concerned that it would be more difficult to have meaningful conversations in an online environment, but when he learned about the on-campus components of the program, that made it possible for him to enroll.

Other students were also concerned at first, but since the hybrid program included on-campus aspects, they decided to give it a try. Along these lines, Jason said that even though the on-campus meetings occurred only once each term, it was the most significant time for feeling connected to his peers and the campus community. Melissa had a similar experience that she was not sure how connected she would feel to the campus community, and the pastor at her church was apprehensive about encouraging her to enroll. The following comment by Christopher captures how students have a yearning for community when they enter theological education:

> I wasn't worried about the coursework per se being online. I was more concerned about spiritual formation and development. I wondered how I could develop spiritually when being at such a distance. I've actually found that I like online a

> lot more than in-person learning for spiritual formation. I think the distance gives us time, spiritually at least, to process about how I am being formed.

Christopher's comment about developing spiritually and connecting with others is key attribute in a graduate theological program.

Several students commented on how important it was for them to develop spiritually with one another. Specifically, spiritual growth occurs in courses when they can trust, be vulnerable, and practice ministry skills. Catherine talked about how critical it was to be supportive and vulnerable with your peers. In the following excerpt, she talked about how online discussions and on-campus meetings enhance the sense of community while also building vocational skills. Spirituality and community are connected.

> The online discussions have been very rich in that people are willing to be vulnerable and admit that they do not know what to do in a pastoral care situation. There is an online community of support, even though several of the people in this class I had never met before, and then when I see them it all makes sense. We did role playing, and that's when all of our insecurities and inadequacies came out, but that's when I felt the community. It's not simply an academic environment. You are coming together as a community trying to make each other better.

Cohort. The students begin developing a sense of community from the onset of their degree program. There is intentionality from the institution for students to connect as a cohort. These cohorts are formed each fall when students matriculate into the program. When they first enroll, they are in the same classes, attend a one-day retreat, and join Facebook groups. As Clara explained in her comment below, there is a strong sense of group identity that is formed through cohorts.

> I really appreciate all the work that went into the first quarter and the introductory courses and getting us prepared academically and as a cohort and as a community. That was invaluable. So much of my experience in this program is the community and the bonding of this group. I don't want to get emotional, but the one thing I miss is that our group isn't in all the same classes like we were in our first quarter together, but we try to coordinate our schedules as best as possible.

Melissa talked about the cohort was formed and how she experienced the group as spiritually and socially connected.

> Two things happened to form our cohort. First, the retreat created a cohort bonding that was a powerful, spiritual, and social experience for my cohort. We came out as a strong group that really care about each other and have each other's back. The second part is the Facebook group. The way that this group is there for each other and when you do have the challenges and the joys that happen in life. We celebrate together and pray for each other. I just have this hunch that that might be a tighter bond spiritually than what might happen in person. And it may just be a quirk of the personalities of the group or whatever, but it's a really precious thing, and it's related to the spiritual formation, and it's related to the way we care for each other in community that is amazing.

Melissa noted in the comment above that she thinks the cohort was established at the retreat and with Facebook groups. She also stated her belief that the group would not have formed the way it did with an on-campus program. She said that she thought that establishing connections online before coming to campus was an effective way to introduce the cohort experience.

Sharing stories. Instructors also establish a sense of community with their students. The following remark by Dr. Franco describes his experience when he would encourage students to share their own stories.

> I think you start to see that community is happening when students begin to share their stories with each other and not just share information and not just repeating whatever the others are reading or saying. Whenever students start sharing their personal stories and the others start receiving those stories and reflecting and being compassionate, community is there.

Dr. Percy is also intentional about asking students to share their stories in discussion forums to create a sense of community. “I ask prompts that invite personal kinds of reflection or connection to their own experience, so you get to know them through the stories they choose to tell, and the way that they respond to each other’s stories.” Jason, a student in Dr. Franco’s class, referred to the significance of sharing stories: “It was kind of interesting to see how we allow that vulnerability to come into the classroom, and that's where I think we have mastered community. People tell their stories, and it's a very safe environment.” Perceptions of community and online learning were enhanced when students felt that they could share and empathize with one another. Whether going through a challenge in or outside the classroom, students felt comfortable enough with each other to get through the situation and learn from it.

In summary, the findings revealed that a sense of community was established through building trust and vulnerability in intentional cohort groups, specific events, and sharing stories which invited students to learn from each other. They seemed to equate their learning experience with the strength of their connection to their cohort.

Part III: Research Questions

The purpose of this section is to provide an overarching summary of the results. When analyzing them, I noticed that many overlapping findings that answered more than one of the research questions. For example, online discussions were prevalent in the findings. However, when participants talked about discussions, they were referring to different things. Sometimes the comments were about instruction, sometimes peer interaction, sometimes trust and vulnerability, and sometimes the course content. I have discussed these findings earlier in this chapter. However, in this section, I point the reader to the explicit ways in which the findings answered one of the questions most directly.

How is community defined?

I asked this question of the student and instructor participants in the study. I first asked it more broadly," When you think about community, what comes to mind?" I then posed follow-up questions about how they defined community within the context of their education. The participants often started their comments describing how there are different types of communities: family communities, church communities, neighborhood communities, learning communities, and other types of communities. When describing these types of community, participants answered the question with enthusiasm. The word "community" is used quite often at the school. It was evident in the findings that community has a significant impact on students' personal, professional, and academic lives.

Participants primarily defined community as people who share a purpose for "mutual support." As described by professor Dr. Franco, community is "when there is a goal or common purpose among the group of people." As defined by student Catherine,

community is “having a common reason for mutual learning.” Nick felt that “community means a gathering of people anywhere, whether it's face to face or online.” The comment by Nick that community occurs “anywhere” presents an important distinction as it relates to the purpose of community in an online educational community. With online learning communities, *community* encompasses more than gathering together in the same course, the same degree program, or the same institution. Community in a learning environment creates a level of engagement with other people that enhances the purpose, which is education. Students learn from one another, challenge each other, and discover knowledge together.

As is clear with the following comment by Christopher, community is about bringing ideas and understanding into the classroom with other people, which then expands the knowledge created in the class.

> I think if you don't have community, it becomes an individualized study. If you're in community, though, then it begins pushing you in your own learning where you're not just stuck in how you understand a particular text or how you're thinking through a theory. Community gives you the space to start working through some of your own ideas that pushes you to learn more.

This student articulated the notion of learning collaboratively. Having a shared purpose and mutual interdependence is focused on communication, personal meaning, and mutual understanding of the knowledge that is being constructed (Garrison, 2017). Community happens when a shared purpose has been established.

Even with a shared purpose, people do not always share the same personal interests or have other things in common with one another to be the same group. While

the learning community focuses on the common goals of learning in the course, tension may enhance the community by bringing diverse expressions into the classroom. Community may assume that all people agree and get along with one another, but sometimes being in community also creates tension and conflict. As Dr. Percy put it, "people in community also have disagreements which can create a tougher dynamic."

> We often talk about community like this really positive thing, and we think about a village, raising children, or support networks of belonging - all of which are part of community. But community is also being near people who are difficult and that you have to negotiate around in all kinds of ways. Sometimes the tightest, most supportive communities are difficult. I always want to think of community with both liabilities and strengths.

Dr. Williams described it similarly: "It's like a pre-packaged group of people that even if you're not interpersonally inclined to like each other, you are still interested in the same very narrow slice of the world." The comment from Dr. Williams highlights the importance of establishing a community around shared goals and values. His comment about being in the same "narrow slice" of the world refers to theological education. Students who come together for this type of education have an inherent desire to form relationships and build community.

Students also recognize that community is not always expressed in healthy ways. For example, Melissa offered the following comment that having concern for one another does not necessarily mean that the community is a healthy one:

> An ideal community is when there is an exchange of concern for each other. But there are healthy communities and not healthy communities. A community doesn't

necessarily guarantee healthy relationships, but ideally it does. There's support, and there's interaction, and there's learning that are all mutually beneficial.

Participants recognized that developing a learning community takes relational work and commitment, but it is something vital to their education. They talked about community with passion, and I could sense how heartfelt it was for them as they talked about what community meant for them. Students spoke of community as a crucial factor in their educational experiences. Community shapes how they are being developed as leaders in their ministry vocations. The findings were clear that community is essential in the MDiv hybrid program. Therefore, building and constructing these communities is an essential aspect of the program.

How is community constructed?

When students enter the hybrid MDiv program, they participate together in an online orientation and enroll in the same classes in the first term. They form an incoming class cohort whose group identity is encouraged by faculty and staff. When students initially arrive on campus for the first time, they experience a weeklong schedule of courses, events, social activities, and a daylong retreat. These experiences were talked of fondly by the students in this study. However, as important as co-curricular activities are to building community, evident in the findings is how community is built and strengthened within the curricular aspects of the program, specifically in hybrid courses.

In a hybrid course, community begins with and is sustained by the instructor. The tone is established through the syllabus. The syllabus offers the instructor an opportunity to show their personality and how they plan to approach the course. Rather than being

simply a form of one-way communication, the syllabus enabled the instructor to stimulate questions and presented students with a chance to introduce themselves to one another. The instructors provided their unique video introductions to their courses. The personalities of the instructors came through as soon as they introduced the syllabus to the students. These types of introductory videos, as well as other videos throughout the course, created a relational dynamic that helped connect the students to the learning community.

Instructors played a pivotal role in the online discussion forums. Faculty engagement proved especially important at the beginning of the course when the students were still getting to know each other and the instructor. The discussion forums provided an important opportunity in the course to establish trust. The following comment by Dr. Franco shows how he established trust by participating in the discussions at a higher level early in the course, with his input tapering off later on.

> At the beginning of the course, students are very cautious about what they are saying and who they are saying it to. Then as the course progresses, then the level of trust increases, and most of them are saying more and more and participating more. My participation is not as important as it was at the beginning of the course, but I'm still there. I'm reading what they are saying and still responding, but not as much as the beginning of the course.

Dr. Franco continued to say that establishing trust among everyone in the course, especially among the students, is a major factor in their learning. Jason, a student in Dr. Franco's class, explained how important trust was for him.

> It’s a Pastoral Theology and Care class, so these are sensitive and emotional topics. We go behind the first look at the situation to see what's going on behind what the care seeker wants. I’ve been vulnerable in this class. Dr. Franco prompted us to be vulnerable at the beginning and share some of our own experiences, and this gives insight into your peers and how to really connect with them.

Christopher talked about how the Christian Worship class encouraged him to be vulnerable and trusting toward others when hearing feedback from his peers.

> In the context of Christian worship, we talk a lot about our backgrounds and where we come from and why we worship the way we worship. There's a lot of vulnerability of coming out and being who we are. We have to say why we’ve made certain decisions rather than just going along with the flow of things. We may disagree on these things theologically, but there's a lot of trust that goes in with that.

In addition to being present online, it is important for instructors to strategically include participatory group activities when students are on campus. These types of activities create an atmosphere of community building. This is especially evident when students have been dialoguing in the online spaces provided by the hybrid course. When the students have an opportunity to develop trust with the instructor and their peers online, relationships are enhanced on campus. Clear in the findings was how students considered online classes to have a different feel to the community it developed than hybrid courses. While this study did not include online courses, students compared their experiences of hybrid classes with online classes. They mentioned enjoying certain

aspects of online classes, but for community building, students preferred hybrid courses. They appreciated the friendships created when they gathered on campus to learn together. As Cindy put it, “I think it made community stronger once we were all together because we all knew a little bit about each other from being online.”

Learning is achieved when students feel a sense of belonging in a community. When asked about the definition of community, Christopher summarizes the way students in this study feel about being known to one another. He used the analogy of the show “cheers” – “where everybody knows your name.”

> What comes to my mind honestly is Cheers, the show, where you walk in and ‘everybody knows your name’. You're just there. People know who you are, and you know who they are, and you're just able to be yourself. I think it's also a place where there's a bit of stability. I think in a healthy community is where you know that it's a safe place for you. I guess in some ways it feels like I belong, and I think that's an important piece of community.

Christopher indicates that a feeling of belonging is what makes a community. In the book, *Belong: Find Your People, Create Community, and Live a More Connected Life*, Agrawal (2018) defines belonging as, “a feeling of deep readiness and acceptance: a feeling of, I’d rather be here than anywhere else.” (p.17). Having a sense of acceptance builds a sense of identity within the group, therefore, establishes a meaningful learning community. As Christopher noted in his example with cheers, it’s a feeling of acceptance that is unique from other types of gatherings.

How does community play a role in student learning?

Most salient in this research study was how, and to what extent, community plays a role in student learning. I have often heard people discuss community as being on the periphery of an education. While they believe that community can make an educational experience more enjoyable, it is rarely discussed with the notion that community is a significant aspect of the learning experience. The findings in this study revealed that community is at the center of the learning experience. In chapter 5, I discuss recommendations for building community. In this section, I provide an overarching summary as it relates to the community role in student learning.

A community that is formed in the classroom shapes the communal experience of students. They repeatedly mentioned how they relied on their community of peers, the community built in the classroom, and the relationship they had with the instructor to enhance their learning. While learning occurs individually, the experience is enhanced when there are others with whom to exchange ideas. Betty, a student in the focus group, said, “I think the rigor comes from reading and writing thoughtful feedback to others.” This student discussed how one feels responsible to the group to provide helpful feedback to peers.

Dr. Williams said he noticed that there is a sense of belonging and common purpose when one experiences shared learning. He reflected on the difference of working one on one with a student versus teaching an entire class of students. In the following comment he used a baseball metaphor to explain the difference between teaching one student versus a full classroom of students.

> There's already a sense of belonging, of common purpose, and I think community is the whole ball game. If instead of classes of 20 people, it was only a one-to-one tutoring situation, I don't think it would be a very valuable learning experience. If it were one other person and me in Canvas, we'd be just hitting the ball back and forth. That's not interesting or effective. What makes it interesting and effective is that with a sense of community, there are other people along with you, and they have different ideas, and you can learn from them. I think that sense of belonging might be the most important thing.

The community extends outside of the classroom. There isn't a distinction that learning happens in only one place. For example, in the following comment, Cindy shared that community was a noteworthy part of her class experience that extended from Canvas to Facebook:

> I think that we learn better if we have a deeper sense of community. We start a conversation within Canvas, but then we'll also message each other on Facebook and ask questions such as, "Hey, I have a question about this, or help me process through this." I feel like that's super-important that we don't feel like we're just restricted to the classroom space.

Catherine remarked that the opportunity to meet in person with other students created a community that enhanced learning for her future vocation.

> Especially in seminary, I can't imagine doing this work in any other way to prepare us for chaplaincy, pastoral care, and serving a community. Without that sense of community, I wouldn't feel adequately prepared to do this kind of work. Everything we do is about people. Absolutely, the community is essential.

The following comment from Caleb in the focus group spoke about how community plays a role in helping one to understand how to be prepared for a vocation in ministry.

> In the absence of community, you can learn all sorts of theological things by sitting down at the computer with Wikipedia, but the community portion is really necessary to bring it all together and make sense out of it. It's important to make my thoughts and ideas relevant to other people. It's more than just learning theology; it's learning how to be a good pastor. You can sit down and be an armchair theologian, but I don't think you can be an armchair pastor.

This student along with others commented that community played a significant role in preparing for their professional vocations. When asked, "What do you want people to know about online/hybrid theological education," Nick said the following:

> Embrace it. Don't be afraid of it and just because it's not what was done 20, 30, 40 years ago. It doesn't mean it's not quality. This is the same MDiv, if not a little bit more than what was offered before. It's producing quality pastors. The more than we embrace this and put money into it, and put time and effort into it, it's going to create fruitful pastors who can continue ministry as the Methodist church.

Nick's statement affirms the education that he is receiving in a hybrid environment. It is contributing to his success in his vocational discernment where community has played a role in his education. Students appreciate and learn in collaborative settings, whether online or in person. The opportunity to learn with like-minded people who are entering similar career paths requires the development in community of a foundational trust inherent in being a divinity student.

Conclusion

Students and faculty revealed that community is important in the learning experience. The instructors in the courses approached their teaching towards making connections with the students. They designed their courses in a way that allowed for ongoing class engagement. They were intentional with their curriculum design by utilizing the tools and strategies available within hybrid courses. Online discussions were most effective when faculty were present and participated. When faculty provide authentic and timely feedback, students were more motivated to participate more fully in discussion forums. When instructors connected real-life vocational skills in the learning environment, students took risks and trusted each other. This trust created an opportunity for students to be vulnerable with themselves and each other. Finally, community is about bringing critical reflection into the classroom with other people, which then expands the ideas and knowledge.

Chapter Five: Interpretations, Discussion, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study is to research the ways that students in a Master of Divinity program experience community in hybrid courses. By using qualitative research methods, namely an embedded case study, I asked participants to share their opinions and experiences about community in their learning environment. The foundational conclusion of this study is that when community is prioritized as an essential aspect of the learning experience, whether online or in-person, students are enthusiastically motivated to learn, especially as it relates to their vocational development. Three research questions guided this study.

1) How is community defined among students and instructors in graduate hybrid theological education?
2) How is community constructed in graduate hybrid theological education?
3) How does community play a role in student learning in graduate theological education?

Summary of the findings

The findings in this study indicate that community plays a central role in the learning experience. It invites a more profound sense of connection between individual students and between students and instructors. This connection taps into a desire to learn with others. Community, as defined by the participants in the study, is when people have a common interest for mutual support. This tracks with the definition in the book, *The Art*

of Community, in which the author defines community as a "group of persons who share a mutual concern for one another's welfare" (Vogel, 2016, p. 9). Participants in this study shared how important community was to their well-being and, most importantly, to their learning in the program. Community developed when there was a level of trust and camaraderie within the class. When the learning environment has an open and cohesive environment, academic goals are more likely to be achieved (Garrison, 2017). Having this mutual concern provided learning environments where students felt comfortable sharing their strengths and areas for growth.

The concern for one's peers extends outside the classroom. Participants talked about a special bond they had with a cohort of students and how going through the degree together enhanced their experiences. The more connected students feel in community, the deeper the learning becomes. When gathering for a common purpose, community provides an opportunity for meaningful socialization and facilitating connections (Cox-Davenport, 2014). When there is meaningful socialization, students share personal experiences, and that helps create a reflective dialogue about professional issues (Cox-Davenport, 2014).

The three main themes revealed in this study are: 1) *Faculty engagement,* which refers to the instructor's participation in student learning and growth, 2) *The impact of gathering days,* which refers to when students meet on-campus as a part of hybrid courses, and 3) the *development of a sense of community*, which refers to the feeling of being part of a group of people with a common purpose.

This study showed that hybrid courses are valid for community building. When online activities, such as discussion boards, are designed with the purpose of

collaboration and co-construction of knowledge, students progress farther in understanding the course content. When on-campus activities, such as role-plays and presentations, are constructed to allow students to practice real-life vocational skills, learning becomes meaningful because it transfers to students' personal and professional lives.

The findings also revealed that building trust and vulnerability led to more in-depth learning experiences. When hybrid courses met face-to-face, it enhanced a sense of community by building upon the trust that was established by online interactions. On-campus meetings provided an opportunity for the classes to engage in group activities where students practiced vocational skills, as in real-life role-play situations and other pastoral leadership activities.

The instructors in the study provided ways to engage the students in community, both online and in person. The courses had similar course designs that provided ample opportunities for students to participate in their classes consistently through discussions and assignments. This consistency invited students to learn more from each other and to engage with the material by eliciting critical discourse that spanned over several days. The instructors provided relevant hands-on experiential learning activities when their classes met on campus. Students reported that their learning was enhanced when they had the opportunity to practice real-life situations for professional development.

Implications

This study has three main implications for educators in higher education. While I address these implications for graduate theological education specifically, they also apply to a broader audience. While theological education is centered on developing relational

skills such as counseling, pastoral care, and preaching, other graduate programs in higher education, such as counseling, and social work also require students to learn a similar set of skills.

First, I provide the reader with the implications of how the CoI framework informed this study; second, I provide the implications of the uniqueness of hybrid courses; third, I discuss vocational development with online theological education; and fourth, I suggest rethinking community in theological education.

#1 Community of Inquiry

Educators desire to discover ways to improve teaching in online spaces. In my own teaching experience, this involves reading literature and conversing with peers about best practices. An implication from the study is the importance of having a pedagogical framework for designing curriculum for online and hybrid courses. Having a framework that is designed, researched, and implemented specifically for distance education provides a foundation for creating ideal learning spaces. Furthermore, there are assessment tools with this framework, especially the CoI survey (see Appendix A). While this study did not address assessment practices specifically, the CoI framework provides educators with a targeted approach for assessment.

This study also suggests that educators may want to consider ways to develop community in their courses. Most important in this research study was how, and to what extent, community plays a role in student learning. The findings in this study revealed that community is at the center of the learning experience, and community building should be a priority in developing the curriculum. This may be a paradigm shift for many educators who may not view community as an essential critical thinking function;

however, the information gathered in this study could be used for developing faculty training, curriculum, co-curricular activities, information technology, and best practices to serve students who enroll in these types of programs.

The CoI framework provides the foundation for using a variety of tools which can be interpreted for instructors' individual strengths. For example, in this study the instructors provided feedback to their students differently. While one instructor focused on individual feedback to students, another instructor provided feedback in larger discussions. While each of the faculty recorded video, they each used it for different purposes. By focusing on the three presences —social, cognitive, and teaching —it invites faculty to broaden their focus. For example, while critical thinking is connected to cognitive presence, it is further established with social presence and teaching presence.

As educators continue to develop pedagogy skills for teaching in online and hybrid classes, emphasis on building community seemed to yield a more robust learning environment. Regarding theological education, students discussed how important it was for them to develop spiritually with one another. Specifically, spiritual growth occurred in courses when they were able to trust one another, be vulnerable, and practice ministry skills. For example, with socialization, students are permitted to share personal experiences that create a reflective dialogue about professional issues (Cox-Davenport, 2014). Having trust and connection among students and educators suggests that there was enhanced critical thinking because of the socialization.

The data revealed in my research featured an understanding of the CoI framework. Generally, seminarians seek and value community. A question to consider is whether a community would occur naturally due to this value that students bring to the class;

however, the findings in this research suggest that students yearn for intentional communities, particularly in the online spaces. The CoI framework provides the structure that establishes that a robust academic environment is obtained when students feel a sense of community with each other and with their instructors.

#2 Uniqueness of hybrid

An implication is that hybrid seems to be a preferred model for students in the study. These types of courses create a uniquely relational opportunity for students to develop community with gathering days in the middle of the term. In the ten-week quarter, students are online for the first four weeks and then come to campus for the fifth week. After the fifth week, courses resume online for the remaining five weeks. Based on the findings about how students build trust and community online before they come to campus, an implication is to have the on-campus component of a hybrid course in the middle, or a little later in the term. Salient in the findings is that there should be a few weeks for students to develop relationships with each other electronically before they arrive on campus.

Further study is needed to determine if hybrid models are more relational than residential models, but there is preliminary evidence from this study that the nature of hybrid models allows for community to be established in significant ways. In the online sections of the hybrid courses, all students must respond and participate equally. This creates a unique experience for the instructors, as well as a means for the students to get to know each other and collaborate their learning together, which is been further enhanced when everybody is on campus at the same time.

#3 Vocational development with online theological education

The findings in this study suggest that students connected the course material to their personal and professional lives in the courses through vocational development. Vocation is the primary purpose that students enroll in professional theological graduate programs. With an MDiv degree, students intend to work in a career where they will provide counseling, pastoral care, teaching, preaching, facilitation, and other forms of leadership. Churches, nonprofits, social agencies, hospitals, and other service organizations need educated clergy and spiritual leaders. The trend of students enrolling in online programs in theological graduate schools is growing (Tanner, 2017), and 64% of theological schools currently offer fully or partially online courses (Gin, Smith, & Brown, 2015).

While graduate theological institutions are increasing access to students by using online and hybrid courses, slower to change are the ecclesiastical decision-makers who decide eligibility for clergy ordination. This study could inform ecclesiastical decision-makers to make more favorable decisions to allow more candidates for ministry to enroll in distance programs. In my professional role at the site, students have commented that those in authority of ordained ministry are concerned about how much online education is in an MDiv program. Students are frustrated by this notion. As this study demonstrated, students in hybrid courses learn in a robust academic environment, engage vocational relationship skills, and connect to their peers and instructors in meaningful ways. Students expressed that they feel prepared for ministry based on the excellent education they are receiving in the hybrid program.

#4 Rethinking community in theological education

Theological education is by its very nature grounded in community. One of the primary purposes of education is to equip people to lead communities for transformation and change. Whether the community is a congregation, a nonprofit, a hospital, the military, or another type of community, a mark of theological education is to prepare students to lead communities. Historically, theological education was to educate religious leaders for congregational communities, but this has broadened over the years to include educating for a wider range of careers, such as community organizing, nonprofit management, education, counseling, and chaplaincy. Regardless of the vocational trajectory, students who graduate from a theological graduate school will most likely lead some type of community.

The ATS, the accrediting body of graduate theological schools, states the importance of institutions providing enough opportunities for community building into the learning outcomes of the degree programs. Community is such an important attribute to a seminary education that it is highlighted in the accreditation standards.

> An institution shall demonstrate that its students are engaged in a community of learning whereby faculty and students have significant opportunities for interaction, peer learning, development of pastoral skills, supervised experiences of ministry, and growth in personal, spiritual formation (ATS, 2012, p.4).

The standards also indicate that "because of the importance of a comprehensive community of learning, the MDiv cannot be viewed simply as an accumulation of courses or individual independent work" (ATS, 2012, p.4). These accreditation standards focus

on the fact that community provides the context for the education. Without intentional communities, seminaries could not be accredited under the ATS.

Having a sense of community invites students to delve deeper into themselves and be curious about others, which opens the possibility for transformation and change. With this underlying assumption that graduates will lead communities, seminaries incorporate community-building opportunities into their programs. Generally, this means *on-campus* activities such as weekly worship, meals, rituals, workshops, and lectures. Community in this context is also established in classroom settings through lectures, face-to-face discussions, and other classroom activities. Commonly, when people talk about both seminary and community, they are usually referring to these types of on-campus activities; however, community reaches far beyond buildings and institutional structures. As demonstrated in this study, building communities online encourages spiritual and personal formation among students. When instructors are cognizant of sustaining communities, trust and open dialogue enhance the learning experience (Hege, 2011). Establishing trust was an important finding in this study. Students commented about their level of trust with each other and with the instructor, who helped create a more profound sense of connection and belonging.

Community is a natural occurrence with seminarians, but it is often considered on the periphery of the educational experience, rather than at the center of it. The implications of this study point to online communities that enhance students' learning and resolve notions that community occurs on the sidelines. The growth of online and distance education has forced educators to be more intentional about the online community experience. Learning management platforms, such as Canvas, coupled with

the advancement in technology, provide new ways of learning virtually in a community. The following statement from Dr. Percy describes her reflections about the first online course she taught and how she changed the way she approached building relationships with students. Her quote, used here as a final reflection, highlights the significance of this study—that community building is highly relational, and when done intentionally, occurs with distance learning.

> I had to learn how to build relationships or maintain relationships in an online environment. It was just an interesting process to relearn what does it mean to connect with people in an online environment? What does it mean to be relational? How can this still be a communal learning experience? It just felt like the tools of the trade that I had been leaning on, which is embodied pedagogy, were taken out of my repertoire, and I had to do something different.

The questions that Dr. Percy raised are important ones to consider for educators. Dr. Percy admittedly spent a lot of time one-on-one with students as she was learning how to teach online, but said it was well worth it to discover the connection that it created with students. She continued her explanation about how it is a "very humbling kind of proposition" to realize that the online course was more effective in terms of students' learning than with other residential courses she taught previously. She commented that, to her surprise, the students' papers at the end of the term were the "best she had ever seen." She attributed a part of that success to the fact that she prioritized making connections and building community with the students. Community in theological education requires a paradigm shift to rethink the idea that community only occurs in person. Educators can

adapt their curriculum to encourage them to rethink ways in which to connect with their students.

Recommendations for faculty

The following recommendations are based upon the conclusions of this research study and are designed for faculty who teach or how are considering teaching online or hybrid courses. The recommendations address how community can be established and maintained in online and hybrid courses. Rather than provide specific suggestions about assignments, course design, or curriculum, I present these recommendations more broadly. Since pedagogy and teaching philosophies vary greatly among faculty, these recommendations are offered with the hope that instructors will interpret these recommendations to suit their own goals and objectives in their courses. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Incorporate the Community of Inquiry framework into course objectives.
2. Participate regularly with students in discussion forums to establish teaching presence.
3. Record video for lectures and course announcements.
4. Provide authentic feedback that addresses students' vocational preparation and academic interests.
5. Utilize small groups to establish open communication and trust.

#1: Incorporate the Community of Inquiry framework into course objectives

Educators would benefit from incorporating CoI into course objectives. This includes, but is not limited to curriculums, course designs, and course evaluations. The framework provides the foundation for hybrid courses that entail face-to-face and online

learning activities (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The CoI framework "supports connection and collaboration among learners and creates a learning environment that integrates social, cognitive, and teaching elements in a way that will precipitate and sustain critical reflection and discourse" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 8). A community of inquiry is when students engage with one another with respect, "build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions" (Lipman, 2003, as cited by Vaughn, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013 p. 11). Incorporating strategies that enhance cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence provides a roadmap for learning goals and outcomes (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

For graduate programs that require relational skills, this framework is well suited because it centers around building collaboration and community. The framework could also provide a common language for faculty to converse and share ideas and be accountable towards similar institutional goals. For example, a technique to incorporate cognitive presence in hybrid and online courses is to enhance critical thinking in asynchronous online discussion forums (Holsler & Arend, 2013). To accomplish this goal, instructors should examine the four stages of cognitive presence and develop discussion questions that specifically inform each of the phases (Holsler & Arend, 2013). The four phases of critical thinking are: 1) a *triggering event* that is evident when an idea or problem arises, 2) *exploration* that occurs with problem-solving among the learners, 3) *integration* where knowledge is synthesized, and 4) *resolution,* when learners apply what has been created through the collaborative classroom experience (Garrison, 2017). An

understanding of these four stages, coupled with an assessment of these stages, will provide insight that may solicit deeper critical thinking (Holsler & Arend, 2013). Often dialogue stalls out at a surface level in online discussions and lacks deeper critical thinking (Holsler & Arend, 2013). To avoid surface-level engagement, faculty should employ strategies that develop a cognitive presence in online discussions. These strategies include developing questions for discussion forums that elicit responses within the four phases. The following table is an adapted example from the guide provided by Holsler and Arend (2013).

Table 15 - A guide for identifying and eliciting cognitive presence

(an excerpt from the Appendix of Holsler & Arend, 2013)

Cognitive Presence Phase	**Description**	**CoI Identifying Cues**	**Question Stems/Strategies**
Triggering Event	Questions designed to capture student interest and generate curiosity.	Sense of puzzlement; Realization of the problem or issue; Desire to find out more.	Questions that focus on a problem, issue, dilemma, or learning task.
Exploration	Students begin to understand the nature of the problem; search for relevant information and possible explanations.	Brainstorming ideas; Information exchange; Personal narration and opinions.	Questions that ask for clarification; Questions that ask students to take on various viewpoints; Questions that ask for more evidence; Questions that explore ideas or perspectives that have not yet emerged.
Integration	More focused and structured phase of meaning-making; Reflective phase marked by a critical discourse that shapes understanding misconceptions.	Connecting or building on ideas of others; Synthesis of information; Creating solutions	Questions that focus on relationships or connections; Questions that focus on the initial synthesis of ideas Questions; Seek to test tentative solutions.
Resolution	Resolution to the problem or dilemma.	Testing, applying or defending solutions; metacognitive awareness	Questions seeking solutions, synthesis, and verification; Questions that have students raise their solutions; Responses based on evidence.

Faculty who teach at the same institution could institute peer learning about the community of inquiry framework. They could facilitate "lunch and learn" sessions of best practices by sharing information about different strategies. For example, the faculty could read the literature and discuss the theories and practices together. In another example, course evaluation questions could resemble the community of inquiry framework.

#2: Participate with students in discussion forums to establish teaching presence.

Students and instructors each take responsibility for learning. In the CoI framework, the "element is labeled *teaching* presence and not *teacher* presence" (Vaughn, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013, p. 14), whereby all participants contribute and collaborate with learning. Everyone in a community of inquiry engages in critical discourse, critical thinking, and co-creating knowledge (Vaughn, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013). With discussions forums, there are generally due dates in which students are required to write an original post in the discussion forum. These due dates drive the discussion to occur in designated time frames. Because of this imposed date, students participate in the discussion during a specified day(s) during the week. When students converse and share ideas, they expect instructors to also be in the discussions with them. While students can and do learn amongst themselves, they also assume the expertise of the faculty will guide them. Instructor participation during this time is critical for the students' learning. When the due date has lapsed, the conversation has ended. When instructors participate in the discussion, it provides the opportunity to teach directly to the class by clarifying concepts, introducing new questions, and furthering critical discourse.

Comments arose from the interviews and focus groups about student motivations in discussion forums. Students admitted that because they are balancing life

responsibilities along with their graduate work, they sometimes posted in the discussion and then "moved onto the next thing." When students are required to revisit the discussion to post to one or more of their peers, they tend to seek people they know and then comment only to those people; however, it appears that if the instructor is active in the discussion and contributes relevant instruction, students are more motivated to converse with more people and engage with the discussion longer. Furthermore, students talked about how valuable the instructors' insights are in discussion forums. Ideas are clarified and challenged with direct instruction. Students felt that they wanted the instructor not only to read their posts but to guide them into a deeper understanding of the content presented.

#3: Record video for lectures and course announcements.

Students appreciated instructor videos because it provides an opportunity to see the instructor's facial expressions, body movements, and personality. It gave the insight to view the professor's passion for their subject matter. Students felt that instructors were talking directly to them in real time, even though the video was pre-recorded. Students appreciated that they can connect with the instructor when the video is made for their class specifically. In this study, the instructors used video differently. In some instances, the video was used for 30-minute lectures; in other instances, the video was used for course announcements. Sometimes the video was a combination of both. Video connects students to the instructor, which connects them to their learning.

#4: Provide authentic feedback that addresses students' vocational preparation and academic interests.

Authentic feedback in this context refers to when instructors provide feedback specifically tailored for each student. When this type of feedback is connected to a student's vocational goals, students are motivated to dig deeper into the course content. Students said this authentic feedback motivated them to learn. When students received personalized feedback, they felt like their instructor cared about their success.

Students understand that providing individual feedback takes time for the instructor and expressed gratitude when the instructor took the time to tell them something specific. For example, students shared how the instructor suggested a book, or a scholar to follow, or an activity to try in their community. When feedback connected the coursework to students' future vocations, it appeared to provide deeper meaning for their studies in the Master of Divinity program. In addition to providing meaningful feedback, it is helpful to students when the feedback is timely to the grading process. Some students commented in the interviews and also in the course evaluations that they were grateful for the detailed feedback but preferred it to be closer to when the assignments were due.

An MDiv degree is a professional degree that prepares students to serve in a variety of capacities including but not limited to, religion, spirituality, and social justice. The education "has a complex goal: the personal, vocational, spiritual, and academic formation of the student (ATS, 2012, p.4). With these interests at the forefront of students' minds, they are committed to learning the profession of ministry so that they can be of service in their communities. Students in this study shared that they are open to,

and appreciative of, corrective and specific feedback that addresses explicitly their future vocation.

#5: Utilize small groups to establish open communication and trust.

Students feel overwhelmed by large discussion forums and feel inundated with dozens of posts to read through. It was evident in the conversations with students that while they did learn from larger discussions, smaller groups cultivated a sense of community, trust, and open communication. When they were divided into smaller online groups, students shared more openly about their lives and their struggles with course material. Small groups create an online environment for students studying theological concepts and skills, provide students the opportunity to practice the theological intercultural spiritual care knowledge and skills in the discussion forums (Doehring, 2018), and are more manageable when students are tasked with sharing and demonstrating skills. Students in this study said that small groups of five to seven students felt more intimate and that they were able to go below the surface level that sometimes occurs with larger group discussions.

Recommendations for Deans/Administrators

While individual faculty members can make changes in their courses to connect with students and incorporate new course designs, Deans, board members, presidents, and other administrators are essential to learning communities. Deans could consider providing access to workshops from other educators from other institutions who incorporate the Community of Inquiry framework in their curriculums. These consultants could be invited to observe courses and offer feedback. There could also be additional training opportunities during the summer months with stipends to incentivize faculty to

redesign their courses. Deans could encourage peer-to-peer learning among the faculty by urging faculty to invite their peers to observe courses for feedback. Deans could also take an active role in observing courses.

I provide this recommendation because of an inadvertent benefit that I experienced while conducting this research project. As an adjunct faculty member, I learned firsthand from observing the faculty in this study. Including the pilot study, I observed a total of five faculty members during the academic year, which immediately translated to my own teaching. For example, I consider myself an attentive and engaged teacher with students, but learning new strategies helped me make adjustments that were more effective than what I was doing before. Learning from peers in this way was a different experience than learning about "good practices" from peers or from the literature. Learning firsthand by observations provided profound insights for my own teaching.

Beyond the faculty, this research also has implications for enrollment and fundraising administrators because of the useful talking points that highlight the benefit of a theological education. As mentioned previously, one of the accreditation standards is to ensure that the community is established in a Master of Divinity program. The stories shared in this research and the findings therein provide excellent examples for administrators to tell a compelling story about the institution.

Recommendations for students

In chapter two, I wrote about the work of Shea & Bidjerano (2010) around learner presence that refers to students accomplishing learning goals by bringing themselves into the educational environment. When students manage tasks with one another and provide

group leadership, the learning presence informs the other presences in the CoI framework. Students could take on the responsibility of incorporating the CoI framework into their learning experience. My observations of students show that they tend to place the responsibility of their education solely on the faculty and administration; however, students could take a more active role in their own learning experiences, including contributing to the learning goals of establishing and contributing to community in their academic context.

Recommendations for future research

This study examines three hybrid courses at one private graduate school, and elevates the students' experiences by sharing their stories about the importance of community on their learning and vocational goals. Teaching online courses requires a different set of skills than teaching residential courses. For some educators, teaching online is an unfamiliar environment, therefore, gathering insights on how to graciously live in this new reality will provide relevant and robust learning opportunities in higher education. Since this study focuses on three courses at one graduate school, the findings should not be considered a generalization, at this site or other sites. Research can be broadened to multiple institutions, which would increase the understanding of online and hybrid programs. The following are recommendations for future research.

First, further research is needed to discover how community is developed in solely online courses. While the findings show that community was built and sustained in the online classroom, it seemed to be enhanced when the students met face-to-face. Future research could be pursued about how instructors and students would know that community is evident in their online courses. Would there be different teaching strategies

for online versus hybrid? Would students define community in the same way with online courses as with hybrid courses? The findings in this study suggest that community is built and sustained online. This was evident in how the students developed trust and established relationships before they met on campus. The question for further study is how important meeting on campus is for the extension of community. How could online courses develop a deeper sense of community? When comparing online classes to hybrid classes, students felt that community was more significant in the hybrid courses. More research could bring out these differences more specifically.

Second, while my research study focused on community, future research could include vocational development and spiritual formation. Seminarians are more likely to be engaged in community and value community. They are intentional about building relationships by learning about themselves and about others. They are seeking a vocational profession that requires sophisticated relational and pastoral skills. A future study that targets the notion that seminarians are intentional about community could possibly address the question about how spiritual formation fits in their overall experience of community.

Third, future research about how to use technology in the church as a way of connecting more people to a wider network in a faith community would be of interest to ecclesiastical leaders. This study revealed that students utilize the technical skills they use in the online classroom outside of the class. They are writing blogs, developing wiki pages, recording podcasts, and writing online journals in their church ministries. Students are also thinking of new ways to connect with their communities using virtual technology. Research in this area could examine how instructors are using technology

and how students interpret this technology to use outside of the class. The research could have student and alumni participants to find the trajectory of how the technology utilized in seminary was then used in future vocational settings.

Fourth, future research about how a sense of community increases retention would provide valuable insight. Online classes can cause frustration, dissatisfaction, and a lack of confidence and motivation (Lehman, 2014), but a sense of community has been shown to increase retention rates in both online and traditional classrooms (Rovai, 2002). In my professional career of working with online/hybrid students at CTS, I have noticed an interesting phenomenon that students in the hybrid Master of Divinity program are retaining at the same, or at slightly higher rates than the students attending on campus. This is an interesting phenomenon that is contradictory to higher education statistics that indicate that online students have higher attrition rates than classes taught in a face-to-face setting (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007).

Finally, further research could include both quantitative and qualitative findings. For example, data could be collected to determine how often students log into courses and how long they stay engaged. This quantitative data coupled with qualitative research about the reasons behind students' behaviors could provide the rationale to create changes in policy and practice. Furthermore, quantitative and qualitative research can be conducted with the CoI survey (see Appendix A).

Conclusion

The foundational conclusion of this study is that when community is prioritized as an essential aspect of the learning experience, students are enthusiastically motivated to learn, especially as it relates to their vocational development. If theological graduate schools want to reach more people and remain relevant for developing spiritual and religious leaders, they must embrace online and hybrid education with enthusiasm and vigor. As demonstrated in this study, students learn effectively in online and hybrid communities. They experience trust and vulnerability, learn the required skills needed, and participate in an academically rigorous environment.

Theological education equips students to lead in a changing, challenging, and suffering world. Daniel Aleshire (2011), the former Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, states the following about the effectiveness of theological schools in the future.

> Change has been rapid and ubiquitous, and ATS member schools have been affected by both the scope and the pace. Twenty years ago theological schools were barely on the Internet; now, thousands of students are completing courses online. More has changed than technology. Religion has changed, higher education has changed, and students have changed. The Association and its member schools have some catching up to do. *The future has arrived*. What are the responses that will make theological schools as effective in the future as they have been in the past?

One of the answers to Dan Alshire's question is for theological schools to lead in party by sustaining and encouraging online/hybrid learning communities. Graduates of theological

education are tasked with connecting people and creating change in local and global communities. Distance education provides students with the tools to achieve these goals. Virtual learning communities connect people in deeply meaningful ways. As Dan Aleshire states in the quote above, “religion has changed, higher education has changed, and students have changed.” I would add that distance education has changed. It is no longer text-based with limited social interaction. Online education can now provide sophisticated interactions that build community and relationships that further critical thinking skills. The communities that are built in online and hybrid courses are making an impact on students’ motivation to learn and grow.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Community of Inquiry (CoI) Survey instrument[2]

5-point Likert -type scale
1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Teaching presence

Design an organization

1. The instructor clearly communicated important course topics.
2. The instructor clearly communicated important course goals.
3. The instructor provided clear instructions on how to participate in course learning activities.

Facilitation

1. The instructor was helpful in identifying areas of agreement and disagreement on course topics that help me to learn.
2. The instructor was helpful in guiding the class towards understanding course topics in a way that helped me clarify my thinking.
3. The instructor helped to keep course participants engaged and participating in productive dialogue.
4. The instructor helped keep the course participants on task in a way that helped me learn.
5. The instructor encouraged course participants to explore new concepts in this course.

Direct instruction

1. The instructor to focus discussion on relevant issues in a way that helped me learn.
2. The instructor provided feedback that helped me understand my strengths and weaknesses relative to the courses goals and objectives.
3. The instructor provided feedback in a timely fashion.

Social presence

Affective expression

1. Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in this course.
2. I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants.

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[2] Arbaugh, J.B., Cleaveland-Innes, M., Garrison, D.R., Ice, P., Richardson, J. Shea, p., Swan, K. (2008). Developing a community of inquiry instrument: Testing a measure of the Community of Inquiry framework using a multi-institutional sample. *Internet and Higher Education*,11, 136

3. Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.

Open communication

1. I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium.
2. I felt comfortable participating in course discussions.
3. I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants.

Group cohesion

1. I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants are still maintaining a a sense of trust.
2. I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants.
3. Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration.

Cognitive presence

1. Triggering event

2. Problems posed increased my interest in course issues.
3. Course activities peaked my curiosity.
4. I felt motivated to explore content related questions.

Exploration

1. I utilized a variety of information sources to explore problems posed in this course.
2. Brainstorming and finding relevant information helped me resolve content related questions.
3. Online discussions were valuable in helping me appreciate different perspectives.

Integration

1. Combining new information helped me answer questions raised in course activities.
2. Learning activities helped me construct explanations/solutions.
3. Reflection on course content and discussions helped me understand fundamental concepts in this class.

Resolution

1. I can describe ways to test and apply the knowledge created in this course.
2. I have developed solutions to problems that can be applied in practice.
3. I can apply the knowledge created in this course to my work or other non-class related activities.

Appendix B: Observation Protocol

Teaching Presence
How does the instructor guide the class towards understanding course topics in a way that stimulates student engagement?
How do the instructor's actions reinforce the development of a sense of community among course participants?
How does the instructor provide feedback to students that helps the learner understand their strengths and weaknesses relative to the course's goals and objectives?
How does the instructor facilitate discourse or provide direct instruction?
How do instructors pick up on cues that the students are learning?
Social Presence
How do students get to know one another to feel a sense of belonging in the course?
What are the ways in which students interact with each other?
What are the ways that students express their disagreement with other students? Is a level of trust maintained? Why or why not?
How are online discussions developed and presented by the instructors that creates a sense of collaboration?
Is there evidence that students show expressions of support and encouragement?
Is there evidence that students create a sense of presence online with personalization of communications?
Cognitive Presence
What types of course activities pique interest for students to learn?
How do students navigate finding relevant information to resolve content related questions in the course?
How do assignments and learning activities help students construct explanations/solutions?
How do students demonstrate that they can apply the knowledge created in the course to their profession or other non-class related activities?
Community
What are the most salient indicators that community is being formed?
What are indicators that community is evident?
Theological Education
How is technology used to share theological ideas and beliefs?
How is care expressed in the course?
What indications are present that students will apply what they learned in their church or in similar professional settings?

Appendix C: One-to-One Interview Protocol Student Participants

I'd like to start by hearing about your background with taking online or hybrid classes.

1. Describe your experience with online education before attending Iliff. If no experience, describe what you thought online education would be like.

2. Did you have any apprehension before taking online classes at Iliff? If so, please describe. Was it was alleviated or is it still present for you?

3. How would you describe your comfortability when using new technology such as computers, tablets, smart phones, apps, or other technology? When you have a problem with computers or other technologies, how do you solve the problem?

Learning

Now, I'm going to ask you some questions specifically this course, your experience and=how you learn best.

1. Describe how you learn most effectively from the instructor?
2. How is the instructor present?
3. Describe how you learn from other students in the class?
4. What is most difficult for your learning with this hybrid class? How have you overcome this challenge?
5. How does the instructor guide the class towards understanding course topics in a way that stimulates your learning?
6. How does the instructor provide feedback to you that helps you understand your strengths and weaknesses relative to the course's goals and objectives?
7. What have learned about yourself as a student taking this hybrid class?

Community

Next, I'd like to hear about your thoughts and experiences with community.

1. How would you define community? (Generally speaking).
2. Tell me about a specific time that you experienced [that community] _____ (what you just described) in this course.
3. Tell me about a time when community was lacking in this course.
4. Describe why or why not having a sense of community is important to you as a student in a hybrid class?
5. How do you get to know other students in the course?

Hybrid Learning

Now I'm going to ask you questions about hybrid learning.

1. How would you describe a hybrid class to someone who has never taken a class a hybrid class before?
2. What would be your ideal way to build community in a hybrid course?
3. In what ways does a hybrid class align with your learning style?
4. In what ways does it differ?
5. What is most valuable for you when in a hybrid class? (What do you look most forward to in a hybrid class?) What are the joys of being a student in a hybrid class? (What are the rewards? What excites you?)
6. What are the challenges?
7. What have you learned about yourself as a learner as a result of being in this class?
8. Describe gathering days and how it is important?
9. What do you want faculty to know about teaching hybrid classes?

Conclusion

I'd like to wrap up the interview by making sure I didn't miss anything.

1. At the beginning of the interview I asked what you about _____. Some of the things I heard was_____ (sum up points). Did I get that right? Is there anything more to share about that?
2. Was there anything that I didn't ask that you were hoping to share?
3. Last Of all the things we've talked about today, what should I pay most attention to? What should I think about when I reviewing this interview?

Appendix D: Focus Group Interview Protocol Student Participants

Opening

My first question is about what you were thinking before you started at Iliff in this hybrid program.

1. Describe your thought process if you had any apprehension or doubts about whether you would feel a sense of community at a distance.
    - How did you imagine being in a relationship with people, with instructors?
    - How did you imagine spiritual formation would take place?

Social Presence

Now I'm going to ask you some questions specifically about communication and trust in this course.

1. How do you know that there is trust established in the course?
2. Talk about a time when you felt that your point of view was acknowledged by other students.
3. Tell me about a time where you felt comfortable disagreeing with another student, students, or the instructor.

Teaching Presence

Next, I'd like to hear about your views of the instructor in this course as it relates to your learning.

1. What invites you to participate in Canvas discussions?
    a. If your responses to other students are not required, what would make you want to participate?
    b. What makes students participate on Facebook, but not in Canvas groups?
2. As you think about the instructor's presence in the course, what is most important to your learning?
    a. What is most important in building community?
3. Describe a situation where the instructor was instrumental in creating a sense of community among course participants?

Cognitive Presence

Next, I'd like to hear about your views as it relates to critical thinking in this course.

1. Name an example of a time when a topic was explored deeply.
    a. What do you think allowed this topic to be explored more thoroughly?
2. Talk about a time when the class reached a resolution to a problem or concern about a particular topic.
3. What are some examples of the ways that you have applied knowledge from the hybrid course that can be applied in practice in your life, and non-class activities?
4. I'd like to hear your thoughts about the way your instructor design the course in a way that was most helpful for your learning.

Community

Lastly, these next set of questions are about experiences with community.

1. Tell me about why having community matters, particularly as it relates to theological education.
2. Does it have anything to do with your calling as a faith leader?
3. Community often happens organically. For example, when you think about how friendships you find similar interest, you may start to have conversations, you start to build trust with one another, you start to share ask your life. This happened very naturally. Like to know how this organic sense of community occurs in a hybrid class?
4. Is there something that they instructor can do to enhance this natural sense of community building?
5. What advice would you give to a new student taking a hybrid course for the first time?

Conclusion

Now I'd like to wrap up the interview.

1. Was there anything that I didn't ask that you were hoping to share?
2. Out of all the things we've talked about today, what should I pay most attention to? What should I think about when I review this focus group interview?

Appendix E: One-to-One Interview Protocol Instructor Participants

Teaching philosophy

1. How would you describe your teaching philosophy?
2. In what ways does a hybrid class align with your teaching style? In what ways does it differ?
3. How do you know when students are learning in your class?
4. What are your goals that you are trying to achieve in your students with your teaching?
    a. Why is this important to you?
    b. How are your goals expressed in your classroom?
5. What are some examples about specific teaching techniques that you find useful?
6. How do you organize your class to enable students to be actively involved in reaching those goals?
7. How do you address the range of learning styles among students in your classes?

Community

Next, I'd like to hear about your thoughts and experiences with community.

1. How would you define community? (What does community mean to you?)
2. Tell me about a time that you experienced community in this course.
3. Tell me about a time when you felt that community was lacking in this course.
4. What tools or strategies do you use to make the learning environment social, comfortable, and connected?
5. Do you build a course with that [community] in mind?
6. What strategies do you use to make the learning environment social, comfortable, or connected?
7. How have you leveraged community to meet your teaching goals?
8. What are some ways that you have observed students learning collaboratively?

Hybrid Teaching

Now I'm going to ask you questions about hybrid courses.

1. What are the joys of being an instructor in a hybrid class?
2. What are the challenges?
3. Describe how you spend your time teaching.
4. Describe the ways in which the hybrid environment enhances you getting to know students. How does hybrid class limit you getting to know students?
5. What have you learned about yourself as an instructor teaching hybrid classes?
6. What is most valuable for you as an instructor when teaching in a hybrid class?
7. Describe an example of when teaching a hybrid class was challenging. How did you overcome this challenge?

Course Design and Assessment

1. Describe the process of building this course (course design, assignments). Talk about how you designed the course. The assignments, the flow, the content, the course design.
2. What is going as you hoped?
3. What would you do different next time?
4. Tell me about how you planned Gathering Days. What was in the forefront in your mind as you planned?
5. Are there things you do before gathering days in the online space to prepare for gathering days?
6. Are there things you do during gathering days to prepare for the online space after gathering days?
7. Talk about the observations you had of the students during and after gathering days.

- What do you notice about pre/post Gathering Days?

Conclusion

Now I'd like to wrap up the interview by making sure I didn't miss anything.

1. Was there anything that I didn't ask that you were hoping to share? What questions should I have asked?
2. As I listen back on this interview, what should I pay attention to?