THE IMPACT OF TWO REQUIRED RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES IN AN ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

by

KARAH ZANE HAGINS

(Under the Direction of Janette R. Hill)

ABSTRACT

Online learning in higher education offers a variety of options to meet the needs of students. Asynchronous online learning, in particular, provides flexibility, yet frequently falls short in terms of opportunity for encouraging connections between students when compared to traditional face-to-face educational experiences. Studies have determined that a lack of interpersonal connections can contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation, which may affect student persistence, and reduce satisfaction with online learning experiences. This qualitative case study explored the impact of two required student-to-student relationship development activities on student experiences in an asynchronous online learning environment (AOLE). In-depth analysis resulted in two overarching themes as key features of participant experiences in RCJ3000. These included relational factors and peer factors. Relational factors comprised the interpersonal and social domains of peer connections, engagement, and communication. Peer factors included the interactions between peer students through the two required course activities and included social support, perspectives, and collaborative skills. The findings revealed that the *Get to Know a Classmate Activity* (GTKAC) may serve as a supportive element for many

students in AOLEs. A supportive element might be characterized by two features: (1) meeting, conversing with, and learning about a peer student, and/or (2) fostering a sense of social presence and support throughout the semester. The results from thematic analysis seemed to indicate that participants' experiences in RCJ3000 were further impacted through the (1) *relational factors* of engagement, peer connections, and communication, and (2) the *peer factor* of social support. Data indicated that the GTKAC activity may help reduce the gap between social interactions characteristic of face-to-face learning contexts and the often isolating spaces of online learning. By highlighting the importance of promoting peer relationships in AOLEs, this study may contribute to enhancing engagement and social support.

INDEX WORDS: Student-to-Student Relationships, Informal Interactions, Engagement, Social Support, Isolation, Sense of Belonging, Social Emotional Learning, Qualitative Research

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DEDICATION

To my grandparents, Fred and Betty Zane Waters: Thank you for teaching me the importance of education and fostering a lifelong passion for learning.

To my parents, Sam and Joy Hagins: Thank you for teaching me to believe that I can do anything and supporting me through all of my subsequent adventures.

To my sisters, Amanda and Rebekah: Thank you for making me proud to be your big sister and for your encouragement as devoted teammates.

To my husband, Pat Strawser: Thank you for saving me from myself and patiently teaching me to cherish and embrace who I truly am. Thank you for loving every single piece of who I was, who I am, and who I will become.

To my children, Adelaide and Ezra: Thank you for the ability to see the world anew through your eyes and the honor of being your mother.

This achievement would not have been possible without you all.

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I never saw a Purple Cow,

I never hope to see one;

But I can tell you, anyhow,

I'd rather ***be*** *than* ***see*** *one.*

I will always be a purple cow.

To my first grade teacher, Mrs. Nancy Frank, thank you for planting a powerful seed. To my third grade teacher, Mrs. Almon, who saw a little girl with few friends, but a deep love for big books. You caught me reading during class and asked me to speak with you afterward. Upon discovering that I was reading an unabridged edition of Jules Verne's "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," instead of punishing me, you recognized an opportunity. You proceeded to recommend other amazing books that I greedily consumed, all under an agreement I would no longer read in class. Thank you for not just encouraging, but fortifying my love of reading, unleashing all the possibilities that accompany a love of literature. You provided the fertile soil – vital for to a seedling to grow.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Online teaching and learning offer a modality characterized by flexibility, convenience, and opportunities for students, faculty, and administrators in institutions of higher education. Research examining this educational domain highlight many benefits, including an increase in non-traditional student enrollment, adjustments in educational strategies post-pandemic, and innovations in support for self-directed learning needed to succeed in this environment (Garret et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2020). While learning is ultimately an independent endeavor, it does not need to be solitary. Learning should not take place in a vacuum and online learning is not an outlier in this regard. Numerous learning theories and research concludes that relationships are crucial to learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Lave, 1996; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Katzman & Stanton, 2020; Quinlan, 2016). As students discuss and learn with others, their perspectives are expanded, biases explored, and schemas augmented (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016; Koh et al., 2010; Leach & Zepke, 2011). In a post-pandemic world where solitude and loneliness were our most present companions, the need to revive relationships with each other has never been greater.

Research on student-to-student interactions has established that there are several benefits associated with integrating opportunities for students to engage with each other. Studies on relationship development have concluded that when intentional interactions are provided, students are more connected to their learning, more engaged, have higher rates of persistence, experience less isolation, and are more likely to have meaningful learning experiences (Conrad

& Donaldson, 2011, 2012; Gikandi & Morrow, 2016; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Koh et al., 2010; Rovai, 2002). The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of required student-to-student relationship development activities in asynchronous online learning environments (AOLEs). This study contributes to the ongoing research on the social, cognitive, and affective impact of student-to-student interactions in AOLEs. It advocates for the inclusion of these course activities into online learning design practices to reduce feelings of isolation and promote a more connected learning experience.

Statement of the Problem

Relationship development can be a challenge in any context but is particularly challenging in asynchronous online learning spaces. Over the last few years, the increase in online courses has been exponential, despite research that has identified dissatisfaction with this modality (Barber, 2004; Beaudoin et al., 2009; Cole et al., 2014). Both students and instructors claim that online learning, particularly asynchronous environments, is isolating, tedious, and lacking when compared to traditional classroom instruction (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Kamei & Harriott, 2020).

Despite plentiful online course improvement rubrics such as Quality Matters™ and OSCQR Course Design Review Scorecard, online courses are still considered a less preferred alternative to face-to-face learning (Buchanan & Palmer, 2017; Zhu et al., 2020). However, these rubrics focus predominantly on "stock, prescriptive models for online learning" (Burtis & Stommel, 2021, p. 1), with little attention to what is fundamentally missing from online environments, namely, connections, relationships, and meaningful interactions (Anderson, 2003; Gikandi & Morrow, 2016; Kamei & Harriott, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Research has shown that students benefit from learning with and from one another (Biber, 2020; Elmi, 2020).

While maintaining attention to aesthetics, accessibility, and alignment in online courses, there should be an increased emphasis on the individuals participating in the course.

To assist with this focus, the developmental process of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) may be useful. SEL promotes the cognitive, social, and emotional skills that assist students with developing empathy, interacting with one another, and succeeding in educational, professional, and community settings (Biber, 2020; Conley, 2015; Durlak et al., 2011). While existing research delineates the benefits of SEL in K-12 contexts, further exploration is necessary in higher education. In addition, revising SEL strategies for online learning has the potential to create more inclusive online learning environments and enhance students' interpersonal and intrapersonal skills (Baxter Magolda, 2002; Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Kamei & Harriott, 2020; Reicher, 2010). Research examining SEL strategies in online settings is on the rise. However, there is a notable shortage of studies specifically addressing SEL in AOLEs.

The implementation of an effective delivery method for course activities may improve consistency and provide support for the research process. The Phases of Engagement Model (PoEM) is an instructional strategy designed to provide students with specific activities over a defined time period. Its overarching purpose is to aid in promoting engagement, collaboration, and a sense of community in online learning environments (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012). While the PoEM provides clear steps for encouraging engagement in online courses, formal research on this model is lacking. Existing studies either refer to the model as an effective foundation for another method or provide it as a general reference. (Koh et al., 2010; Parra, 2011). Formal research on applying the PoEM in an online learning environment has the potential to disclose valuable insights and provide additional information regarding its efficacy.

While relationship development, SEL, and PoEM provide the tools to enhance asynchronous online learning in higher education, the research to support instructors and instructional designers in implementing relationship development activities is insufficient. There is a need to study relationship development activities inspired by SEL and delivered via the PoEM and how such activities impact online student experiences.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of required student-to-student relationship development activities on student experiences in AOLEs. The following research question provided a focal point for this study:

How do required student-to-student relationship development activities impact student experiences in asynchronous online learning environments?

Relevance of the Study

The limited research related to relationship development activities for promoting student-to-student connections inspired by SEL and delivered via PoEM in asynchronous online learning in higher education provides opportunity to conduct additional research. This study has the potential to influence how we design online learning activities, evaluate their effectiveness, and in doing so, impact student perceptions of their experiences. This study will focus on the impact of relationship development activities to promote connections between undergraduate students in an AOLE in higher education (see Figure 1.1).

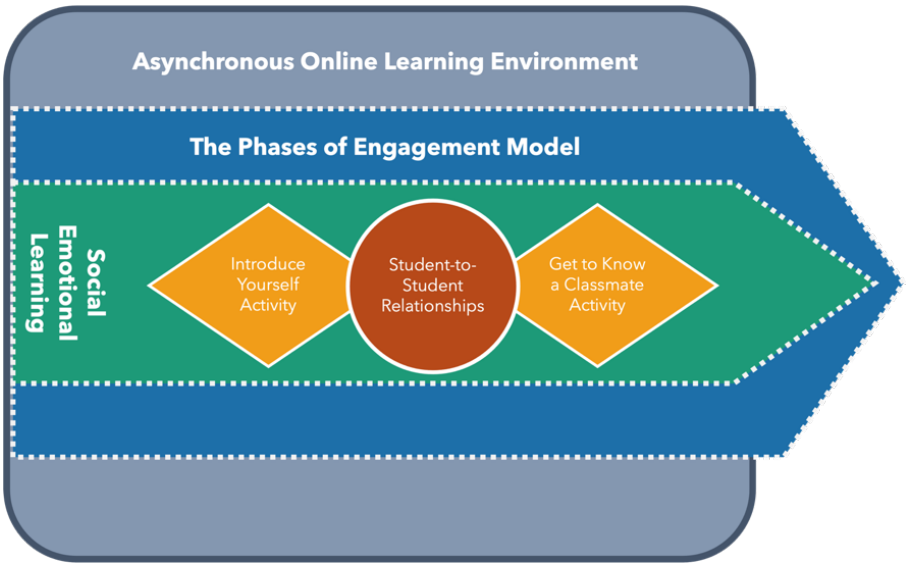

Figure 1.1: Diagram of the study's research overview.

The context of higher education was considered the ideal choice for this research for several reasons. The researcher has years of experience in higher education and has developed expertise in designing, developing, and implementing online courses. There is also a lack of research concerning the implementation of SEL approaches via PoEM in higher education and even less for AOLEs. Further, many educational approaches regarding online improvement tend to focus on instructor credentials, increasing assessment scores, and curricular revisions with a "one size fits all" mentality (Comer, 1988; Curtis & Stommel, 2021; Katzman & Stanton 2020). There is not specific guidance concerning relationships and connections between peer students beyond basic introduction activities, nor is there sufficient empirical research on the impact of such practices in higher education.

This exploratory study aims to establish a baseline measure of relationship development activities and examine how students perceive the impact of these activities on their online learning experiences. In doing so, this study seeks to provide guidance for instructional designers and instructors on reducing isolation and encouraging a sense of belonging in AOLEs.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the study and includes the statement of the problem, purpose, research question, and relevance of the research. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature and the theoretical foundations that frame the study. This includes an overview of the social side of online learning, key factors affecting student-to-student relationships in AOLEs, and the concepts of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the Phases of Engagement Model (PoEM). In Chapter 3, the study's methodology is presented, which includes the research methods used to collect and analyze survey and interview data, strategies to promote validity and reliability, and the ethical considerations. The findings of the study are discussed in two chapters: the survey data are presented in Chapter 4 and the interview data are presented in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 provides the cumulative findings of the study, overall interpretations, implications for theory and practice, limitations and delimitations, and recommended future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

> *A personal relationship is nice too, because how many people only take online classes, so they don't actually get on campus and meet people. So having a personal relationship with someone that you're also in an online class with could become significant because then you can say, "I went to school and I did go online, but I did make a friend."*
>
> *Maire, Study Participant*

Introduction

Online learning has experienced increased adoption in educational institutions, particularly in higher education. The flexibility and variety of programs offered in online settings have made it possible for many individuals to pursue degrees that were previously inaccessible as traditional face-to-face offerings (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Su et al., 2005). As these nontraditional students become the norm, providers of online education need to reevaluate the components that constitute a meaningful online degree experience.

Research has shown that learning is both a social and individual activity (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Su et al., 2005). Thus, learning can be enriched through the connections and interactions established with others. These interactions not only enhance the learning process but create opportunities for the development of interpersonal and social skills (Elmi, 2020; Kamei & Harriott, 2020; Rovai, 2002). Social awareness, relationship skills, and communication are just a few of the basic competences required for graduates to better succeed in the world beyond education (Elmi, 2020; Erickson & Noonan, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). These skills, while more

organically occurring in face-to-face contexts, must be intentionally curated and facilitated in online environments (Archambault et al., 2022; Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Martin & Borup, 2020). Therefore, social features of online learning experiences require further investigation.

The social opportunities in online learning fall short of what is offered in traditional face-to-face settings (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Lowenthal et al., 2020; Martin & Borup, 2022). Although many online courses provide opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and group work, the crafting of activities designed for students to interact informally is infrequent. Studies have shown that students benefit from a sense of belonging and community with online instructors, peers, and the institution (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Miller et al., 2021). Increasing connection and belonging in online courses via informal interactions can "enable online students to form positive social relationships and close ties with fellow students" (Farrell & Brunton, 2020, p. 5). An additional argument for fostering such relationships is to mitigate feelings of isolation and loneliness prevalent in online learning (Bolliger & Shepherd, 2010; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

Understanding required student-to-student relationship development activities in asynchronous online learning environments (AOLEs) and how they impact student experiences was the focus for this study. The primary resource used to identify literature for this review was GALILEO, an online repository that allows searching across more than 400 databases across numerous subjects (GALILEO Library, 2023). GALILEO databases (e.g., Elsevier, ERIC, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Routledge, Science Direct) were used to search for peer-reviewed scholarly articles. Hundreds of articles were reviewed during the last two years using search terms that included isolation, connection, relationship development, student-to-student

interactions, rapport, student engagement, informal interactions, empathetic design, connectedness, and social emotional learning. References from collected articles were used to identify additional resources, leading to more searching in GALILEO and GIL, the UGA Libraries catalog. In addition to the GALILEO databases and UGA catalog, resources were obtained via interlibrary loan, peers, and other scholars. Finally, Web searches were conducted via the Google® search engine, Google Scholar®, and Google Books® to identify relevant literature to inform the review and guide the overall study.

In this chapter, the literature used to inform the study and provide a foundation for understanding the results of the research are presented. The chapter begins with a review of the literature on the social aspects of online learning environments and student-to-student relationships. Then an exploration of key factors affecting student-to-student relationships in online learning is conducted. This is followed by the conceptual and theoretical foundations that frame this study; these include Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and The Phases of Engagement Model (PoEM). Research studies are used to illustrate the primary concepts throughout the review when relevant. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature, including areas that require additional consideration.

The Social Side of Online Learning Environments

Pedagogical practices have been shifting from direct instruction to facilitation of collaborative learning in educational institutions for some time (Archambault et al., 2022; Shea et al., 2022). Much of this shift is due to an increasing consensus that learning is fundamentally the result of a shared culture provided by community, rather than an individual endeavor (Archambault et al., 2022; Elmi, 2020; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009). Building community is essential for creating a successful online learning environment. Efforts focused on developing

community may increase student persistence, retention, reduce isolation, and result in a more effective learning experience (Rovai 2001; Shea et al., 2022). A critical element of community is student-to-student relationships or connections (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rovai, 2002; Shea et al., 2022). When students feel connected to each other as learners, they are more likely to reach out to peers for help and receive support rather than withdraw (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rovai, 2002). This accountability for and between each other resultant from a supportive relationship can contribute to students' sense of belonging and community (Boyle et al., 2010; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Such relationships may also contribute to student persistence in online courses. Rovai (2002) wrote "besides learning from course materials and their online instructors, students should also be encouraged to learn from each other" and develop interpersonal relationships (p. 14). Providing opportunities for peer interaction and developing interpersonal relationships can enhance educational experiences.

While the need for student-to-student interactions has been established, the focus of these relationships has primarily been cognitive. The tools and designs used to foster engagement through these relationships surround discussions of course content, group projects, and peer review (Trespalacios & Rand, 2015; Gikandi & Morrow, 2016). Few activities are provided to augment social relationships between students (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Providing more opportunities for students to share their personal backgrounds, talk informally, and engage with each other may prove effective for increasing rapport and belonging in online course spaces (Archambault et al., 2022; Koh et al., 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). For example, Boettcher and Conrad (2010) suggest assigning two introductory activities, one social and one cognitive. This way learners have a chance to share personal information and increase chances of identifying commonalities with peers

(Archambault et al., 2022; Koh et al., 2010). Increasing such social opportunities in AOLEs may contribute to other important aspects of the learning experience.

In the following sections, potential benefits of student-to-student relationships in AOLEs are discussed. These include engagement, social support, collaborative skills, perspectives, and rapport.

Engagement

When students feel connected to their peers and have a sense of community, they are more likely to participate in course activities and discussions (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rovai, 2002). Online learner engagement has been defined as "the productive cognitive, affective, and behavioral energy that a learner exerts interacting with others and learning materials and/or through learning activities and experiences in online learning environments" (Martin & Borup, 2022, p. 164). This definition includes the dimensions of interaction with others and active engagement with course materials. When both dimensions are activated, students who are engaged may develop a deeper understanding of course content and improve academic performance (Martin & Borup, 2022; Rovai, 2002).

Engagement and motivation are important elements for any learning endeavor, but are critical in online spaces, where much of the learning is self-directed (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016; Kelly et al., 2020). In these online spaces engagement can be established through communication, interaction, presence, collaboration, and community (Martin & Borup, 2022). As such, student-to-student relationships may contribute to increased engagement and motivation in AOLEs. A study, aimed to establish a framework for identifying criteria that led to a high level of student engagement and satisfaction, revealed diverse student perspectives on the value of interacting with peers (Leach and Zepke, 2011). While some students found it beneficial,

others faced challenges in working with peers due to external time constraints (Leach & Zepke, 2011). These students preferred independent learning, and the perceived value of group work depended on the composition of the group members (Leach & Zepke, 2011). This suggested that student perceptions of peer interaction focused more on the outcomes of these interactions rather than their intrinsic impact on educational experiences.

Another study found that the role of student peers in the learning experience and support was valued (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Formal and informal communities formed by students and tutors "engendered a sense of belonging to the program and was an integral part of their approach to learning" (Farrell & Brunton, p. 8, 2020). The peer communities formed during the study were "perceived by participants to be an essential source of support, reassurance, encouragement, and human connection" (Farrell & Brunton, p. 8, 2020). Interactions that provide these types of human connections are integral for combating the isolating experience of online learning and can increase social support for students (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Engaging with peers may not only improve the learning experience but might also contribute to a sense of community in online learning environments.

Social Support

A focus on student-to-student relationships may result in enhanced social support that can combat the solitude of learning online (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). These social interactions are important to consider in a learning environment where individuals are not offered many face-to-face interactions. When students are able to work together, they can offer each other support, encouragement, navigate challenges, and retain motivation throughout the course (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Research found that informal student networks were beneficial for participants in terms of a sense of community

(Andrews & Tynan, 2012). This study provided insight for designers of online courses, entreating them to explore how technology "tools are being utilized by learners and give consideration to ways in which connectedness through both formal and informal avenues can be more effectively fostered for distance learners" (Andrews & Tynan, 2012, p. 575).

Boyle et al. (2010) conducted a study on the efficacy of student-to-student mentoring to reduce drop-out rates in distance education. The study concluded that "mentoring can work in increasing retention in distance education, that schemes can be cost-effective, and they can be helpful in encouraging the engagement of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds" (Boyle et al., 2010, p. 127). Allowing students to self-enroll in the mentoring program of their choice provided a simpler and more approachable avenue for supporting online students in this study (Boyle et al., 2010).

A study conducted by Kaufmann and Vallade (2022) investigated how connections with others in an online course may reduce perceptions of loneliness. Citing a "crises of connection" as a rising trend across colleges and universities, the study determined that online students "lament how their learning experiences are lacking overall interpersonal connections" (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022, p. 1794). The study of 218 graduate students enrolled in an online program suggested "that student-student rapport and connectedness play a more integral role in reducing perceptions of loneliness in the online classroom than interactions and connections with the instructor" (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022, p. 1801). When outcomes are exclusively tied to the educational aspects of online courses, the responsibility should be placed upon instructor communication and instructor-to-student relationships (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). However,

> …once we begin to consider important relational outcomes, such as loneliness, the focus on the interactions and relationships must also shift accordingly. Fostering student

> connections and rapport emerges as a particularly important goal, especially in the face of the more prevalent perception of online instruction as simply content transmission (e.g., Journell, 2010). This need, among other considerations, becomes integral to building and delivering high quality courses for online education. (Kaufmann and Vallade, 2022, p. 1802)

Approaches to social support that offer opportunities for students to get to know one another can also improve collaborative skills.

Collaborative Skills

The ability for students to work together on projects or assignments is a key element for future success. Student-to-student relationships can facilitate collaboration and help students develop important teamwork and communication skills (Archambault et al., 2022; Cipriano & Brackett, 2020). Collaborative learning defined as "two or more people working together toward a shared learning goal," provides students the opportunity to share knowledge, experiences, and perspectives with each other (Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2016, p. 247). Student-to-student interactions may provide a foundation for more complex collaborative endeavors while contributing to community in online learning environments (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Shea et al., 2022).

This type of community is most successful when it goes beyond interaction with course elements. Cole et al. (2014) wrote that "[b]uilding community also requires, among other elements, interaction with each other, that is, between student and instructor and among students in the course" (p. 112). A study conducted to measure student satisfaction with online learning found that a "lack of interaction, including lack of communication with the instructor and classmates, was the main source of dissatisfaction with online courses" (Cole et al., 2014, p.

122). The case in support of the need to provide social opportunities between students to promote collaboration continued with a study focused on online groupwork.

A study on improving online groupwork found that while collaboration is an essential component of groupwork, it does not occur without intentional course design and scaffolding by the instructor (Koh et al., 2010). It is important that instructors take an active role in facilitating collaboration "including assisting group formation, building a sense of connection, and being involved in the groupwork process" (Koh et al., 2010, p. 201). As instructors assist in group processes to encourage student-to-student collaboration, there is opportunity for promoting different perspectives and experiences between online students.

Perspectives

AOLEs attract students from diverse geographic locations and cultural backgrounds (Andrews & Tynan, 2012; Archambault et al., 2022). Student-to-student relationships may provide opportunities for students to share their unique perspectives and experiences, which might enrich the learning experience and promote cultural competency (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Elmi, 2020). By focusing on student-to-student relationships, social presence and community may be increased. Furthermore, "establishing social presence within an online course is critical in order for all identities, experiences, beliefs, and knowledge sets to be accepted rather than marginalized" (Phirangee & Malec, 2017, p. 2).

In a study focused on how six online graduate students were othered and how this affected their learning experiences, results suggested that establishing strong social presence allows diverse learners to "link knowledge pools together to create a shared meaning and understanding" and create community to "alleviate feelings of isolation and alienation which some online learners may experience, through the development of camaraderie and social

reinforcement" (Phirangee & Malec, 2017, p. 10). While the study determined that peer relationships are important, the role for mitigating isolation and othering fell upon the instructor, specifically through the design and facilitation of the course. Instructors that consider the social aspects of learning to craft student interactions and discussions play a crucial role in ensuring a positive online learning experience (Phirangee & Malec, 2017).

A study was conducted on the role of diversity perceptions and expressive freedom in peer-to-peer problem solving communities (Ordovás de Almeida et al., 2014). The findings suggested that identifying "methods for assessing diversity, and then finding ways to use diversity to enhance participants' learning experiences" was a recommended starting point (Ordovás de Almeida et al., 2014, p. 205). The study advocated for combining individuals from different backgrounds, knowledge levels, and experiences into groups then moderate communication around sharing best practices and innovative ideas to enhance learning (Ordovás de Almeida et al., 2014). The study found that leveraging the diverse learning styles and prior experiences of online learners may result in more meaningful engagement with course content and each other.

In another study, graduate students were tasked with providing formative peer feedback to promote meaningful interactions (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016). The course design included consistent interaction opportunities between students and ongoing formative peer feedback through assorted tools and strategies. This approach was intended to "capitalize on learners' diverse prior experiences and knowledge" (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016, p. 159). The sharing of student created artifacts for critical peer review proved useful for encountering new perspectives. As students provided or received constructive comments on their work, it "exposed students to

diverse possibilities as they reviewed peers' thinking and/or artifacts" (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016, p. 164). This peer-to-peer feedback was considered to be an example of meaningful interactivity. In addition to experiencing different perspectives, student-to-student relationships may contribute to building rapport in online learning spaces.

Rapport

Traditionally, building rapport has been associated with positive student outcomes and linked to instructor presence (Glazier, 2016; Lehman & Conceição, 2010). In a study on building rapport to improve retention and success in online courses, findings advocated for an ongoing approach to increasing rapport (Glazier, 2016). The study determined that "[b]uilding rapport is really about building relationships, and that is not done in a single shot" (Glazier, 2016, p. 441). In this study the responsibility for creating a high-rapport environment depended on the instructor. Findings indicated that the rapport-building teaching techniques successfully lowered the number of students who earned a D, an F, or withdrew from the class (Glazier, 2016). The study inferred that while rapport cannot alter students' levels of readiness or circumstances, it may provide means for helping students cope with such challenges (Glazier, 2016).

In another study, high-rapport relationships between instructors and students were described as meaningful relationships, encompassing engagement and connection in online learning contexts (Rotar, 2022). Meaningful relationships can mitigate the inherent absence of personal contact associated with isolation in online learning (Rotar, 2022). The study also explored support interventions for online students and focused on the growing trend of using technology in designing interventions. It underscored a "shift to a more personalized yet holistic approach to student support" (Rotar, 2022, p.1). While many studies on rapport have focused on instructor-to-student relationships, student-to-student interactions may also facilitate rapport in

online spaces. This perspective was supported by Frisby and Martin (2010) who indicated that both instructor-student and student-to-student rapport were positively associated with connected environments and increased participation.

Another study found that student-to-student relationships contributed to increased rapport in online learning spaces (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). In this study on student perceptions of rapport, climate, and loneliness, a focus on the relational aspects of the online environment, specifically student connections with instructors and peers, provided insight into the various roles individuals play in online communities (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). The results of the study suggested "that student-to-student rapport and connectedness play a more integral role in reducing perceptions of loneliness in the online classroom than interactions and connections with the instructor" (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). In addition, as rapport is focused on students' perceptions of personal connection and positive interactions with others, those with higher perceptions of rapport may experience lower levels of loneliness and isolation in online learning spaces (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Thus, increasing rapport among students may contribute to a sense of belonging, increase engagement, and contribute to student success and retention in online courses (Glazier, 2016; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022).

Research has shown that student-to-student relationships may contribute to engagement, social support, collaborative skills, perspectives, and rapport (Martin & Borup, 2020; Cole et al., 2014; Gikandi & Morrow, 2016; Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; O'Shea et al., 2015). Considering these elements in online learning environments may help to reduce loneliness, enhance student persistence and retention, result in more meaningful learning, and contribute to the achievement of learning outcomes (Archambault et al., 2022; Glazier, 2016;

Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). The next section discusses the key factors for student-to-student relationships as revealed by the research.

Key Factors Affecting Student-to-Student Relationships in AOLEs

A review of the literature resulted in five factors that can affect student-to-student relationships in AOLEs relevant to this study. These included communication, technology, course design, time, and trust. While each of these elements are important for student-to-student relationships, they are most effective when applied together due to intertwined and dependent associations between the factors.

Communication

Effective communication is critical for promoting student-to-student relationships and connections in AOLEs (Archambault et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022). The absence of visual communication cues and lack of immediate feedback can make communication in online environments more challenging (Lowenthal et al., 2020; Martin & Borup, 2020). Therefore, instructors need to provide opportunities for students to interact and communicate with one another through various channels, such as discussion forums, chat rooms, and video conferencing (Lowenthal et al., 2020; Yang, 2021).

Providing multiple opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous video may establish social presence more quickly and in turn effectively increase affective engagement (Martin & Borup, 2020; Lowenthal et al., 2020). Providing students access to a variety of methods for communicating with each other and scaffolding this communication throughout the course can result in more authentic student-to-student relationships (Archambault et al., 2022; Conrad & Donaldson, 2012).

A study exploring factors that impact engagement in online learning cited poor online communication in three domains, which negatively impacted students' social engagement. These domains included untimely responses to emails, lack of instructor participation in discussion forums, and delayed feedback on from the instructor (O'Shea et al., 2015). Modeling communication expectations between students can start with instructor accessibility and presence (Archambault et al., 2022; Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Lehman & Conceição, 2010). Conrad and Donaldson (2012) expressed that the same goals for task completion for students should be placed upon the instructor. While students should be provided with clear guidelines, "the instructor needs to model adherence to a set time frame and provide constructive feedback" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012, p. 30). Subsequently, online communication has been identified as essential for establishing a sense of community among online learners (Koh et al., 2010). While student comfort levels with technology may vary, the instructor "should teach students how to use communication tools, and the students should follow communication rules" (Koh et al., 2010, p. 194).

Instructors that employ positive communication to connect with students have the potential to alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). The research indicates that "students have emphasized the importance of perceiving online instructors as approachable, supportive, respectful, engaging, understanding, and responsive (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022, p. 1803). Additionally, considering students' technology acumen and existing skill sets emerged as another crucial aspect influencing student-to-student relationships in online courses.

Technology

The use of appropriate technology can promote student-to-student relationships and connections in AOLEs (Vanbecelaere & Benton, 2021). Social media platforms and learning management systems (LMS) that provide interactive features such as chat rooms, discussion forums, and peer review tools can facilitate collaboration and communication among students (Kreijns et al., 2013; Vanbecelaere & Benton, 2021).

Instructors should consider the unique needs of their students and select technology tools that align with their course goals and objectives (Archambault et al., 2022; Lowenthal et al., 2020). Technology should not be used for its novelty, but rather for its ability to enhance student learning. As students learn to navigate a new tool as a community (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012), it enhances the sense of social learning and connectedness (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022), along with constructive thinking and social bonding (Archambault et al., 2022).

Providing technical support for students challenged by technology is also an essential element of a successful online experience (Greenhow et al., 2022; Yang, 2021). One of the most ubiquitous online technologies employed in education is the LMS. Taking time to explore the affordances provided by these systems and offering instructors "access to trainings and professional development opportunities that help introduce and demonstrate new technologies and provide a place for discussion with other instructors on the advantages or disadvantages of various tools" is critical (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022, p. 1804).

It can be intimidating for students to learn content and technology concurrently. Research indicates that "the technology used to facilitate distance learning required an increased level of learning discipline and motivation, particularly as using new technology at the same time as engaging with new subject material can be difficult" (Croft et al., 2010, p. 32). However, one

way to reduce the adverse impact of new technology may be achieved with effective and threaded online course design.

Course Design

The design of online courses impacts student-to-student relationships and connections (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2022). Instructors should design courses that promote active learning and encourage students to collaborate and engage with one another (Archambault et al., 2022). This can be achieved through the use of group projects, peer review activities, and online discussions (Archambault et al., 2022; Gikandi & Morrow, 2016). Instructors should also provide clear guidelines and expectations for student participation and communication to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to engage with one another (Rotar, 2022; Shea et al., 2022).

If designed effectively, online courses might encourage peer interaction by employing active communication between students and instructors via discussion forums, asynchronous video, and optional synchronous sessions (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Lowenthal et al., 2020). Community may be fostered through informal student interactions such as social media, study groups, and email (Archambault et al., 2022). The instructor's ability to facilitate connections in an online space is fundamental for both student learning outcomes and for the overall quality of the experience (Archambault et al., 2022; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). As a result, "scholars strongly encourage online instructors to consider and facilitate social presence, communication, and interaction in order to avoid students feeling alone or isolated" (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022, p. 1796).

An analysis of both existing literature and the responses of 381 students indicated that the most effective interactions included introductions, collaborative group projects, contributing

personal experiences, entire class online discussions, and exchanging resources (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Regardless of the specific type or combination of interactions incorporated into the course design, study results suggested that opportunities for students to get to know one another should begin early in the semester (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Despite "dazzling technology, there is still no substitute for interaction and there must be opportunities for students to interact in multiple ways with their peers in an online environment" (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012, p. 241).

In another study, students identified instructional design as one of the top factors contributing to the effectiveness of online learning (Swan et al., 2004). The study expressed that there are "several models upon which to base the designs of effective online environments" (Swan et al., 2004, p. 67). Good design is the foundation for successful online instruction (Archambault et al., 2022; Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Martin & Borup, 2022). Designing course activities and integrating them with course content requires instructors and designers to consider the various time constraints faced by a diverse online student population.

Time

Time constraints, such as conflicting schedules, professional and familial responsibilities, and time zone differences can make it difficult for students to collaborate and interact with one another (Greenhow et al., 2022; Yang, 2021). These challenges may be amplified in AOLEs, where the lack of real-time interaction can contribute to a sense of isolation and disconnection among students (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Lowenthal et al., 2020). Instructors should be aware of these difficulties and provide flexible communication and collaboration options to accommodate students' schedules (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Yang, 2021). A study of adult learners revealed that while some students appreciated the opportunity to interact socially, others

voiced concerns about the time they could allocate to reading social comments (Conrad, 2002). Alternatively, participants in another study indicated that informal conversations played a role in fostering friendships and camaraderie (Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009). In this study, communication took place beyond the confines of the course space and proved important for establishing social bonds and facilitating learning. Overall, the importance of social interactions between students depends on the goals, expectations, and mindset of the individuals in the course (Croft et al., 2010; Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009).

According to research on student satisfaction, one of the advantages of online learning is the flexibility it offers in terms of time and convenience (Archambault et al., 2022; Cole et al., 2014; Gray & Diloreto, 2016;). In order to preserve this flexibility, instructors should allow adequate time for students to contemplate topics of discussions, engage in critical thinking, and develop their thoughts to communicate at a deeper level (Kelly et al., 2021; Lowenthal et al., 2020). Designing course content with “this type of consideration and time gives students more opportunity for sustained communication with classmates” (Gray & Diloreto, 2016, p. 4). The importance of allowing sufficient time for online students was similarly emphasized in an Australian case study. The research university supplied self-access support materials, enabling students to address issues or practice using technology at their own pace and during times compatible with their schedules (Kelly et al., 2021). The integration of content, assignment deadlines, and activities while considering students' needs may prove instrumental in building rapport and trust within online course environments.

Trust

In online environments students have limited opportunities to get to know one another personally, which can lead to a lack of trust and inhibit collaboration (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Shea

et al., 2022). This lack of trust may be exacerbated by the anonymity and distance of online environments, which can create a sense of detachment among students (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Lowenthal et al., 2020). Instructors should foster a sense of community by encouraging students to share personal experiences and perspectives to build trust and rapport among classmates (Archambault et al., 2022; Greenhow et al., 2022; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Shea et al., 2022).

Research has found that small group activities can lead to fostering trust and positive relationships between students (Rovai, 2004). As an important element for community building, trust helps students feel like they belong to the larger group (Koh et al., 2010; Rovai, 2002). Furthermore, failing to create opportunities for trust in online learning may lead to instructor dominance, diminishing interactivity throughout the learning experience. Rovai (2002) wrote that trust produces "the open and caring environment needed to promote diverse and constructive interactions that empower learners to negotiate common understandings in their quest for learning new perspectives and ideas" (p. 5). Trust may also create opportunities for students to feel at ease and be open to sharing gaps in their knowledge so others can offer support (Rovai, 2002). Feeling safe allows students to share more personal information with their peers, which is significant for developing interpersonal relationships (Archambault et al., 2022).

In some cases, research has revealed student-to-student relationships in online courses to be a key factor in student satisfaction, achievement of learning goals, and persistence (Archambault et al., 2022; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rovai, 2002). In others, students have expressed that the student-to-student components of the course did not augment their learning experience (Han & Johnson, 2010; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Many of the studies on

student-to-student relationships are focused upon furthering aspects of student engagement and building community (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rotar, 2022; Shea et al., 2022).

The research presented has provided evidence that student-to-student relationships may contribute to engagement, social support, collaborative skills, provide exposure to different perspectives, and facilitate rapport (Boyle et al., 2010; Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Glazier, 2016; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Kreijns et al., 2013; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). Integrating these elements into the design and development of AOLEs may contribute to reduced loneliness, student persistence and retention, and may result in engaged learning and achievement of learning objectives (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rovai, 2002). In this section, the five key elements affecting student-to-student relationships in online learning were discussed. These key elements included communication, technology, course design, time, and trust (Archambault et al. 2022; Croft et al., 2014; Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rovai, 2002). This information was substantiated with existing research.

Theoretical Framework: Social Emotional Learning

While incorporating interactions with the instructor, students, and course content is widely practiced in online educational contexts, there is a need to integrate more opportunities for social interactions, namely sharing of student backgrounds and personal interests (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Koh et al., 2010). With the popularity of online courses and technology as the required delivery mechanism, we need to remain cognizant of the costs associated with a lack of face-to-face communication. Considering the whole student as they enter the learning environment in conjunction with opportunity for connection with peers offers many benefits with the right foundation. The competencies outlined by Social Emotional Learning may provide such a foundation. According to existing research, this framework may

provide a link for increasing connections and developing social skills in AOLEs (Elias, 2019; Elmi, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011; Yang, 2021). Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is formally defined as:

> The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023)

These skills and practices are relevant throughout an individual's life. With origins in emotional intelligence, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, problem-solving, health promotion, and positive development, SEL scholars have identified five core competencies that articulate what individuals should know and be able to do for educational, community, and career success (CASEL, 2023; Conley, 2015; Elias et al., 1997). These competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2023). The individual competencies are defined by CASEL (2023) as follows:

- Self-Awareness. The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts
- Self-Management. The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations
- Social Awareness. The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts
- Relationship Skills. The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups

- Responsible Decision-Making. The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations

These competencies were combined with contexts into a framework for applying evidence based SEL strategies called the CASEL Framework. At the center of the wheel are the five core social and emotional competencies. Circling around each of these are the four key contexts where children live and grow. The framework was then transformed into a graphic entitled the CASEL Wheel (CASEL, 2023) (see Figure 2.1).

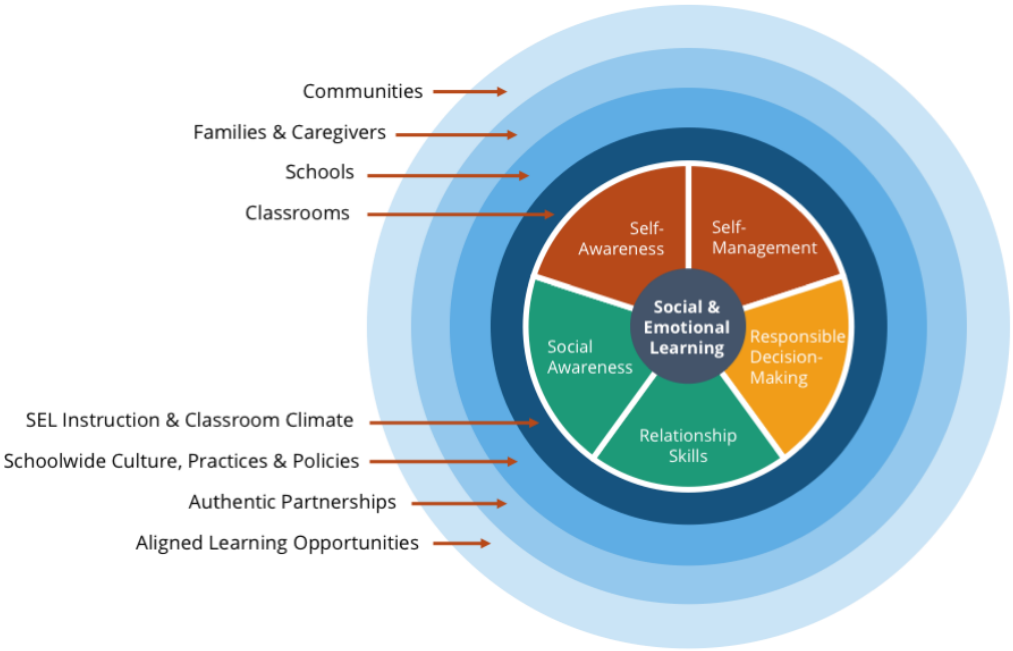

Figure 2.1: The CASEL Wheel. Adapted from Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2023).

According to CASEL (2023), "school-family-community partnerships coordinate SEL practices and establish equitable learning environments across all of these contexts". The CASEL framework combined the work of emotional intelligence, prevention experts, and youth development scholars into an applicable student-centered process. This process allows for customization of SEL strategies within various environments and across developmental stages.

In the following section, the foundations of SEL are discussed, followed by an overview of its application in online learning environments in higher education.

Foundations of Social Emotional Learning

While the term *social and emotional learning* is relatively new, the concepts underlying SEL have been applied in education for some time. In the early 20th century John Dewey espoused his student-centered approach focused on development of the whole child. Dewey argued that curriculum should be relevant to students' lives, resulting in meaningful activities in learning and participating in classroom democracy (Dewey, 1940). As such, an ongoing goal of education is to prepare students to be responsible, caring, and engaged citizens (Comer, 1988; Elias et al., 1997; Seery, 2010). The means of achieving this in our current educational system is an evolving area of practice to which SEL is a contributor.

In one of the most extensive meta-analysis conducted on social-emotional developmental interventions, Durlak et al. (2011) conducted research on 213 SEL programs involving 270,034 kindergarten through high school students. Based on the research, the results indicated that SEL programs improve students' academic performance. An average student enrolled in a SEL program ranked at least 11 percentile points higher on tests, had better attendance records, displayed more interest and collaboration in the learning environment, and had increased grade point averages (Durlak et al., 2011). The study added to the growing amount of evidence that SEL programs have a positive impact upon students and contributed to arguments for SEL programming to be standard educational practice. School districts, universities, and other organizations, continue to work towards the advancement of SEL in education nationally and internationally.

In 2020 approaches to student support across educational institutions were forced to adapt quickly in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This event highlighted several gaps in student support mechanisms, most notably the lack of social and emotional support in online courses (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Katzman & Stanton, 2020; Yang, 2021). This exposure resulted in renewed interest in how educators could support students through both academic and social challenges. Those that were already implementing SEL in their curriculum relied more heavily on the strategies than ever, while those new to SEL found promising approaches (Lowenthal et al., 2020; Walker, 2020; Yang, 2021). This interest and the challenging environment of the pandemic resulted in a push for more holistic approaches in education and learning (Katzman & Stanton, 2020; Lowenthal et al., 2020).

In a brief distributed by Pennsylvania State University in 2020, the role of SEL was explored as means for promoting wellness during the complex trauma of the pandemic. Cipriano et al. (2020) found that nationally 83.8% of states reported an increase in SEL as an educational priority during the pandemic. The brief concluded that educational contexts must continue to implement SEL interventions that are both systemic and systematic, not just in face-to-face classrooms, but "use our creativity and learning in real time to apply SEL to remote teaching and learning (Cipriano et al., 2020). The need to transition to online learning required traditional SEL strategies to be reimagined in synchronous, hybrid, and AOLEs.

Social Emotional Learning in Online Learning Environments

The resurgence in popularity of SEL since the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in renewed interest in applying SEL strategies in online education (Walker, 2020). SEL provides a framework for dealing with conflict and trauma in a way that many educators discovered to be effective as they searched for strategies to support their students during the pandemic (Walker,

2020). Some examples of successful SEL interventions included checking in on how students were feeling, fostering a broader self- and social awareness of bias, discrimination, and oppression, navigating loss with empathy, transformed relationships, and decision-making involving stakeholders (Cipriano et al., 2020). While revising these interventions for online environments can be challenging, there are additional benefits for SEL in online learning. Some established complaints concerning online learning include the absence of relationships, lack of feeling connected, and feelings of isolation (Archambault et al., 2022; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Focusing on bonds between student-to-instructor and student-to-student within a SEL framework may offer strategies towards reducing these factors.

Katzman and Stanton (2020) provided a positive outlook on the potential for effective online learning, "education that is rich in social emotional learning (SEL) and cultural sensitivity has the potential to be provided to all parts of the world, including under resourced and rural areas" (p. 1562). A study by Han and Johnson (2012) focused on the understanding of facial expressions and non-verbal cues that can be exchanged using synchronous video technologies. There was a positive correlation between students' emotional intelligence and their social bonds with peers in online environments in the study (Han & Johnson, 2012). The study concluded that increasing the connection between students could result in a more productive environment and increase persistence in online learning environments (Han & Johnson, 2012; Katzman & Stanton, 2020).

Kamei and Harriott (2020) discussed how integrating SEL in daily lessons could benefit students in online settings through sample activities designed to foster cognitive regulation, emotional regulation, and social skills. During the pandemic, Kamei and Harriott (2020) expressed that students "need social and emotional support now more than ever in order for them

to be able to learn" (p. 367). In their study, Kamei and Harriott (2020) suggested two approaches, explicit SEL instruction and ongoing teaching practices that are designed to promote SEL. Some of the suggested activities included group problem solving sessions focused on a student's identified challenge, watching videos about growth mindset, daily affirmations, stress reduction strategies such as breathing techniques and yoga, and anonymous notes of kindness exchanged between assigned classmates (Kamei & Harriott, 2020). They concluded that expressing effective social and emotional learning for students begins with instructors. Without a solid support system for the adults that are implementing SEL strategies, the process will not be as successful. Providing support for instructors "to manage their social and emotional demand and well-being, the quality of teacher-student relationships is boosted and their effectiveness in classroom management increases, resulting in children feeling comfortable in the learning community" (Kamei & Harriott, 2020, p. 369).

The research has found that SEL curriculum may increase social behavior, whether in the traditional classroom or in online learning and thus, contribute to student satisfaction, learning outcomes, reduce feelings of isolation, and may increase academic performance (Croft et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2011; Han & Johnson, 2012; Katzman & Stanton, 2020). The means to implement competencies grounded in a SEL framework are seemingly endless. Activities can be intermittent, weekly, monthly, or spread out over the semester. In order to provide a consistent approach to the structure, this study chose to implement SEL informed activities via The Phases of Engagement Model (PoEM) as developed by Conrad and Donaldson (2011, 2012).

The Phases of Engagement Model

The Phases of Engagement Model (PoEM) is an instructional framework designed to build trust, facilitate collaboration, and foster community amongst students and instructors in

online learning environments (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). The framework provides a means for the development of specific activities and introduces them in a scaffolded sequence across the semester. The PoEM is intended to provide the necessary guidance for students and instructors to engage properly in online environments. Conrad and Donaldson (2011) wrote:

> Interaction and collaboration are not intuitive to many adult learners who have been educated in a predominantly lecture-based environment. Initially, a learner may be more comfortable in a passive student role and will need guidance and the opportunity to become more involved in an online learning environment. (p. 7)

Their model provides an adaptable structure for this guidance that is applicable across disciplines. The PoEM aids in easing the adjustment process for learners by helping them develop comfort with technology, adapt to predominantly text-based communication, and become accustomed to a higher degree of self-direction compared to traditional classrooms (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). In addition to these aspects, learners face the challenge of "swiftly establishing trust and interdependence with others they may never meet in person" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 8). In online learning environments it is the instructor's duty to ensure learners connect with others to cultivate collaborative relationships (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).

These types of relationships must be intentionally and strategically encouraged via scaffolded activities designed for the online environment. The PoEM is comprised of five distinct phases that include the role of the learner and the role of the instructor, both of which transition over the course of the semester within recommended time frames. The PoEM is detailed in the figure below (see Figure 2.2).

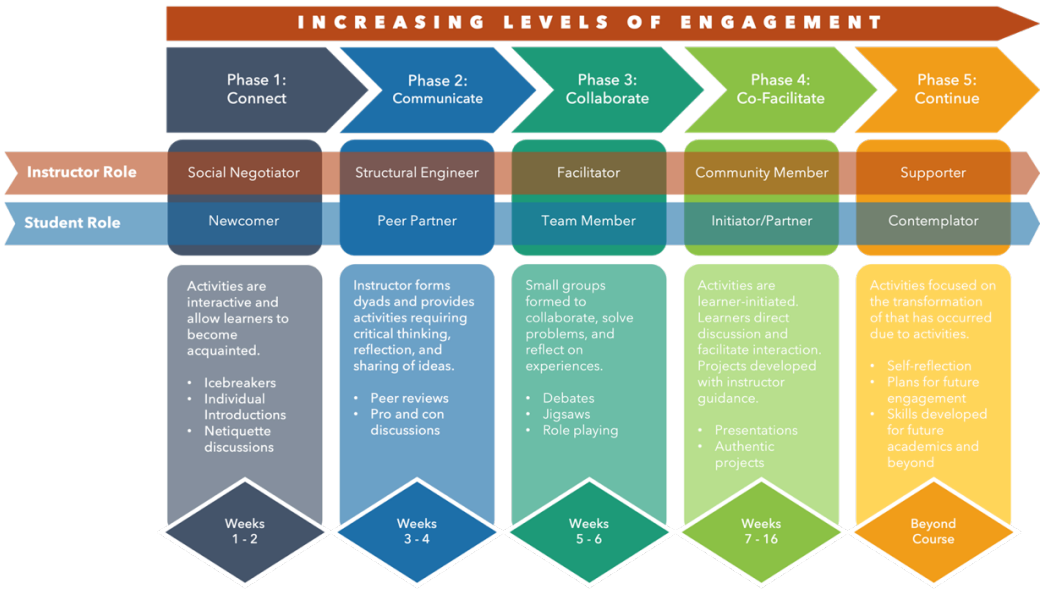

Figure 2.2: The Phases of Engagement Model. Adapted from Conrad & Donaldson (2012).

In this section, the five phases of the PoEM are presented, followed by a discussion of the model in practice.

The Five Phases of Engagement

While the activities and timelines for each phase can be modified, the importance of each phase within the larger framework are equivalent. The progressive building upon one phase to the next is integral for success. The phases "emphasize student-focused learning within an instructor facilitated environment" and include: (1) connect, (2) communicate, (3) collaborate, (4) co-facilitate, and (5) continue (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012, p. 1). The activities are designed to foster connection between students via introductions and low-stakes assignments. As students get to know each other and become more familiar with course expectations, they move into more active learning based strategies.

As the weeks progress, the activities require more collaboration with classmates and course content like peer-review and small group work. By the end of the semester, the instructor has transitioned from the primary facilitator to a member of the learning community as students

cooperate to create new learning content and provide new solutions for course concerns (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012).

Phase 1: Connect

The first Phase establishes precedent and expectations for the Phases that follow by allowing students to become familiar with the online environment and instructor's expectations. This time period can be overwhelming as students explore new technology and learn the proper way to engage in online interactions. The 1 – 2 weeks spent in this phase allows students to explore the LMS, required technology tools, and begin engaging with their classmates in low-stakes introductory activities (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012).

Usually referred to as icebreakers, it is recommended that preliminary activities are of two types, social and cognitive in online learning environments (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). Conrad and Donaldson (2012) explain, "the social icebreaker can be more social-oriented and is conducted primarily among colleagues, while the cognitive ice breaker can be more course-oriented and occurs with the instructor" (p. 17). The goal of this phase is to create an environment conducive to transparency, value of student contributions, and encouragement at the beginning of the course.

Phase 2: Communicate

Following the preliminary student-to-instructor and student-to-student activities in Phase 1, focus shifts towards establishing deeper connections between students that encourage communication. During this phase, which takes place during weeks 3 – 4 in the course, students are paired with a partner assigned by the instructor. The instructor should intentionally pair partners based upon information gathered in Phase 1. Students should be encouraged to engage in dialogue with those that seem similar or different from them, based on instructor goals for

pairing of partners. Such partnerships are integral for creating a space that inspires diversity of thought and perspectives from all students.

Conrad and Donaldson (2012) write that it is vital to encourage "students to state differing views and to come to consensus on those areas of negotiated agreement. For some students, it is a revelation to learn that differences of opinion are encouraged and can be successfully expressed." (p. 17). Helping students reach such goals may be achieved by allowing one of the more experienced online partnerships to share their discussions with the group, provide a rubric for the activity, offer an example from a previous online course, or modeling such behavior by the instructor (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012).

Phase 3: Collaborate

A collaborative online experience provides opportunity for "individual personal growth and learning that go beyond the experiences of the solitary learner interacting with just the content and instructor" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012, p. 18). In a well-designed online course, no student should be able to move through the semester without participating in such activities.

While differing opinions and history of working in groups may impact some students' desire to work with others, the PoEM is focused on "fostering individual knowledge acquisition by creating effective online collaborative teams" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012, p. 18). During weeks 5 – 6, instructors should assign teams by combining the previous partner pairs from Phase 2. It is essential that instructors create these teams rather than students because teams tend to be less diverse and less well-equipped otherwise (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). By the time team formation occurs, the instructor has used the progressive information gathered from Phase 1 and Phase 2 in order to create groups that are potentially successful based on upcoming course requirements.

When working with collaborative groups, it is important to set expectations early and often, while encouraging final projects that are authentic and live beyond the time spent in class (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). Such projects "should include tasks…that can be incorporated into a learner's current or future employment or community involvement" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012, p. 19). This may aid in fostering intrinsic motivation for students to work well together in the achievement of common goals. A slight modification for Phase 3 as presented by Cannon (2019/2020) is notable and applicable for lower-level undergraduate courses, "the collaborative phase may be as far as the course is designed to develop student-to-student engagement, and the course can focus on working in groups on a class debate, role-playing exercise, or similar activity" (p. 4). The ability to implement such modifications is an advantage inherent in the PoEM.

Phase 4: Co-Facilitate

Phase 4 extends from week seven through the end of the course and is focused on encouraging students to contribute to their own learning experience via facilitation of content-related discussions, teaching other groups important information, and creating new learning resources (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). This can involve teams delving deeper into the authentic projects defined in Phase 3, or individually presenting novel information to online classmates through LMS tools.

In Phase 4, the instructor assumes the role of a fellow team member and/or learning community member by offering guidance as a subject matter expert (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). Previous versions of the PoEM presented Phase 4 as the final Phase, but in 2012, Phase 5 was added in response to evolving learner abilities, transformational learning, social networking,

and connectivism (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). Phase 5 is intended to accompany students beyond the online learning experience and into future educational endeavors.

Phase 5: Continue

This Phase represents culmination of both student and instructor journey towards a collaborative, engaging community throughout the semester. The purpose of Phase 5 is "to promote learner-led engagement beyond one course experience and encourage learners to incorporate it into all their learning experiences" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012, p. 15). The end goal of the PoEM is to increase learner engagement as instructor influence decreases over the course of the semester. Once a student has participated as a co-facilitator, they can apply such skills in future learning spaces. Realizing their own abilities for leadership and engagement in the online learning environment can be transformational for students, allowing them to be "more engaged with the learning process, more of a leader than when they entered the course, and that they have the power to be leaders in future learning experiences" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012, p. 20). The activities for Phase 5 should rely heavily upon personal reflection for students and feedback concerning their growth over the semester.

The five Phases have been explored and intended outcomes for each Phase have been provided. In the next section, practical applications of the PoEM are discussed. While the effectiveness of the PoEM is widespread, educational research dedicated to the model is lacking. The few sources identified either apply PoEM as a foundation for design strategies concerning group work (Koh et al., 2010), provide general information about applying the model in online learning environments (Cannon, 2019/2020), or reference it as one possible approach for collaboration amongst many (Parra, 2011). Thus far, no formal educational research focused on implementing the model in an online learning environment and exploring the results from a

student perspective has been identified. The next section will explore the few sources that reference the PoEM along with relevant information for the purposes of this study.

The Phases of Engagement in Practice

As an instructional strategy, a gap in formal research on the PoEM has been identified. While the theoretical foundations of the PoEM align with concepts of active learning, social cognition, constructivism, and problem-based learning, applying this particular approach to online learning has not been adequately researched in the field. Proponents of the model agree that it is effective, and many instructors have applied it successfully in their online courses, but as such, this information is anecdotal. Instructional designers familiar with the model have worked to spread its use amongst those in higher education by providing workshops at their respective universities and at educational conferences (Hagins, 2016, 2017, 2018). Other supporters have provided informal overviews of the model in teaching-based repositories or other online resources, i.e. The Teaching Professor, Faculty Focus.

In a study on improving online groupwork, Koh et al. (2010) employed a qualitative case study to explore strategies to improve groupwork in online learning environments. The study identified two areas for instructor strategy to focus upon: (1) course design, and (2) groupwork process (Koh et al., 2010). Findings suggested that developing a sense of community by sharing student backgrounds and engaging in social opportunities were emphasized as critical for successful online engagement (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Koh et al., 2010). While this research did not specifically apply the PoEM, much of the results seem to be in alignment with the concepts and approaches inherent in the model.

While not a formal research project, Cannon (2019/2020) praised the process and benefits of the PoEM in a magazine article for C2C Digital Magazine. In the article, she provided

instructional strategies and examples of activities to aid instructors as they applied the PoEM in their online courses. Cannon's (2019/2020) suggested modification of the PoEM based upon course level is of particular interest to this study. According to Cannon (2019/2020), focus can shift from certain Phases to others depending on the course level, type of requirements, and skills progression. For instance, the first three Phases can be heavily emphasized in undergraduate or lower-level courses (connect, communicate, collaboration). For upper-level and graduate courses, the last two Phases can align with the projects and expectations of these types of courses (co-facilitator, continue) (see Figure 2.3).

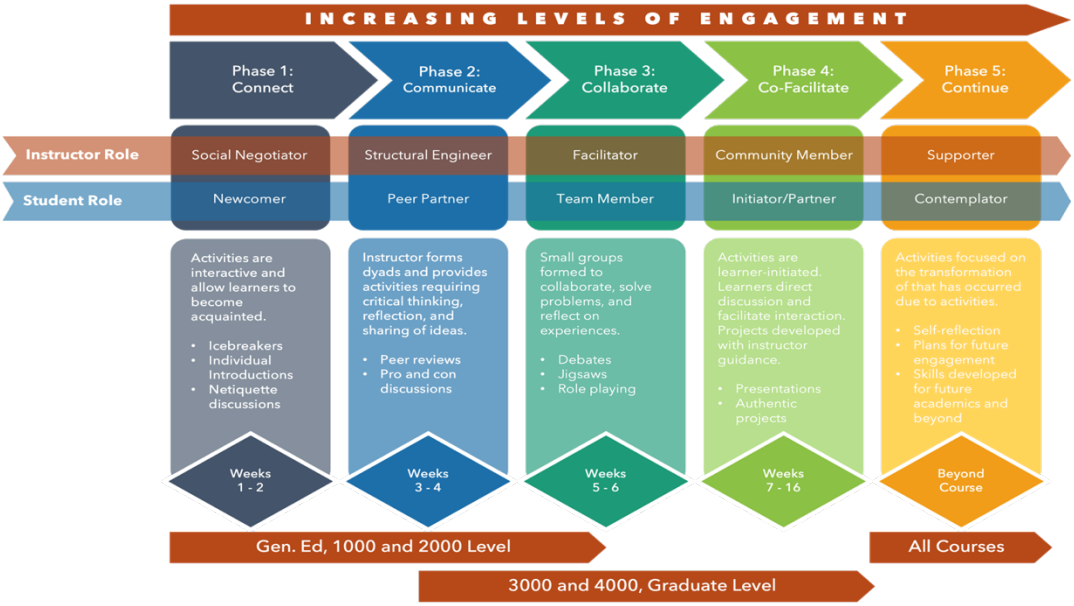

Figure 2.3: Visual of the PoEM applied to course levels. Adapted from Cannon (2019/2020).

The sequence and scaffolding provided by the PoEM goes a long way towards helping students develop trust and collaboration. Cannon (2019/2020) explained, "through taking responsibility for their own learning, feeling accountable to their circumstances while at the same time learning from their peers' ideas and perspectives, and becoming knowledge leaders and creators, students become more engaged in the course and are more likely to persist and succeed" (p. 6).

Lastly, Parra (2011) presented a white paper at the 4th annual SLOAN-C International Conference reflecting her experience scaffolding group work in online courses. While the white paper was not accessible for this study, I located her companion slide deck presentation used at the conference. The PoEM was not specifically applied for this study, rather it was used as a base model from which Parra (2011) worked to develop her own support strategies for online group work. Similarities included the need for engagement amongst students, instructor chosen partners and team building, phases across the semester, and various instructor roles that transitioned over the course of the semester (Parra, 2011). Based on the results of her student survey, participants seemed mostly satisfied with the scaffolding of the group work that Parra (2011) implemented in the course. This instructor-led process resulted in a positive impact on student satisfaction, learning effectiveness, and student success (Parra, 2011).

While this information is helpful, the scope of the research does not include implementing the PoEM specifically. In addition, these resources explore graduate-level online courses. There has been no formal exploration of undergraduate students regarding application of the PoEM. Thus, there is a marked need for further study of implementing the PoEM in online learning environments and as a framework for facilitating undergraduate student populations in higher education.

Conclusion

In this review of literature several features and the importance of the social side of online learning environments were discussed. By exploring how student-to-student relationships may contribute to engagement, social support, collaborative skills, perspectives, and rapport, an argument for the importance of these intertwined elements in creating an engaging and connected online learning environment was established (Archambault et al., 2022; Boyle et al.,

2010; Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Glazier, 2016; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Rovai, 2002). Identifying factors that may affect student-to-student relationships in online learning were also explored. These included: communication, technology, course design, time, and trust (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rovai, 2002). Providing meaningful student-to-student interactions in online learning by focusing on these factors may result in a more holistic and fulfilling learning environment. Such an environment may contribute to student success, retention, persistence, and the achievement of learning outcomes (Archambault et al., 2022; Rovai, 2002; Weidlich et al., 2021). In addition, these approaches may reduce isolation and help students take responsibility for their own learning (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Kelly et al., 2020).

While instructor-to-student engagement is an established marker for course success (Lehman & Conceição, 2010), student-to-student relationships have been recognized as a critical component of the online learning experience and the emphasis of this study (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Gikandi & Morrow, 2016; Greenhow et al., 2022; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). In order to further investigate holistic social experiences conducive for online learning, Social Emotional Learning was explored followed by an overview of the Phases of Engagement Model. By integrating SEL competencies into course activities designed to foster connection and delivering these activities via PoEM, this study seeks to further approaches towards inclusive experiences and reduce negative aspects of online learning environments.

The lack of research in higher education concerning social connections and relationships within a SEL framework in online environments emphasizes the need for additional investigation of this topic. Conducting research and implementing strategies that draw on concepts of relationship development activities in alignment with SEL may present opportunities for

improvement in AOLEs. In addition, applying these strategies using an instructional approach like the PoEM, may afford consistency for future studies. Kaufmann and Vallade (2022) cite a need for research in this area, writing that "the role of instructors in creating spaces where meaningful interpersonal interactions among students can take place (and then getting students to utilize them) has received little to no attention from instructional scholars" (p. 1802). This study is grounded in the literature as it seeks to investigate the perspectives of undergraduate students in an AOLE regarding the impact of required student-to-student relationship development activities on their experiences.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Online learning has been recognized as an essential component of learning in higher education (Garrett et al., 2022). However, criticisms from students and instructors contribute to the commonly held perception that online learning is "less than" traditional face-to-face learning (Croft et al., 2014; Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2016; Shea et al., 2015). While there is substantial literature on factors contributing to lack of persistence and feelings of loneliness amongst online students generally, less research has been dedicated to the study of encouraging connections and relationships between peer students (Meyer, 2014; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Leach & Zepke, 2011; Rovai, 2002). The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of two required student-to-student relationship development activities on student experiences in an asynchronous online learning environment (AOLE). The research question explored in this study was:

How do required student-to-student relationship development activities impact student experiences in asynchronous online learning environments?

Research Context

To investigate the research question, I conducted a qualitative case study during the Fall of 2022. As a qualitative inquiry, the emphasis is on "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). The study was conducted at a large urban research university in the southeast and is considered a commuter campus, where on-campus living is

optional. This university serves a large minority population with 39.5% of students identifying as black or African American, 21.9% of students identifying as white, and 38.6% of students identifying as Asian, Hispanic, Multi-Ethnic, International, and Other (CollegeFactual, 2023).

For this study, I worked closely with the instructor of record as we focused on undergraduate students enrolled in the AOLE, RCJ3000: Research Methods in Criminal Justice. This is a required course for students seeking a degree in Criminal Justice and is offered each semester to 3rd year students. Students are expected to complete each week of content independently and within allocated due dates. Course assessments included weekly homework assignments, a mid-term, and a final. The course does not include collaborative activities that require student groups. As a research methods course, RCJ3000 expects students to understand and apply concepts that may involve analysis and problem-solving as well as complete assessments that require a mixture of recall, application, and synthesis of information. Thus, the course is considered to have moderate rigor.

Since 2018, the instructor of record has been teaching this course in an online format, implementing a total of four sections annually. This comprises two sections in the Fall and two sections in the Spring. On average, this equates to approximately 200 – 220 students annually enrolled in research methods with this instructor. Thus, she is comfortable with the course content, activities, assessments, and schedule. Furthermore, the instructor expressed that research methods is her favorite course to teach, as applied research is her area of expertise. Known for her empathetic and responsive approaches, she has garnered a reputation that attracts a large number of students to her courses. Consequently, there tend to be returning students who are well-acquainted with her teaching style, expectations, and communication protocols. Within the

scope of this study, a minimum of three participants mentioned familiarity with the instructor of record, having previously enrolled in her courses.

The platform for course content, activities, and assessments was the university-supported learning management system (LMS). The LMS is the university's online learning environment, powered by Desire2Learn's Brightspace (D2L, 2022). Supplementary technology for RCJ3000 included the university's supported instance of web conferencing software, WebEx, interactive documents provided by Google®, and a password protected space in an application called Flipgrid (https://www.webex.com/; https://www.google.com/; https://flipgrid.com/).

I selected this context because I sought to understand how two required student-to-student relationship development activities impact undergraduate student experiences. Past and current partnerships with the instructor of record provided access to this specific population in this specific environment. As an employee of the context university, I have familiarity with the functionality and specifications of various technology tools used in online teaching and learning. In my role as an instructional designer, I am tasked with designing and developing AOLEs with faculty partners, all of which use the LMS platform. These relationships have resulted in practical and theoretical knowledge of online learning environments. Thus, this context was not only accessible, but I was confident working in this environment to observe, research, and facilitate the required activities for the study.

Research Design

To explore my research question, I conducted a qualitative case study. This approach allowed me to explore and interpret the experiences and perspectives of the participants. In a case study, "the interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation" (Merriam, 1998). Thus, the experience of

conducting the case study itself provided information and insight. Unlike other types of qualitative research, case studies are "intensive descriptions and analysis of a *single unit* or *bounded system* such as an individual, program, event, group, intervention, or community" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). This methodology supported my interest in developing a deep understanding of subjective interpretations of connection and relationships experienced by undergraduate students in a specific AOLE.

As an instrumental case study, I gained insight into the impact of two required student-to-student relationship development activities by focusing on RCJ3000 (Stake, 1995). This study adopted an interpretivist or constructivist paradigm. Interpretive research assumes "that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). Ontologically, this perspective is one that contends that researchers do not discover knowledge, rather it is constructed through interaction with others in a variety of different ways in individual lives (Creswell, 2014). These multiple realities are context bound and the purpose of this approach is to describe, understand, and interpret the experience of undergraduate students in RCJ3000 (Creswell, 2014). As such, the two required student-to-student relationship development activities were provided to all undergraduate students in the AOLE. These activities were intended to enhance interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities and encourage meaningful interactions between students. After participants completed the activities, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participants over the course of the semester, a research survey was provided to all students, and the opportunity to participate in survey session interviews were provided to all participants.

Following initial interviews with two participants, a research survey was created based on preliminary findings from these sessions. This survey included questions to further substantiate participants' experiences with the required course activities and explore the impact of connections and/or relationships with peers. Of the 50 students enrolled in RCJ3000, 39 participated in the survey. This provided a completion rate of 78%, which resulted in 36 complete responses. A question included in the survey invited participants to complete a 15 to 20-minute interview to discuss the survey results with the researcher. Of the 36 participants that completed the research survey, 12 expressed interest in completing an interview. After scheduling and communications were conducted, this resulted in eight completed interviews. The interview protocol was created from preliminary results of the research survey and contributed to my understanding of student perceptions of the required course activities and how they impacted their experience in RCJ3000 over the course of the semester. Figure 3.1 provides a summary of the study's research design.

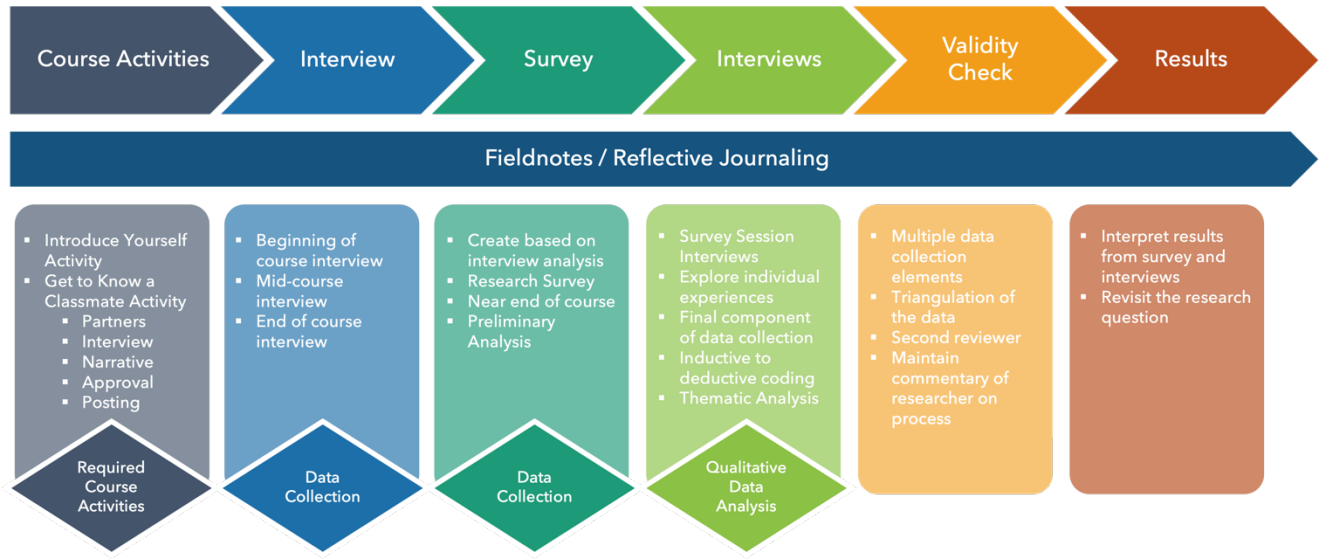

Figure 3.1: Summary of the study's research design.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

This instrumental study employed nonprobability sampling methods. These types of methods "are logical as long as the fieldworker expects mainly to use data not to answer questions like 'how much' and 'how often' but to solve *qualitative* problems, such as discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences" (Honigmann, 1982, p. 84). My goal was to explore the impact of two required relationship development activities in AOLEs with the instruments of measurement being the experiences of students enrolled in such a course. Of nonprobability sampling, purposeful sampling is the most used in qualitative research.

Purposeful sampling is grounded in the assumption that the researcher aims to uncover, comprehend, and gain insights. Therefore, the selection of a sample is undertaken with the intention of maximizing the potential for learning and understanding (Creswell, 2014). Recognizing the importance of selecting information-rich cases for study, I chose RCJ3000 because it offered the potential to yield valuable insights into the central issue aligned with the purpose of my research (Stake, 1995). The participants for this study were chosen as a typical sample combined with convenience sampling. Participation in the study was extended to all students enrolled in the Fall 2022 online section of RCJ3000 offered at the university. The students in the course were indicative of the broader population of students enrolled in online undergraduate courses across the university.

This sample, the methods used to recruit research participants, and the chosen data collection methods, resulted in a large amount of data throughout the duration of this study. These methods included course activities, interviews, and a research survey. Detailed

information regarding participant recruitment and data collection methods are provided in the following section.

Participant Selection

I worked with the instructor of record for RCJ3000 to recruit voluntary participation from the undergraduate students enrolled in RCJ3000 (approximately 50 individuals). I chose to focus on the experiences of undergraduate students for the following reasons. First, the availability of an AOLE with adequate enrollment for the type of study I intended to conduct. Second, the factors influencing student perceptions of the two required relationship development activities in AOLEs was illustrative of many other students' impressions. Third, the students enrolled in RCJ3000 represented a variety of different majors and areas of interest across the university, thus these individuals provided a foundational measure against which I was able to compare student perspectives on relationships and connections in AOLEs.

Participant Recruitment

Every undergraduate student enrolled in RCJ3000 was expected to complete the two required relationship development activities. Their participation in these activities resulted in points for class participation and homework grades. Prior to completing the two required course activities, students were asked if they would like to participate in the research study. The invitation to participate in the study was provided to students using their student email address (see Appendix A). Once I compiled a list of interested participants, I sent them the informed consent, again using their student email address (see Appendix B). The consent was provided as a link to a Qualtrics survey and as a PDF attachment to their student email account.

From that point forward, I contacted the participants to schedule the interviews as part of the research study. While the interviews were estimated to require time and resources on the part

of the researcher, I understood that up to three hours of interviewing was a commitment for the participants as well. As busy students with lives outside of school, I wanted to be cognizant of their time and obligations. Upon concluding the third and final interview, I provided each participant with a $20.00 digital gift card as an incentive. This card was provided via a download link sent to their student email address.

Following the initial interviews, I determined that additional student experience data was necessary. Using the preliminary analysis from the initial interviews, a research survey was created and provided to all students enrolled in RCJ3000. This voluntary research survey was provided to students as an HTML content page in the course and sent to students using the announcement tool (see Appendix C). As incentive for completing the research survey, students were offered four extra credit points added to their final grade in the course. An alternative activity was provided for those students that did not wish to participate in the research survey for an equivalent amount of extra credit. One of the final questions in the survey asked participants if they would be willing to engage in a 15-20 minute interview with the researcher to discuss survey findings. Participants that agreed to and completed this interview were provided with a $10.00 digital gift card as an incentive. The participant criteria for this study were limited to undergraduate students enrolled in the Fall 2022 section of RCJ3000.

Data Collection

This instrumental case study collected various types of data for analysis. This contributed to triangulation as defined by Farmer et al. (2006) as “a methodological approach that contributes to the validity of research results when multiple methods, sources, theories, and/or investigators are employed” (p. 377). As previously discussed, the study used two required course activities designed to foster relationships in AOLEs, a research survey, and qualitative

semi-structured interviews as data instruments. Using this research design, information from the activities were reviewed first, which contributed to the first interview protocol. The results from the research survey were used to substantiate researcher-generated data from the preliminary semi-structured interviews and the survey session interviews. Information related to each type of data collection are included in the following sections.

Course Activities

The activities for this study were inspired by the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) framework (CASEL, 2022) and delivered using The Phases of Engagement Model (PoEM) (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012) to encourage connection and relationships in AOLEs. As such, the activities were required for all students and took place during the first few weeks of the course. There were two required activities with tasks for completion associated with each. They included: (1) Introduce Yourself FlipGrid Activity (IYFG), and (2) Get to Know a Classmate Activity (GTKAC). An overview of each of the course activities are provided below.

Introduce Yourself FlipGrid Activity. This activity required students to log in to a password protected Flipgrid (https://info.flipgrid.com/). Once logged in, they were asked to record a brief video introduction and post it to the Flipgrid board (see Appendix D). This activity occurred asynchronously.

The IYFG activity was intended to encourage the following SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness (CASEL, 2022). This activity aligned with Phase 1, student as newcomer, according to the PoEM (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012). Phase 1 states that "instructor provides activities that are interactive and that help learners get to know one another" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 9). By providing a video recording, students engaged in self-disclosure using audio and video technologies. Students were encouraged to

view the videos submitted by their classmates and, if so inclined, provide commentary. This was intended to promote interactions and encourage social presence and engagement between students.

Get to Know a Classmate Activity. This activity was comprised of two parts, part 1 was a synchronous conversation with a classmate and part 2 was a writing assignment based upon part 1. Part 1 of the activity asked researcher assigned student partners to engage in a synchronous session using the university supported video conferencing tool, WebEx or a comparable tool of their choice (https://www.webex.com/). Student partners worked together to determine a time to meet that was conducive to both their schedules. To begin, one student served as the interviewer or conversation starter. In this role, the student either used a list of conversational prompts (see Appendix E) or relied on a natural communicative flow for the session. Upon conclusion of the first student's questions, the other student had a chance to ask questions and become the interviewer. This portion of the GTKAC activity was intended to promote empathy, presence and understanding between partners through storytelling and conversation (Lowenthal et al., 2020; Mancino, 2011). When the conversation ended, students exited the video conferencing tool and began the second part of the activity.

Part 2 of the GTKAC activity required students to write a short biographical narrative about their partner based on the information they gathered in part 1. The biographical nature of the writing assignment was intended to provide opportunity for students to "think about the other" or "walk in another's shoes" (Conley, 2015; Elias et al., 1997). Activities like this can be effective in promoting connections and engagement (Biber, 2020; Lawlor, 2016; Manney, 2008).

In addition, this was an opportunity for students to share their personal backgrounds and experiences informally in order to encourage social presence and camaraderie (Koh et al., 2010;

Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Shea et al., 2022; Weidlich et al., 2021). When students completed their biographical narrative about their partner, they were required to share their writing with their partner via email for review, accuracy, comments, and approval. Once their partner approved the narrative, students posted their writing to a class-wide online discussion forum. While students were encouraged to read their peers' biographical narratives, this was not a requirement (see Appendix F).

The GTKAC activity was intended to encourage the following SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2022). This activity aligned with Phase 2, student as cooperator, according to the PoEM (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012). Phase 2 states that "instructor forms dyads of learners and provides activities that require critical thinking, reflection, and sharing of ideas" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 9). By taking time to engage in face-to-face or audio-only conversation, students were able to listen, reflect, and engage with their partners.

The motivation behind informing students that their partner would be writing about them was intended to encourage mindful sharing of insights and engaging respectfully with each other. In addition, RCJ3000 was a research methods course, hence, the activity further contributed to student understanding of the interview process as a data collection method. Figure 3.2 provides an overview of each of the course activities and how they aligned with SEL competencies (CASEL, 2022) and the PoEM (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012).

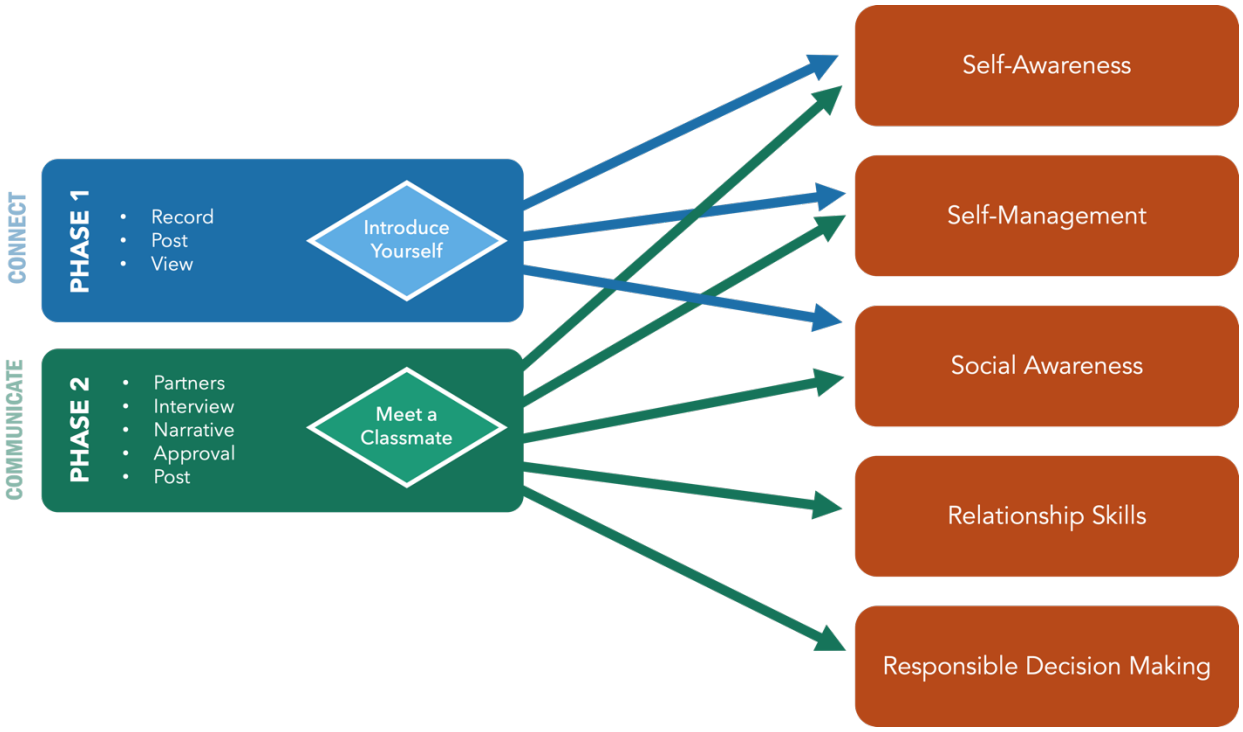

Figure 3.2: Overview of required course activities aligned with SEL and the PoEM.

Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews

Kvale (1996) characterized qualitative interviews as a space where two or more individuals engage in discussions on a topic of shared interest, contributing to the construction of knowledge. I chose semi-structured interviews due to their flexibility and real-time ability to further probe a specific topic to encourage deeper conversation with participants. Roulston (2010) wrote that for semi-structured interviews "the protocol is used as a guide and questions may not be asked in the same order; the interviewer initiates questions and poses follow-up 'probes' in response to interviewee's descriptions and accounts" (p. 14). This study comprised two distinct sessions of interviews. The first interview session (semester sessions) involved meeting with the same participant three times over the course of the semester (beginning-of-course, mid-course, and end-of-course). The second session (survey sessions) encompassed

survey participants willing to discuss the survey results for approximately 15 to 20 minutes (end-of-course). Both sessions are discussed in the sections that follow.

Semester Sessions. Due to the repetitive nature of these interviews, I worked to create a professional relationship with interview participants. This relationship was intended to be one in which they were comfortable sharing their lived experience as well as revealing their views and opinions (Creswell, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Each of these interview sessions was conducted via the university supported video conferencing tool, WebEx and were recorded. I did not engage in note taking during the sessions. This allowed me to focus on the participant, continue to develop rapport, and engage in dialogue as it unfolded. Each session lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, and I employed iterative interview protocols built upon findings from each session (see Appendices G, H, I). Based upon findings and reflections of each interview session, I revised the subsequent protocols accordingly.

Survey Sessions. These interviews took place following the research survey and asked questions pertaining to the preliminary results. While these interviews did not exceed 20 minutes in length, they resulted in rich, descriptive data that furthered my understanding of student experiences in RCJ3000. These interviews compiled a diverse group of participants and assisted in further substantiation of the survey results. The interview protocol was consistent across each session (see Appendix J).

Research Survey

Survey design provides "a description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (Creswell, 2014, p. 155). The survey was provided to students near the end of the semester (November 2022). It was distributed using a Qualtrics link embedded in an HTML content page, using the announcements tool, and was voluntarily

completed by students. The survey was comprised of Likert scale, multiple-choice, multi-select, ranking, and open-ended questions about the two required relationship development activities, connections with peers, and individual experiences. The survey data served to substantiate the data received from the semester session interviews and provided a more in-depth understanding of student experiences in the AOLE (see Appendix K).

Fieldnotes/Reflective Journal

Writing fieldnotes can strengthen the relationship between the researcher's experience and what is happening throughout a study (Emerson et al., 1995). The writing of fieldnotes "encourages experiential education students to observe more finely and systematically, to consider both the mundane and the dramatic, and to attend to others' activities and concerns as closely as their own" (Emerson et al., 2003, p. xxi). I kept a reflection journal and used reflexive memos to document information and key points throughout the data gathering and analysis process.

These documents included brief synopsis of the work used to code data as well as record my preliminary analysis. For example, following each interview, the jotting of emotions, non-verbal cues from participants, and other points of interest furthered my understanding of participant and researcher experiences. I used memos to develop questions, brainstorm ideas, work through concerns, and attempt to stay aware of my own bias. In qualitative research, “[r]ather than trying to eliminate biases or ‘subjectivities,’ it is important to identify them and monitor them in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher’s own interests, to make clear how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of the data” (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016. p. 16). My purpose for using this type of introspective

documentation was to be transparent about the study direction in addition to providing an audit trail for other researchers to review, substantiate or refine my process.

Data Analysis

In this study, I analyzed various forms of data using a qualitative approach. The survey was interpreted on a question by question basis, while the open-ended questions and interviews were subject to iterative thematic analysis. Further information about this process is presented in the following sections.

Data Organization

For the analysis process, I created a repository to organize and prepare my data for analysis. Upon identifying participants, I created a password protected folder on my computer to serve as the storage device for securing participant profiles, contact information, and responses throughout the study (Paulus et al., 2015). I used a standard naming convention to organize documents that included the collection date and a brief description of the data (e.g., "maire_I1_09152022). This information remained in the password protected folder for archival purposes until completion of the study.

Next, copies of the data were imported as "Documents" into MAXQDA for inclusion in the data analysis process. Document names used the standard naming convention described above, and I used the memo field to summarize the contents of each document. The organization and labeling process ensured access to pieces of the data at any given time (Paulus et al., 2015).

Documents were further organized into folders in MAXQDA; the purpose of folders was to collect and organize documents for retrieval, and in support of the analysis process. Folder names described the types of documents included in the file (e.g., Interviews). See Figure 3.3 for an example of the document folder organization and naming conventions in MAXQDA.

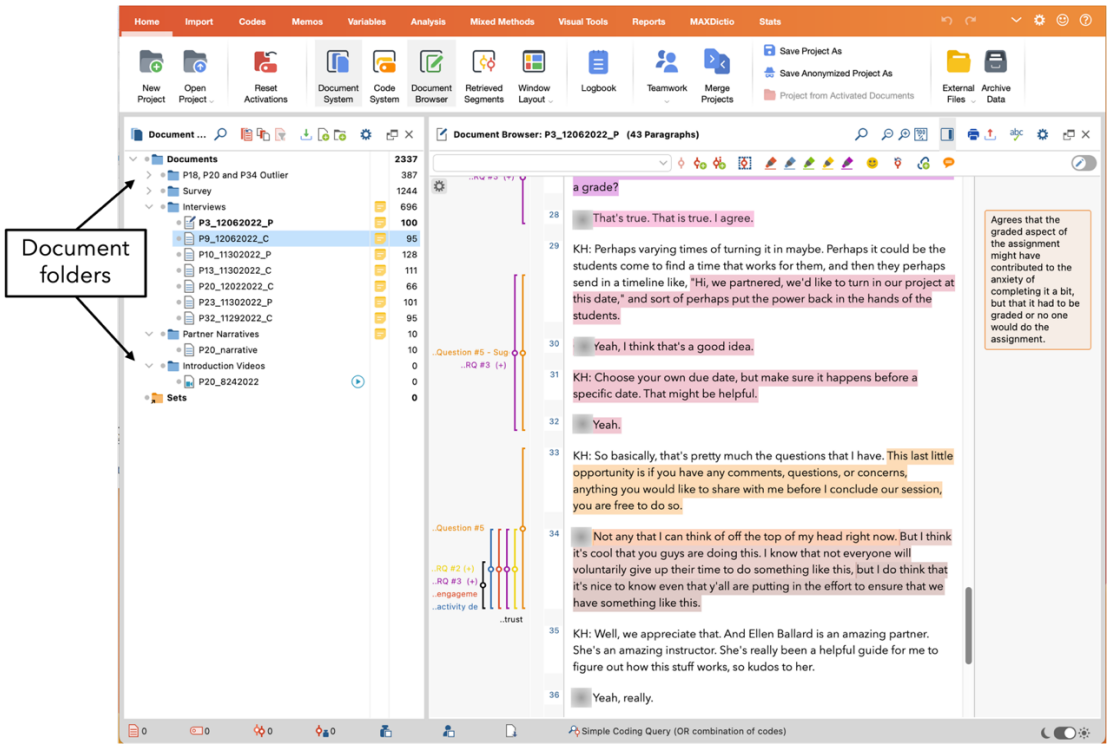

Figure 3.3: Document folders and organization with naming conventions in MAXQDA.

Codes developed during qualitative analysis were documented in MAXQDA and stored in the Code System. Codes were provided with descriptive names (e.g., “future goals”), a corresponding color, and the memo feature provided a more detailed description (e.g., “future goals and/or desires of participants”). Code sets were used to delineate coding for different data instruments and to keep track of progressive coding over time. Folders within the code sets aided in retrieval and analysis. Codes were then arranged into categories as insights and meaning were formulated (Saldana, 2014). A useful feature of MAXQDA was the ability to “activate” certain documents within groups and certain code or category sets. This allowed the researcher to focus solely on specific codes and categories across all the data sets. See an example of an activated category in Figure 3.4.

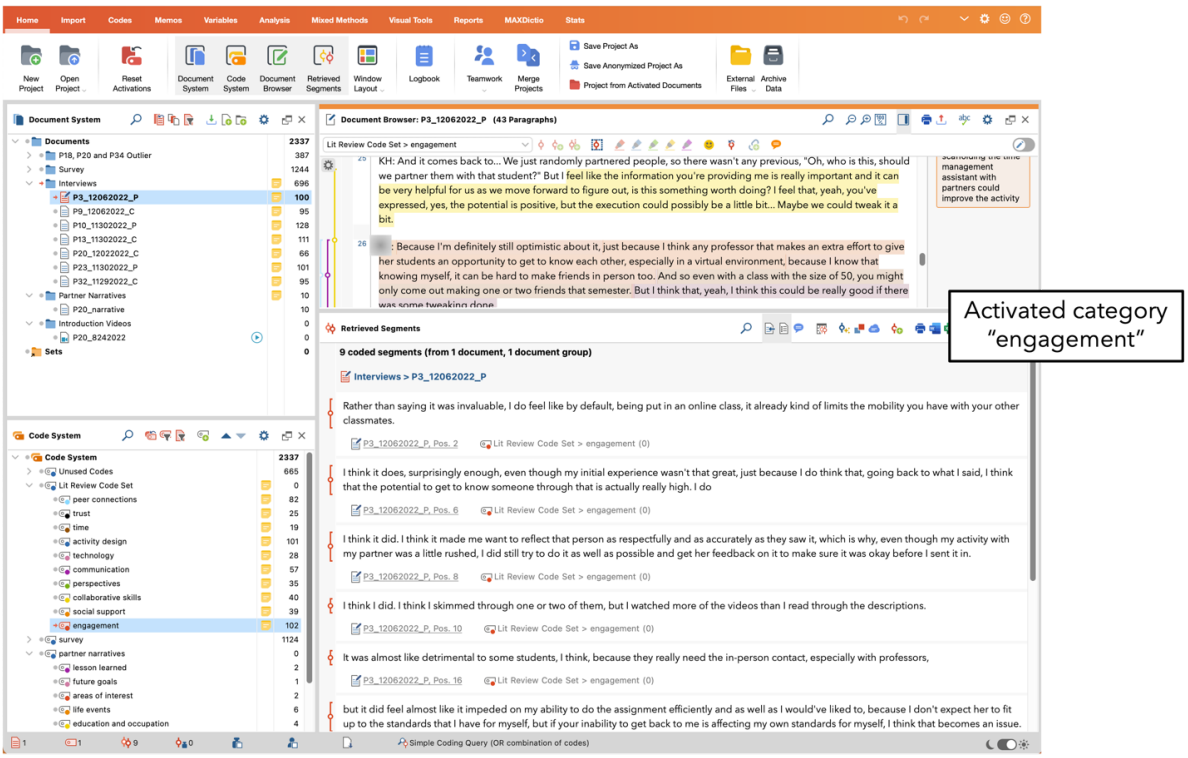

Figure 3.4: Activated category of "engagement" in MAXQDA.

Process for Analyzing the Interview Data

Qualitative interview audio transcripts were generated using a combination of the recording transcripts feature in WebEx and purchasing professional transcription services from Rev (https://www.rev.com/). Due to the amount of interview hours and time available to conduct analysis, there were constraints for transcribing the interviews myself. Once I received the transcriptions, they were downloaded into a password protected folder on my computer. To confirm the transcripts were correct, I listened to the audio while reading the transcripts and corrected any identified errors. Transcripts were then imported as Documents into MAXQDA for analysis and organized into the correct folder (e.g., "Interviews"). Each transcript was named according to the study's standard naming convention (e.g., evere_12082022), and the memo feature was used to describe the contents of the documents.

To analyze the data, I engaged in an inductive and comparative review of the data, developing a set of codes, which translated into categories and then organized into themes (Saldaña, 2014). The process of developing codes was conducted simultaneously via MAXQDA, Google Sheets®, and by hand. Once a code was identified, I added it into MAXQDA as necessary according to the software conventions. This involved selecting a specific Document, opening the Code System, reading, and reviewing the Document, creating codes in the Code System, and entering comments for each code to describe its intended purpose. In most cases, a larger group of Code Groups was created to further organize codes within codes.

Lastly, I moved from inductive to deductive analysis of the data by identifying evidence in support of my final set of categories until I reached a sense of saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To obtain saturation, I read each interview transcript once before creating codes. Coding the data began during the second read-through of the interview transcripts. A third review of each transcript provided coding consistency within and between each interview transcript. At the end of the coding process, I reviewed my codes with my literature review and my research question to ensure consistency and alignment. The next step involved organizing the codes into categories. This entailed combining "the most seemingly alike things into the most seemingly alike groups" and then identifying themes (Saldana, 2014, p.12).

Process for Analyzing Research Survey

Survey data was downloaded from Qualtrics into an Excel (.xlsx) spreadsheet format, cleaned of identifying data and incomplete responses and then, uploaded into MAXQDA. I saved the original survey data using the previously mentioned naming convention to the password protected folder for archival purposes.

I analyzed the Likert scale data by the frequency of responses and the percentage of participants for each of the questions. The Likert data was generally described as follows: not satisfied at all, somewhat satisfied, neutral, satisfied, and very satisfied. Then, I chunked the data into lower and higher ends of the scale. Using this method, I determined the majority of responses from each question and explored outliers. The open-ended questions were manually coded and calculated using inductive and then deductive thematic coding in MAXQDA.

I used PowerPoint to create visual representations of thematic analysis in addition to tables of each of the responses when applicable. These outputs and visual examples were used to interpret the preliminary findings from the activities and augment the observations, documents, and interview data. The initial findings from the survey were used to create the interview protocol for the survey session interviews.

Validity and Reliability

In this study, several strategies were employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the research, which are also referred to as credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Saldaña, 2014). Achieving validity and reliability in qualitative research entails clearly describing data analysis methods, substantiating findings, and supporting results with specific evidence (Saldaña, 2014). To enhance the validity of findings, direct quotes from participants were integrated to accurately portray their perspectives. Rigorous qualitative practices were also applied to "meaningfully interconnect literature, research, questions, and interpretations with each other" (Tracy, 2013, p. 230).

Another way to demonstrate validity in qualitative research is by dedicating sufficient time and intentionally seeking diversity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was pursued by incorporating insights from the

literature and leveraging my professional expertise as an instructional designer. Additionally, reliability was promoted through a comprehensive and transparent description of research processes. Approximately five months were devoted to data collection, complimented by over two years establishing a relationship with the instructor of record, which further contributed to the study's validity and reliability.

Data collection from various sources, including course activities, interviews, a research survey, and informal fieldnotes/reflection journal, were implemented to enhance internal validity. Dr. Janette Hill, a faculty member at UGA, served as the principal investigator, functioning as the peer examiner and assisting in clarifying researcher bias and the overall process.

In qualitative research, achieving reliability is an ongoing, iterative process that can never be fully realized. This is because replicating a study will not result in similar findings due to the dynamic nature of socially constructed understandings, which are always evolving and inherently partial (Tracy, 2013). "Even if the study were repeated (by the same researcher, in the same manner, in the same context, and with the same participants), the context and participants would have necessarily transformed over time – through aging, learning, or moving on" (Tracy, 2013, p. 229). However, this does not lessen the importance of the original study, and interpretations of the same data can persist until new research presents a different set of dependable findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

The proposed research design and activities associated with this study were reviewed and approved by the UGA Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix L), the context university's IRB, and the instructor of record in RCJ3000 prior to data collection. It was

determined that the risk for harm to participants was minimal. However, transparency on the part of the researcher to disclose the purpose of the study, research reciprocity for participants, maintaining confidentiality, using pseudonyms, and obtaining informed consent were essential steps in ensuring minimal harm.

Explanation of Study Purpose

To ensure that participants understood the purpose of the study, recruitment messages, interview protocols, and the survey instrument were vetted by the UGA IRB, context IRB, and instructor of record for RCJ3000 prior to distribution. Information about the study's purpose, criteria for participation, activities, incentives, methods of data gathering, and how findings would be presented were included in several locations and repeated for participants. Additionally, contact information for the researchers were provided to participants in recruitment emails, course HTML content pages, course announcements, and in the survey in the event they had questions at any point during the study.

At the beginning of each interview session, I provided a brief introduction where I presented myself and explained the purpose of the study. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before I began recording the interview session and were encouraged to ask questions during and after the interview session as needed.

Research Reciprocity

The primary benefit for participation in this study was the contribution to ongoing research in student-to-student relationships and connections in AOLEs. Throughout the study, the importance of candor and the value of participant experience and perspective were emphasized. This was emphasized in the recruitment materials, announcements, HTML content pages, and survey introduction. During the interview sessions, I explained how the study's

results would be published and available in the UGA Libraries dissertation database, ProQuest. Participants were able to receive up to $30.00 in incentives and four extra credit points added to their final grade as a thank you for engaging in research activities.

Potential Risks

The anticipated risks to participants were determined to be minimal. The disclosure of personally identifiable information being of most concern. Information including names, demographics, external obligations, and personal experiences were self-disclosed by participants as part of the study's data collection and required protection. This identifying information was securely stored in a password-protected folder, and it will be permanently destroyed three years after the completion of this study. Additionally, pseudonyms were used to ensure that identifying information was not disclosed as part of the study's results. This process was shared with participants in the consent form and discussed during the interview introductions.

Obtaining Informed Consent

The informed consent for this study did not require a signature from participants. Rather, participants answered affirmative in the electronic informed consent sections in both the initial consent survey and the research survey in Qualtrics. Participants were also informed that they were free to discontinue participation at any time. Contact information for the researchers was included in case participants had questions prior to providing their consent. The Qualtrics link to the informed consent form was sent via email following student interest in participating in the study. The form was also included as an email attachment (PDF) for participants' records. They completed this form by clicking "I agree."

For the research survey, the first question provided the informed consent and participants had to click "I agree" prior to accessing the survey questions. Opportunities to ask questions

were provided throughout the process and interview recording did not commence until participants indicated that they were ready for the interview to proceed.

Researcher Subjectivity

This study was influenced by my professional experience and interests. In addition to being a doctoral candidate, I am also an instructional designer at the context university. As such, I view the world from a particular lens. Specifically, the realm of online course design and development. As an instructional designer, it was challenging to approach this project as an objective researcher. My expertise has been built in practical applications, rather than consistent explorations of underlying theories. As the designer of the two required course activities, I encountered my own bias towards the perceived effectiveness and outcomes of the activities. On several occasions, I inadvertently tended to emphasize positive outcomes, leading to an initial overreach of the study results. My advisor played a crucial role in guiding me toward a more objective stance and provided support as I navigated the recognition of this bias.

I have worked to design and develop numerous asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid and face-to-face learning experiences for undergraduate, graduate, and professional students since 2014. Creating learning environments that are student focused and humanistic is a passion of mine. This passion extends to working with faculty partners as they move from the familiarity of traditional teaching and learning to the murky waters of online. A vital aspect of my position is meeting faculty where they are and encouraging a collaborative relationship built upon trust, vulnerability, and empathy.

Often, I become the de facto counselor, listener, and ultimately friend of most individuals I have the pleasure to work alongside. In many ways, this relationship building has become the keystone to what I do and something that I enjoy. As such, I have developed a deep belief in the

power of relationships and connections with others. This study is an opportunity to try and provide such potential for students in ever-isolating AOLEs. In addition, this study is meant to broaden my understanding and contribute to the field of learning, design, and technology.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the qualitative design of this case study was described, including context, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis methods. To support the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the data, a number of measures were employed that included peer review, data triangulation, investigator credibility, pseudonyms, and an iterative analysis and review process. Ethical considerations were addressed along with researcher's subjectivity. In the next chapter, I present the survey findings resulting from this process.

CHAPTER 4

SURVEY FINDINGS

Introduction

This study explored how required student-to-student relationship development activities impacted student experience in an asynchronous online learning environment (AOLE). In this chapter, results from the research survey data collected during Fall 2022 are presented. The research survey, offered near the end-of-semester, was comprised of Likert scale, multiple choice, ranking, multi-select, and open-ended questions. For the Likert scale data, I explored the numbers in each category and then organized the data into the lower and higher ends of the scale.

The results were grouped into five sections: (1) survey participant demographics, (2) importance of relationships in online courses, (3) required course activities and connections with classmates, (4) the Get to Know a Classmate activity (GTKAC) and connections with classmates, and (5) themes from open-ended questions. Participant response data was provided in the open-ended question section and pseudonyms were employed to protect participant identity. A summary of the overarching themes that emerged from the survey are also provided.

Survey Participant Demographics

The research survey was provided to all undergraduate students enrolled in the Fall 2022 section of RCJ3000: Research Methods in Criminal Justice ($n = 50$). Participant responses were collected over a period of 14 days. A total of 36 (72%) survey responses were included in the analysis for the study; 35 participants provided demographic data. Respondents were predominantly female ($n = 27$, 77%), Black or African American ($n = 14$, 40%), age range of 18

– 24 (*n* = 29, 83%), were in their third year of school (*n* = 18, 51%), were taking a full-time course load of 12 hours or more (*n* = 31, 86%), preferred a mixture of on-campus and online classes (*n* = 18, 51%), and had additional responsibilities while obtaining a degree (*n* = 34, 97%) responses). Table 4.1 provides the participant demographics breakdown in greater detail.

Table 4.1

Survey Participant Demographics

Variable	Participants (*n*)	Percentage (*N* = 35)
Gender		
Female	27	77%
Male	7	20%
Non-Binary/non-conforming	1	2.9%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	7	20%
Black or African American	14	40%
Hispanic or Latino	3	8.6%
White	6	17%
Other	4	11.4%
Prefer not to answer	1	2.9%
Age Range		
18 – 24	29	83%
25 – 30	4	11.4%
31 – 35	2	5.7%
Year in School		
Second year	7	20%
Third year	18	51%
Fourth year	8	23%
Fifth year +	2	5.7%
Current Course Load		
Part-time	4	11.4%
Full-time	31	89%
Preferred Modality		
Face-to-face classes on campus	1	2.9%
Online classes	14	40%
Mixture of on-campus and online classes	18	51%
No preference	2	5.7%
*Additional Responsibilities		
I am a caregiver	3	--
I work full-time	17	--
I work part-time	12	--
I parent with a partner	1	--
Other	6	--

**Participants were instructed to choose all that apply for this variable*

The Importance of Relationships in Online Courses

Participants were asked to indicate the importance of a relationship with (1) the instructor, (2) the teaching assistant or GRA, and (3) a classmate in asynchronous online learning

environments prior to taking RCJ3000. On a Likert scale from not at all important to very important, the 36 participant responses regarding a relationship with the instructor were distributed as follows: not at all important (*n* = 1), somewhat important (*n* = 6), neutral (*n* = 6), important (*n* = 15), and very important (*n* = 8). Responses indicated that most participants considered a relationship with the instructor as important (*n* = 20, 56%).

Participant responses regarding a relationship with a teaching assistant or GRA were distributed as follows: not important at all (*n* = 7), somewhat important (*n* = 4), neutral (*n* = 11), important (*n* = 9), or very important (*n* = 5). While 14 participants considered a relationship with the teaching assistant or GRA to be important (39%). The data seemed to indicate that most participants considered this relationship not important or neutral (*n* = 22, 61%).

Participants responses regarding a relationship with a classmate were distributed as follows: not at all important (*n* = 9), somewhat important (*n* = 4), neutral (*n* = 8), important (*n* = 7), or very important (*n* = 8). While 36% of participants indicated lower importance for this relationship, data indicated that participants considered a relationship with a classmate to have higher importance (*n* = 15, 42%).

Overall, a relationship with the instructor had the most in the category of important with 15 (42%), a relationship with the teaching assistant or GRA had the most in neutral with 11 (31%), and a relationship with a classmate had the most in the category of not at all important with nine (25%). The data seemed to reveal that all three relationship categories had some level of importance for most participants prior to taking RCJ3000, with the instructor being the most important (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

Importance of specific relationships in online courses

A relationship…	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Neutral	Important	Very important
with the instructor	1	6	6	15	8
with a teaching assistant or GRA	7	4	11	9	5
with a classmate	9	4	8	7	8

Next, participants were asked to indicate their interest in making new relationships following the pandemic of 2020 using a Likert scale of no interest at all to very interested. Participant responses regarding interest in making new relationships following the pandemic of 2020 were distributed as follows: no interest (n = 3), somewhat interested (n = 7), neutral (n = 11), interested (n = 9), and very interested (n = 6). The greatest number of participants chose the category of neutral with 11 (31%), the next highest category was interested with 9 (25%), and the third highest category was somewhat interested with 7 (19%).

Overall, ten participants did not seem interested in forming new relationships (28%) and 11 participants indicated neutral (31%). The data revealed that many participants had some level of interest in forming new relationships following the pandemic of 2020 (n = 15, 42%). Table 4.3 provides this information in further detail.

Table 4.3

Interest in new relationships following the pandemic of 2020

	No interest at all	Somewhat interested	Neutral	Interested	Very interested
Participant Responses (n), (N = 36)	3, 8.3%	7, 19.4%	11, 31%	9, 25%	6, 17%

As a follow up to this question, participants were asked “has it been easier, mostly the same, or harder for you to make new relationships following the pandemic of 2020?” Half of the

participants indicated that “it has been harder to make new relationships following the pandemic of 2020” (50%), ten participants indicated “it has been mostly the same to make new relationships following the pandemic of 2020” (28%), and eight participants indicated that “it has been easier to make relationships to make new relationships following the pandemic of 2020” (22%). The data revealed that half of the participants found it harder to form new relationships following the pandemic of 2020 (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

Difficulty making new relationships following the pandemic of 2020

Following the pandemic of 2020…	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 36)
it has been easier to make new relationships	8, 22%
it has been mostly the same to make new relationships	10, 28%
it has been harder to make new relationships	18, 50%

Course Activities and Connections with Classmates

As part of this study, students were required to complete course activities designed to assist with fostering a relationship or connection with a classmate. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which the two activities resulted in a connection with their partner using a Likert scale from no connection at all to high connection. Regarding the Introduce Yourself FlipGrid activity (IYFG), participant responses were distributed as follows: no connection at all (*n* = 9), somewhat of a connection (*n* = 13), neutral (*n* = 6), connection (*n* = 7), and high connection (*n* = 1). According to responses, most participants indicated low levels of connection with their classmate(s) resultant from the IYFG activity (*n* = 22, 61%).

Participant responses regarding the Get to Know a Classmate activity (GTKAC) were distributed as follows: no connection at all (*n* = 6), somewhat of a connection (*n* = 10), neutral (*n* = 7), connection (*n* = 6), and high connection (*n* = 7). While 36% of participants indicated high

levels of connection for the activity, data revealed that most participants indicated low levels of connection with their classmate(s) resultant from the GTKAC activity (*n* = 16, 44%).

While the data revealed that both activities resulted in low levels of connection with classmate(s), the IYFG activity provided low levels of connection for more participants than the GTKAC activity. Table 4.5 provides this information in further detail.

Table 4.5

Required activities and resulting level of connection with classmate(s)

	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 36)				
Activity	No connection at all	Somewhat of a connection	Neutral	Connection	High connection
Introduce Yourself FlipGrid Activity	9, 25%	13, 36%	6, 17%	7, 19%	1, 2.8%
Get to Know a Classmate Activity	6, 17%	10, 28%	7, 19%	6, 17%	7, 19%

Next, participants were asked to share how many of their classmates' IYFG activity videos they viewed as part of the activity, these were located in FlipGrid. Participant responses were distributed across the following categories: 0 or just my own video (*n* = 6), 1 – 3 videos (*n* = 14), 4 – 6 videos (*n* = 10), 7 – 10 videos (*n* = 5), 11 – 15 videos (*n* = 1), half of the videos (at least 22 videos) (*n* = 0), and I watched all of the videos (42 videos) (*n* = 0). The data revealed that most participants watched some of their classmates' FlipGrid videos (*n* = 30, 83%). On average, participants viewed 3.7 IYFG activity videos. Table 4.6 provides this information in further detail.

Table 4.6

Number of classmate videos viewed during IYFG activity

# of Videos Viewed	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 36)
0 or just my own video	6, 17%
1 – 3 videos	14, 39%
4 – 6 videos	10, 28%
7 – 10 videos	5, 14%
11 – 15 videos	1, 2.8%
Half of the videos (at least 22 videos)	0
I watched all of the videos (42 videos)	0

Participants were then asked to share how many of their classmates' biographical narratives they read as part of the GTKAC activity, these were in a discussion board. Participant responses were distributed across the following categories: 0 or just my own (*n* = 8), 1 – 3 stories (*n* = 20), 4 – 6 stories (*n* = 7), 7 – 10 stories (*n* = 1), half of the stories (at least 15 stories) (*n* = 0), and I read all of the stories (31 stories) (*n* = 0). The data revealed that most participants read some of their classmates' biographical narratives (*n* = 28, 78%). On average participants read 2.3 GTKAC activity narratives. Table 4.7 provides this information in further detail.

Table 4.7

Number of classmate biographical narratives read during the GTKAC activity

# of Narratives Read	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 36)
0 or just my own	8, 22%
1 – 3 stories	20, 56%
4 – 6 stories	7, 19%
7 – 10 stories	1, 2.8%
Half of the stories (at least 15)	0
I watched all of the stories (31 stories)	0

It was not explicit in the instructions for students to view their assigned partner's FlipGrid video prior to meeting them for the GTKAC activity, however they were asked if they did so as part of the survey. 15 participants indicated that they viewed their partner's video

(42%), 19 participants did not view their partner's video (53%), and 2 participants indicated that their partner did not submit a video (5.5%). The data revealed that most participants did not view their assigned partner's FlipGrid video prior to the GTKAC activity (see Table 4.8).

Table 4.8

Number of participants that viewed their partner's video prior to GTKAC activity

Viewing of Videos	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 36)
Yes, I watched my partner's video	15, 42%
No, I did not watch my partner's video	19, 53%
My partner did not submit a video	2, 5.5%

The next question asked participants if they partnered with a student or with the instructor to complete the GTKAC activity. In a few cases, students were partnered with the instructor. It was necessary to remove those instances from analysis. All 36 participant responses included for analysis confirmed that they were partnered with a classmate.

As part of the GTKAC activity, students were provided a conversational prompt containing questions to ask their partner during the synchronous audio or video session. The use of this prompt was not required. Participants were asked if they used the prompt or not during the GTKAC activity. Responses indicated that 30 participants used the prompt (83%), four participants did not use the prompt (11%), and two participants did not meet with their partner to complete the activity (5.5%).

The two participants that did not meet with their partner were asked to answer the following question: "if you did not meet with your partner using audio or video, how did you work together to complete the assignment? (Please choose all that apply)." One participant indicated they used "email exchanges" and the other participant used "text messages or chat" to

complete the assignment. The data indicated that most participants used the prompt during the GTKAC activity (see Table 4.9).

Table 4.9

Use of conversational prompts during the GTKAC activity

Use of Prompts	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 36)
Yes, I used the prompts	30, 83%
No, I did not use the prompts	4, 11%
I did not meet with my partner	2, 5.5%

Participants were then asked to share the amount of time spent talking with their partner during the synchronous audio or video session. The responses from 34 participants were distributed across the following categories: less than 5 minutes (*n* = 3), more than 10 minutes (*n* = 7), more than 15 minutes (*n* = 7), more than 25 minutes (*n* = 3), more than 30 minutes (*n* = 5), and more than 40 minutes (*n* = 9). The data revealed that 39% of participants met with their partner for a longer period of time than the recommended time of 20 – 30 minutes (*n* = 14, 39%) (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10

Time spent talking with partner during audio or video session

Time Range	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 34)
Less than 5 minutes	3, 8.8%
More than 10 minutes	7, 21%
More than 15 minutes	7, 21%
More than 25 minutes	3, 8.8%
More than 30 minutes	5, 15%
More than 40 minutes	9, 26%

As part of the GTKAC activity, students were asked to write a biographical narrative about their partner's life based on the information they gathered during the synchronous audio or video session. Participants were asked the following question: "how satisfied were you with the

story your partner wrote about you?" Using a Likert scale from not satisfied at all to very satisfied, or "I have not read my partner's story," participant responses were distributed across the following categories: not satisfied at all (n = 0), somewhat satisfied (n = 2), neutral (n = 7), satisfied (n = 11), and very satisfied (n = 16). One participant indicated that they did not read their partner's story (n = 1). The data revealed that most participants were either satisfied or very satisfied with the story that their partner wrote about them (n = 27, 75%) (see Table 4.11).

Table 4.11

Participant satisfaction with biographical narrative written by their partner

Likert Scale	Participant Responses (n), (N = 36)
Not satisfied at all	0
Somewhat satisfied	1, 2.7%
Neutral	7, 19%
Satisfied	11, 31%
Very satisfied	16, 44%
I have not read my partner's story	1, 2.7%

Next, participants were asked if they would like more activities like the GTKAC activity in asynchronous online courses. Responses from 36 participants were distributed across the following: 14 indicated yes (39%), 11 indicated no (31%), and 11 indicated neutral (31%). The data indicated that slightly more participants wanted more activities like the GTKAC activity (n = 14, 39%).

The GTKAC Activity and Connections with Partners

Participants were asked, "did the Get to Know a Classmate Activity result in a connection or relationship between you and your partner?" Of the 36 responses, ten participants indicated yes (28%), and 26 participants indicated no (72%). The data revealed that most participants did not have a connection or relationship with their partner due to the GTKAC activity.

Based upon participant answers to the previous question, they were either guided to provide more information about the connection with their classmate (n = 10), or to a Likert scale question about the value of the GTKAC (n = 26). The ten participants that indicated a connection or relationship with their partner answered the questions in the following section.

Participants that Indicated a Connection with their Partner

Participants that indicated a connection or relationship with their partner were asked a series of questions to further investigate the nature of this connection. The GTKAC activity was comprised of several tasks that students were required to complete to receive full credit for the activity. Participants were asked to rank which task resulted in the most connection between them and their partner on a scale of 1 being low connection to 5 being high connection. These tasks were as follows: meeting with your partner using video or audio, writing your partner's story, sharing your partner's story with them for approval, reading the story that your partner wrote about you, and posting your partner's story to the discussion board.

For the task, meeting with your partner using video or audio, the nine responses (n = 9) were distributed as follows: two participants indicated a rank of 4 and seven participants indicated a rank of 5. For the task, writing your partner's story, the seven responses were distributed as follows: two participants provided a rank of 2, one participant indicated a rank of 3, and four participants indicated a rank of 4. For the task, sharing your partner's story with them for approval, the seven responses were distributed as follows: one participant indicated a rank of 1, five participants indicated a rank of 3, and one participant provided a rank of 4. For the task, reading the story that your partner wrote about you, the seven responses were distributed as follows: two participants ranked it 1, three participants ranked it 2, one participant indicated a rank of 4, and one participant ranked it 5. For the task, posting your partner's story to the

discussion board, the eight responses were distributed as follows: five participants ranked it as 5, two participants ranked it as 2, and one participant ranked it as 3. The data revealed that meeting with partners using video or audio resulted in the most connection between partners. Alternatively, posting partner stories to the discussion board proved least effective in establishing connection between partners. Table 4.12 provides this information in further detail.

Table 4.12

Participant ranking of GTKAC activity tasks

Task	Ranking					#Responses
	1	2	3	4	5	
Meeting with your partner using video or audio	0	0	0	2	7	9
Writing your partner's story	0	2	1	4	0	7
Sharing your partner's story with them for approval	1	0	5	1	0	7
Reading the story that your partner wrote about you	2	3	0	1	1	7
Posting your partner's story to the discussion board	5	2	1	0	0	8

Participants were then asked if they have contacted their partner since the GTKAC activity was completed and if yes, what methods were used. Of the nine responses, seven participants indicated that they did contact their partner, and 2 indicated that they did not contact their partner. Various modalities were provided for participants to indicate the type of communication between partners. The modes of communication and the corresponding participant responses were distributed across the following: email (n = 2), text or chat (n = 6), phone call (n = 1), video call (n = 2), in-person meeting (n = 0), social media (1), no [contact] (n = 2), and other (n = 0). Participants were encouraged to choose all that apply; thus, some participants employed a combination of modalities to communicate with their partner. The data revealed text or chat as the preferred method of communication between partners following the GTKAC (see Table 4.13).

Table 4.13

Modality for contacting partners after the GTKAC activity

Partner Contact / Method of Communication	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 9)
Yes / email	2
Yes / text or chat	6
Yes / phone call	1
Yes / video call	2
Yes / in-person meeting	0
Yes / social media	1
No [contact]	2

Following this question, participants were asked, "how often have you and your partner been in contact with each other since the activity was completed?" Six participants indicated that they have been in contact with their partners and three participants indicated that they have not been in contact. Participant responses regarding frequency of contact were distributed across the following categories: 1 – 2 times (*n* = 3), 3 – 5 times (*n* = 2), daily (*n* = 0), weekly (*n* = 1), we have not been in contact (*n* = 3), and other (*n* = 0). The data revealed that most participants that contacted their partners did so between 1 – 5 times over the course of the semester (*n* = 5) with one participant contacting their partner weekly (see Table 4.14).

Table 4.14

Frequency of contact with partner after the GTKAC activity

Frequency	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 9)
1 – 2 times	3, 33%
3 – 5 times	2, 22%
Daily	0
Weekly	1, 11%
We have not been in contact	3, 33%
Other	0

Participants were then asked to share how likely they were to remain in contact with their partner following the conclusion of RCJ3000. Using a Likert scale from not likely at all to very

likely, participant responses were distributed across the following categories: not likely at all (*n* = 1), somewhat likely (*n* = 1), neutral (*n* = 5), likely (*n* = 2), and very likely (*n* = 0). The data revealed that most participants were neutral regarding whether or not they would stay in contact with their partner following RCJ3000 (see Table 4.15).

Table 4.15

Likelihood of remaining in contact with partners after RCJ3000

Likert Scale	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 9)
Not likely at all	1, 11%
Somewhat likely	1, 11%
Neutral	5, 56%
Likely	2, 22%
Very likely	0

Participants were then asked, "how satisfied are you with the Get to Know a Classmate Activity as means to create a new relationship with a classmate?" Using a Likert scale from not satisfied at all to very satisfied, participant responses were distributed across the following categories: not satisfied at all (n = 0), somewhat satisfied (n = 0), neutral (n = 0), satisfied (n = 5), and very satisfied (n = 4). The data revealed that participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the GTKAC activity as means for creating a new relationship with a classmate. Table 4.16 provides this information in further detail.

Table 4.16

Satisfaction with GTKAC activity as means for creating a new relationship

Likert Scale	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 9)
Not satisfied at all	0
Somewhat satisfied	0
Neutral	0
Satisfied	5, 56%
Very Satisfied	4, 44%

Participants that Indicated No Connection with their Partner

Participants that indicated that they did not have a connection with their partner were guided to indicate their perceived value of activities like the GTKAC activity in online courses (*n* = 26). Using a Likert scale from not valuable at all to very valuable, participant responses were distributed as follows: not valuable at all (*n* = 7), somewhat valuable (*n* = 4), neutral (*n* = 6), valuable (*n* = 6), and very valuable (*n* = 3). While 34% of participants indicated high levels of value for the activity, the data revealed that the GTKAC activity had low levels of value for most of the participants (*n* = 11, 42%). (see Table 4.17).

Table 4.17

Value of activities like GTKAC activity

Likert Scale	Participant Responses (*n*), (*N* = 26)
Not valuable at all	7, 27%
Somewhat valuable	4, 15%
Neutral	6, 23%
Valuable	6, 23%
Very valuable	3, 11%

Summary of Likert Scale Survey Data

The results of the survey provided many points of interest to this study. Responses indicated that most participants considered a relationship with the instructor more important than a relationship with a TA, GRA, or classmate (*n* = 23, 64%) prior to enrolling in RCJ3000. The data indicated that many participants had some level of interest in making new relationships following the pandemic of 2020 (*n* = 15, 42%). Data also revealed that half of participants found it harder to form new relationships following the pandemic of 2020 (*n* = 18, 50%). According to the data, the IYFG activity resulted in low levels of connection for more participants than the GTKAC activity. On average participants viewed 3.7 classmate videos and read 2.3 narratives. Additionally, most of the participants did not view their assigned partner's FlipGrid video prior to the GTKAC activity (*n* = 19, 53%).

The majority of participants indicated that they used the conversational prompt (*n* = 30, 83%). During the synchronous session 39% of participants engaged in conversation for longer than the recommended time period of 20 – 30 minutes (*n* = 14). Most participants indicated that they were satisfied with the biographical narrative that their partners wrote about them (*n* = 29, 81%). The data also indicated that slightly more participants wanted additional activities like the GTKAC activity (*n* = 14, 39%).

The majority of participants did not indicate a relationship or connection with their partner resulting from the GTKAC (*n* = 26, 72%). Of these 26 participants, 11 indicated that the GTKAC activity had low value (42%).

The participants that specified a connection with their partners resulting from the GTKAC activity (*n* = 10) indicated that of the five tasks, the synchronous session provided them with the highest level of connection with their partner. Five participants indicated that they

contacted their partners between one and five times throughout the semester and one participant indicated that they contacted their partner weekly. When asked if they planned to remain in contact with their partners following RCJ3000, most participants were neutral (n = 5) and three participants indicated some likelihood to remain in contact. All nine participants indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the GTKAC activity as a means for creating a new relationship with a classmate.

Themes from Open-Ended Questions

The survey included three open-ended questions, two of which were provided to the participants depending on their answer to the question: "Did the Get to Know a Classmate Activity result in a connection or relationship between you and your partner?" Participants that answered yes to this question (n = 10) were asked to answer the following: "Please take a few moments to describe how your relationship or connection with your partner has impacted your experience in RCJ3000 so far this semester." Participants that answered no to the question (n = 26) were asked to answer the following: "Please take a few moments to share how the Get to Know a Classmate activity has impacted your experience in RCJ3000 so far this semester."

All the participants were provided an opportunity to share additional information with the researcher by answering a third question: "Please feel free to share any additional comments, concerns, or suggestions with me about your feelings about connections and relationships in RCJ3000 or asynchronous online courses in general." The third question returned 18 responses with none included for analysis. The content of participant responses for the third question referenced the online course or instructor, rather than viewpoints on connections and relationships in online courses. While valuable, it is not within the purview of this study.

Responses indicating the participant had no feedback to provide (e.g., “N/A,” “That is all thank you,” or “None”) were excluded from analysis.

Participant responses were grouped by question and each response was analyzed using qualitative data analysis. Identified categories were organized into three overarching themes that emerged from the data: (1) relational, (2) peer, and (3) individual. Two of the themes contained three categories, relational (engagement, peer connections, and communication), and peer (social support, perspectives, collaborative skills). The third theme contained two categories, individual (time, trust) (see Appendix M for category descriptions). Descriptions of each theme are provided below.

Relational: This theme, located at the intersection of peer and individual themes, encompassed the following categories: engagement, peer connections, and communication. In this context, the theme refers to the interpersonal and social aspects of the participant experience through the course activities.

Peer: This theme encompassed the following categories: social support, perspectives, and collaborative skills. In this context, the theme comprised interactions between peer students through course activities.

Individual: This theme encompassed the following categories: time and trust. In this context, the theme centered on individual factors that contribute to participant experience and perceptions of the course activities. It emphasized the significance of time and the establishment or lack thereof, of trust, both of which may shape individual responses and interactions before, during, and after the course activities.

The themes and categories for this study are organized and presented per the visual representation in Figure 4.1. Each circle represents an identified theme in the study, e.g., "relational" is a theme. The rectangle represents categories identified within the themes.

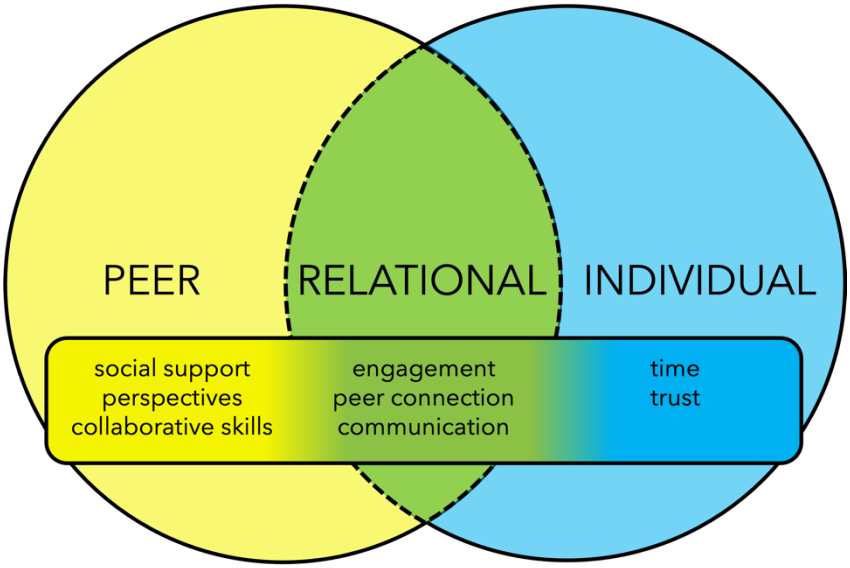

Figure 4.1: Visual representation of thematic and categorical findings

Findings from Open-Ended Questions

The findings from the open-ended questions are presented in two parts, the participants that answered yes to having a connection with their partner (n = 10) followed by the participants that answered no to having a connection with their partner (n = 26). Analysis across participants to find commonalities and notable differences are provided at the end of each section. The three themes identified during analysis included: (1) relational, (2) peer, and (3) individual. Throughout this section, I used excerpts from participant data as well as references to the research when applicable. This was intended to provide a more complete understanding of the data and generated themes.

The Impact of a Connection or Relationship with a Classmate

These ten participants were asked the following question: "Please take a few moments to describe how your relationship or connection with your partner has impacted your experience in RCJ3000 so far this semester." This question returned seven responses, of which six were included for analysis. Participants seemed to indicate that a connection with a peer student impacted their experience in the following ways: (1) meeting, talking with, and learning about their partners, (2) providing a sense of social presence and support throughout the semester, and (3) the discovery of similar interests and shared life experiences with partners Thematic analysis might indicate engagement, peer connection, social support, perspectives, and trust as central categories or concepts for how the connection with their partner might have impacted their experience in RCJ3000. For example, a participant, Ashia, wrote the following:

> *The Get to Know a Classmate Activity has impacted my experience thus far because it gave me the opportunity to reach out or to help [my partner] throughout the course. We went over a few assignments together following the activity and she is super cool! Definitely someone I would hang out with.*

Ashia's response seemed to indicate many aspects related to the relational theme: engagement (reaching out and receiving help), peer connection ("hang out with"), and communication (discussing assignments). Additionally, her response might also align with the peer theme, including social support (mutual assistance with assignments) and collaborative skills (going over class work). Lastly, her response aligned with the individual theme with trust ("to reach out" for help, "hang out with"). Each of these aspects may have contributed to Ashia's perceptions of the role of the connection or relationship with her partner due to the GTKAC activity and its impact on her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Malcolm, wrote:

We haven't spoken since the assignment, but we had a very positive connection. It has definitely impacted me in a great way because meeting someone who is in college and went through the same experiences as me. As a result, I enjoyed the overall experience.

Malcolm's response seemed to indicate two categories within the relational theme: engagement ("very positive connection," "impacted me in a great way," "enjoyed the overall experience"), and peer connection ("we had a very positive connection"). His response also aligned with the peer theme, including social support ("we had a very positive connection," "definitely impacted me in a great way"), and perspectives ("went through the same experiences as me"). Each of these factors might have contributed to Malcolm's perceptions of the role of the connection or relationship with his partner due to the GTKAC activity and its impact on his experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Amahle, wrote:

Having a close knit relationship with a student from class really makes the whole online experience worthwhile. I love the fact that we can chat about not only the class, but life in general.

Amahle's response seemed to indicate aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("makes the whole online experience worthwhile," "we can chat about not only the class"), peer connections ("having a close knit relationship"), and communication ("we can chat"). Additionally, her response also aligned with the peer theme: social support ("chat about not only the class, but life in general," "relationship with a student from class"), and collaborative skills (reviewing class content). Lastly, her response aligned with the individual theme with trust ("a close knit relationship," her willingness to "chat about life in general"). Each of these aspects might have

contributed to Amahle's perceptions of the role of the connection or relationship with her partner due to the GTKAC activity and its impact on her experiences in RCJ3000.

Summary of the Impact of a Relationship or Connection with a Classmate

Participants seemed to indicate that a connection with a peer student impacted their experience in the following ways: (1) meeting, talking with, and learning about their partners, (2) providing a sense of social presence and support throughout the semester, and (3) the discovery of similar interests and shared life experiences with partners. All six participants seemed to suggest the relational theme in their responses. The relational factors revealed included engagement (100%), peer connection (100%), and communication (33%). Five of the participants seemed to indicate the peer theme in their responses (83%). The peer factors that emerged included social support (67%), perspectives (50%), and collaborative skills (17%). Three of the participants seemed to have indicated the individual theme (50%). The individual factor that emerged through analysis was trust (50%). See Figure 4.2 for a visual of the impact of the peer connection by category.

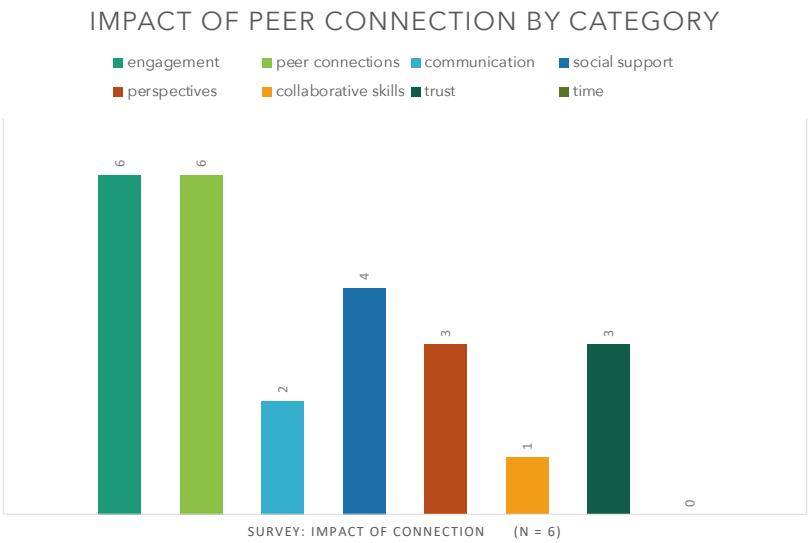

Figure 4.2: Impact of peer connection by category

Four participant responses seemed to provide evidence for the existence of social support between partners. Although the data indicated that only two participants maintained ongoing contact with their partners after the GTKAC activity, social support seemed to emerge, nonetheless. This might be an indicator of social presence (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Weidlich et al., 2022).

The sharing of personal backgrounds to discover similarities and differences might be a contributing factor in the manifestation of the connection or relationship between partners in the case of these six participants (Archambault et al., 2022; Koh et al.). This might be an indication that the GTKAC activity provided opportunity for participants to share this information. While this most likely occurred during the synchronous session with partners, such information might have been shared through other means.

According to thematic findings, establishing a connection and/or relationship with a peer student might have impacted the experience of these six participants in RCJ3000 in the following ways: engagement, peer connections, communication, social support, perspectives, and trust. See Figure 4.3 for a visual representation of themes, categories, and participants.

Themes	Categories	Shonda	Malcolm	Maire	Amahle	Ashia	Araminta
Relational	engagement	●	●	●	●	●	●
	peer connections	●	●	●	●	●	●
	communication		●		●	●	
Peer	social support		●	●	●	●	
	perspectives		●	●			●
	collaborative skills						
Individual	time						
	trust			●	●	●	

Figure 4.3: Visualization of themes, categories, and participants

The next section provides the findings for the 26 participants that answered no to having a connection with their partners resultant from the GTKAC activity.

The Impact of the GTKAC Activity

The 26 participants were asked the following question, "Please take a few moments to share how the Get to Know a Classmate Activity has impacted your experience in RCJ3000." The question returned 26 responses, of which 25 were included for analysis. In addition to the existing three themes (relational, peer, and individual), another descriptor emerged from analysis, No Impact. This referred to participants that expressed that the activity did not impact their experience in RCJ3000. Of the 25 responses, ten (40%) participants wrote that the activity had no impact.

Overall data revealed that across the 25 responses, 17 (68%) provided a generally positive responses regarding the impact of the GTKAC activity on their experience in RCJ3000. The following section has been divided into two sub-sections, part I and part II. Part I addresses

participant responses that indicated no impact. Part II details the results for the remaining 15 participant responses.

Part I: The GTKAC Activity had No Impact

Of the 25 participants, ten (40%) expressed that the activity had no impact. Participants seemed to indicate that the GTKAC activity had no impact on their experience in RCJ3000 for the following reasons: (1) the activity was just another graded assignment, (2) participants chose an online modality to learn independently, and (3) no interest in interacting with others. Thematic analysis seemed to indicate engagement, peer connection, communication, and collaborative skills as factors for the no impact group. For example, a participant, Kali, wrote:

> *The Get to Know a Classmate activity did not really impact my experience. I did not stay in contact with my partner or continue to talk to him. I think it is a good assignment, but I think for some people it is harder to form relationships in this way.*

Kali's response seemed to indicate aspects related to the relational theme: engagement ("did not really impact my experience," "I think it is a good assignment"), peer connection ("it is harder to form relationships in this way"), and communication ("did not stay in contact or continue to talk to him").

Another participant, Rafael wrote:

> *No impact whatsoever. However, it did force me to be a little creative and it helped me communicate more effectively.*

Rafael's response indicated aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("it did force me to be a little creative") and communication ("it helped me communicate more effectively"). Additionally, his response might indicate the peer theme with collaborative skills ("communicate more effectively).

Another participant, Malek wrote:

Not much. I chose an online course so I wouldn't have to talk to anyone that would be in the classroom.

Malek's response seemed to indicate the relational theme with engagement ("chose an online course"), and communication ("wouldn't have to talk to anyone").

Summary of Part I: The GTKAC Activity had No Impact

Thematic analysis revealed key factors contributing to these participants' perception of no impact, including engagement, peer connections, communication, and collaborative skills. For instance, Kali's response reflected elements related to the relational theme, emphasizing challenges in forming relationships through the assigned activity. Rafael highlighted aspects of both the relational and peer themes, acknowledging that while the activity did not significantly impact him, it fostered creativity and improved communication skills. Malek's response underscored his individual social preference for online learning, aligning with the relational theme.

Overall, these ten participants' responses suggested that the GTKAC activity did not have an overwhelmingly negative impact on their experiences in RCJ3000, rather this data emphasized the importance of acknowledging individual social preferences and expectations in online learning modalities.

Part II: The Impact of the GTKAC Activity

Of the 25 participants, 15 (60%) provided insight into how the GTKAC activity impacted their experience in RCJ3000. Participants seemed to indicate that the GTKAC activity impacted their experience in the following ways: (1) the activity provided a sense of social presence and social support throughout the semester for some participants, and (2) the activity resulted in

many participants meeting, talking with, and learning about their partners, (3) the discovery of similar interests and shared life experiences between some partners, and (4) the activity resulted in a misalignment with preferences and/or schedule expectations for some participants.

The Relational Theme

All 15 participants seemed to indicate aspects related to the relational theme (100%). These included engagement (100%), communication (40%), and peer connections (27%). For example, a participant, Tawana, wrote:

> *I did enjoy talking to my partner and the story that they wrote about me. Using the prompts helped ease nerves between the two of us.*

Tawana's response seemed to indicate aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("I did enjoy talking with my partner," "ease nerves between the two of us"), and communication ("talking to my partner," "using the prompts helped"). Her response also aligned with the individual theme with perspectives ("the story that they wrote about me"). Each of these aspects may have contributed to Tawana's perceptions of the impact of the GTKAC activity on her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Selene, wrote:

> *The activity impacted my experience in a good way. I think because even though my partner and I have not communicated after the activity, we are still here for each other. Or even if we were to have a class together in the future.*

Selene's response seemed to align with factors from the relational theme. These included: engagement ("activity impacted my experience in a good way"), peer connections ("we are still here for each other," "if we were to have a class together in the future"), and communication (these partners have not communicated since the activity). Her response also aligned with the

peer theme: social support ("we are still here for each other," "have a class together in the future"). Any of these factors may have contributed to Selene's perceptions of the role of the GTKAC activity and its impact on her experiences in RCJ3000.

Lastly, Sarah, wrote:

> *I was able to get to know one of my classmates, who I otherwise probably would have never spoken to. Since this assignment however, I have not spoken to my partner at all. I feel as if there should be more than one get to know a classmate activity or maybe an optional group project within this course if the goal is to meet more peers.*

Sarah's response seemed to indicate the relational theme: engagement (she got to know a classmate, she would like more assignments like this, suggesting an optional group project), peer connection ("able to get to know one of my classmates"), and communication ("have not spoken to my partner at all"). Each of these factors may have contributed to Sarah's perceptions of the GTKAC activity and her experience in RCJ3000.

The Peer Theme

There were 11 participants that indicated aspects related to the peer theme (73%). These included social support (33%), perspectives (27%), and collaborative skills (20%). For example, a participant, Rihanne, wrote:

> *It was nice getting to know my partner. We had a lot of things in common with one another. I did add her to this group me with other classmates, to discuss the class and all. She was nice and pretty chill. We both are busy so the texting back and forth wasn't at the same time, but we got to know each other still. I think there should be more projects like this because it's so hard to meet people and if you are obligated to have to do it, it might help you meet new people.*

Rihanne's response seemed to indicate aspects of the peer theme: social support (adding her partner to a GroupMe, discussing the class), perspectives ("we had a lot of things in common with one another"), and collaborative skills (working with other classmates, discussing assignments). Her response also seemed to align with the relational theme: engagement ("nice getting to know my partner," she suggested having more projects like the GTKAC), peer connection ("nice getting to know my partner," "she was nice and pretty chill," "it's hard to meet people," she implied that the GTKAC could help her "meet new people"), and communication ("to discuss the class and all," these partners also texted each other). Her response might also indicate an aspect of the individual theme: time (applying time management skills, i.e., "we both are so busy"). These aspects might have contributed to Rihanne's perceptions of the GTKAC activity and its impact on her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Isserly wrote:

> *It allowed me to feel a sort of connection with another classmate, which is rare in asynchronous classes. I felt that if I ever needed help from a classmate, I could reach out to them.*

Isserly's response seemed to align with the peer theme: social support (if she needed help, she could reach out to her partner). Her response might also align with the relational theme: engagement (allowing her to feel "a sort of connection," "I felt if I ever needed help"), and peer connection ("a sort of connection with another classmate," she expressed feeling this way is rare in async classes). Her response might also indicate the individual theme with trust ("I felt that if I needed help, I could reach out"). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Isserly's perception of the GTKAC activity and its impact on her experiences in RCJ3000.

Lastly, Eliza wrote:

> *I learned more about my classmate and [it] gave me a new perspective on my classmates as a whole.*

Eliza's response seemed to indicate the peer theme: perspectives ("I learned about my classmate," "a new perspective on my classmates as a whole"). Her response also seemed to align with the relational theme: engagement ("I learned about my classmate"). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Eliza's perceptions of the GTKAC activity and her experience in RCJ3000.

The Individual Theme

There were four participants that seemed to indicate aspects related to the individual theme (27%). These included time (20%) and trust (13%). For example, a participant, Evere, wrote:

> *It was a solid icebreaker idea, but because it is an actual graded assignment that has a due date, it can also become a burden if your partner does not respond/work with you in a timely manner.*

Evere's response might indicate aspects of the individual theme: trust ("become a burden if your partner does not respond"), and time ("graded assignment with a due date," "partner does not respond/work with you in a timely manner"). Her response might also align with the relational theme: engagement ("it was a solid icebreaker idea"). These aspects might have contributed to Evere's perception of the GTKAC activity and its impact on her experience in RCJ3000.

Summary of Part II: The Impact of the GTKAC Activity

Participants seemed to indicate that the GTKAC activity impacted their experience in the following ways: (1) the activity resulted in participants meeting, talking with, and learning about

their partners for many participants, (2) discovering similarities and sharing life experiences with one another for some participants, (3) the activity provided a sense of social presence and social support throughout the semester for some participants, and/or (4) the activity resulted in a misalignment with preferences and/or schedule expectations for some participants.

Thematic analysis of 15 participant responses resulted in three themes: relational, peer, and individual. The relational theme emerged as most prevalent. Specifically, the category of engagement (100%) was interpreted in all participant responses. This engagement might be indicated through participant interactions with partners, interactions with the GTKAC activity, and affective responses about their experience so far in RCJ3000. The next relational category that might be indicated was communication (40%). This category seemed to be indicated by the modality used by participants to communicate, affective responses about the communication with partners, and/or a lack of communication between partners. The third relational category that seemed to emerge was peer connections (27%). This category may be evidenced through the dynamics of the partnerships described by participants and qualitative statements concerning partner connections.

The peer theme seemed to be present in 11 participant responses (73%). The most frequent category in this theme was social support (33%). While these participants previously indicated that they did not have a connection with their partner, the GTKAC activity still seemed to contribute to social support. Social support seemed to be indicated through references to reaching out or providing assignment support to partners and statements such as “being there for each other.” The next category revealed in the peer theme was perspectives (27%). This indicated that some participants might have shared personal backgrounds and information with their partners. A few participants seemed to indicate perspectives through newfound

consideration of their classmates in RCJ3000, while others suggested an expanded awareness of their peers in the wider university community. The final category noted was collaborative skills (20%). The tasks required to complete the GTKAC activity might have provided opportunity for some participants to develop and/or activate interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

The individual theme seemed to emerge in four participant responses (27%). The most common category was time (20%). This category seemed to indicate the importance of time management and contacting partners in a timely manner before and during the GTKAC activity. See Figure 4.4 for a visual of the impact of the GTKAC activity by category.

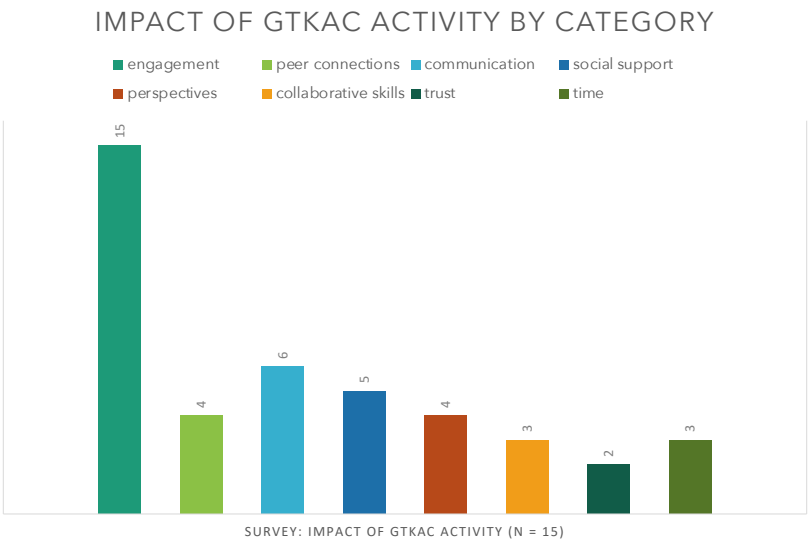

Figure 4.4: Impact of the GTKAC activity by category

Summary of Survey Findings

The results of the survey revealed several interesting data points. Responses indicated that most participants considered a relationship with the instructor to be most important (n = 23, 64%), a relationship with a classmate to have some importance (n = 15, 42%), and a relationship

with a GRA or teaching assistant to be least important or neutral (*n* = 22, 61%). The data indicated that most participants had some level of interest in making new relationships following the pandemic of 2020 (*n* = 15, 42%). Data also revealed that half of participants found it harder to form new relationships following the pandemic of 2020 (*n* = 18, 50%).

According to the data, both the IYFG activity and the GTKAC activity resulted in low levels of connection between participants and their classmates. However, the IYFG activity (*n* = 22, 61%) provided low levels of connection for more participants than the GTKAC activity (*n* = 16, 44%). On average participants viewed 3.7 classmate videos and read 2.3 narratives, which indicated that participants viewed more videos than read narratives. Additionally, most of the participants did not view their assigned partner's FlipGrid video prior to the GTKAC activity (*n* = 19, 53%).

When asked if they used the conversational prompt during the synchronous session of the GTKAC activity, the majority of participants indicated that they did use the prompt (*n* = 30, 83%). During the synchronous session 39% of participants engaged in conversation for longer than the recommended time period of 20 – 30 minutes (*n* = 14) and 25% of participants exceeded 40 minutes (*n* = 9). Most participants indicated that they were satisfied with the biographical narrative that their partners wrote about them (*n* = 29, 81%). The data also indicated that slightly more participants wanted additional activities like the GTKAC activity in AOLEs (*n* = 14, 39%).

Overall, most participants did not indicate a relationship or connection with their partner resulting from the GTKAC activity (*n* = 26, 72%). Of the 26 participants that did not indicate a connection with their partner, 11 indicated that the GTKAC activity had low value (42%).

The participants that reported a connection with their partners resulting from the GTKAC activity (*n* = 10) indicated that the synchronous session provided them with a high level of

connection with their partner. Following the GTKAC activity, seven of the nine responses indicated that participants contacted their partner, and that text or chat was the preferred method of communication. Five participants indicated that they contacted their partners between one and five times throughout the semester and one participant indicated that they contacted their partner weekly.

When asked if they planned to remain in contact with their partners after RCJ3000, five participants were neutral and three participants indicated some likelihood to remain in contact. Of the nine responses, all participants indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the GTKAC activity as a means for creating a new relationship with a classmate.

Overall findings from the open-ended questions seemed to indicate some shared findings across the impact of a connection with a peer student and the impact of the GTKAC activity on many participant's experiences in RCJ3000. These included (1) many participants meeting a peer student, i.e., talking with and learning about them, (2) the discovery of similar interests and shared life experiences between some partners, and (3) a sense of social presence and support throughout the semester for some participants.

Thematic analysis of the open-ended questions generated three themes distributed across the two questions. These themes included: relational, peer, and individual. The descriptor of no impact emerged during analysis of the second question. The information that follows does not include theme or category counts from the ten participants that indicated no impact.

The relational theme was the dominant theme across all open-ended question responses (n = 21, 100%). This indicated that engagement, peer connection, and communication might have been interpreted in participant responses. Of these three categories, engagement emerged across 21 participant responses (n = 21, 100%). A relationship or connection with a peer student

did not seem to affect participant engagement. The next category, peer connections, seemed to be revealed across ten participant responses (*n* = 21, 48%). The last category of communication seemed to be present in eight participant responses (*n* = 21, 38%).

The peer theme was identified in 16 participant responses (*n* = 21, 76%). This seemed to indicate social support, perspectives, and collaborative skills were present in participant responses. Of these three categories, social support (*n* = 21, 43%) emerged in nine participant responses according to the data. While the type of social support varied across participants, overall, the support between partners did not seem dependent on participants' perceived relationship or connection with partners. Five of the participants that previously indicated no connection seemed to suggest social support in their responses (*n* = 15, 33%). Perspectives emerged as the next category in the peer theme with seven responses (*n* = 21, 33%). Collaborative skills were the least indicated category emerging in only four participant responses (*n* = 21, 19%).

The individual theme was the least indicated theme with seven participant responses (n = 21, 33%). The indicated categories seemed to include trust (28%) and time (14%). See Figure 4.5 for a visual of the total open-ended questions categorial frequencies.

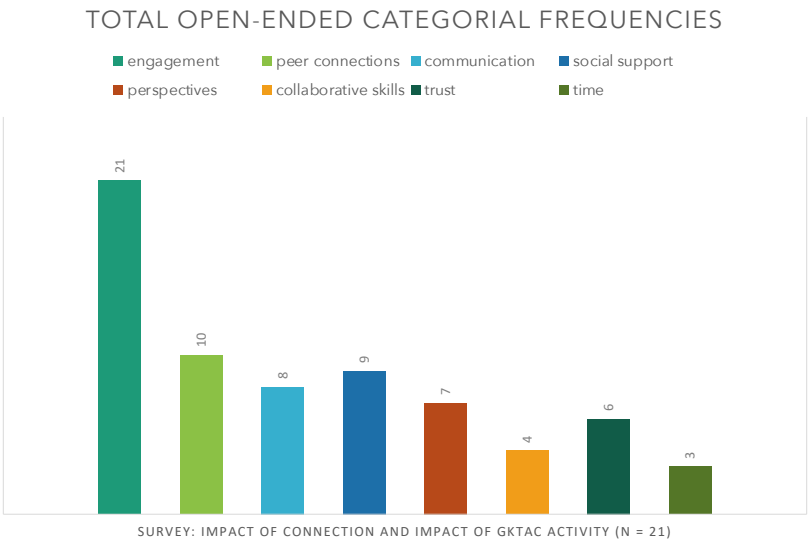

Figure 4.5: Total open-ended questions categorical frequencies

Overall, the data from the research survey and open-ended questions might indicate that the two required student-to-student relationship development activities in RCJ3000 impacted participants across three domains, relational (100%), peer (76%) and individual (33%). Participant responses within these domains seemed to indicate the following factors: engagement (100%), peer connections (48%), social support (43%), communication (38%), perspectives (33%), and trust (27%). Additionally, data seemed to indicate that many participants expressed a generally positive reaction to meeting, talking with, and learning about a peer student Some participants also seemed to indicate a sense of social presence and/or support throughout the semester. Conversely, Participants that indicated no impact or a less than ideal experience resulting from the GTKAC activity seemed to articulate a misalignment with preferences or encountered issues with their assigned partner. In the next chapter, I present findings from the survey session interviews conducted near the end of the semester in Fall 2022.

CHAPTER 5

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter, the findings of the qualitative analysis of the survey session interview transcript data collected during Fall 2022 are presented. Two interview sessions were conducted as part of this study. The first request for interviews took place at the beginning of the semester and the second was included as part of the research survey offered near end-of-semester. Initially, all undergraduate students enrolled in RCJ3000 (n = 50) were invited to participate in three, one-hour long semi-structured interviews over the course of the semester. Three students agreed to participate in these interviews. Following the first interview, one of the participants declined to participate further and another completed the required course activities through alternative means that did not fall within the parameters of this study. Thus, the cross-semester interview sessions were completed by one participant. Due to the sample size and nature of data gathered from the cross-semester sessions, that data was not included for analysis.

The opportunity to participate in an interview to discuss the survey findings was provided as a survey question. A group of eight participants completed interviews with the researcher following the survey and seven transcripts were included for analysis. Each of the interviews took place near the end of the semester and lasted between 15 and 20 minutes.

The results of the analysis are organized in two sections: (1) interview participant demographics, and (2) questions from the interview sessions. The second section was further structured into five sub-sections. These included: (1) perceived value of the activity, (2) ideal

frequency of activities like the GTKAC, (3) perceived enjoyment of the activity, (4) perceived connection with partners, and (5) perceived no impact resulting from the activity. The fifth sub-section was intended to provide a deeper exploration of the no impact category revealed in Chapter 4. This sub-section was not included in thematic analysis. The remaining four sub-sections were analyzed using identified categories and further organized into three themes: (1) relational, (2) peer, and (3) individual. A summary of the overall interview findings is included at the end.

Interview Participant Demographics

The participants were predominantly female (n = 4, 57%), between the age range of 18 – 24 (n = 6, 85%), taking a full-time course load of 12 hours or more (n = 6, 85%), preferred online classes (n = 4, 57%), and represented a cross-section of race/ethnicities including Asian (29%), Hispanic or Latino (14%), Black or African American (43%), and one preferred not to answer (14%). The participants were representative of the larger student body at the context university. Participant data, anonymized through the use of pseudonyms to protect identity, are summarized in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Interview Participant Demographics

Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age Range	Year in School	Course Load	Preferred Modality
*Evere	Asian	Non-Binary / non-conforming	18 - 24	Third Year	Full-Time	Mixture
Javier	Asian	Male	18 - 24	Fourth Year	Full-Time	Online
*Rafael	Hispanic or Latino	Male	18 - 24	Fourth Year	Full-Time	Online
Jules	Black or African American	Female	18 - 24	Fourth Year	Part-Time	No Preference
*Maire	Black or African American	Female	18 - 24	Third Year	Full-Time	Mixture
*Tiffany	Black or African American	Female	31 - 35	Third Year	Full-Time	Online
*Amahle	Prefer not to answer	Female	18 - 24	Fourth Year	Full-Time	Online

**Provided open-ended responses included for analysis in Chapter 4.*

Themes from the Interviews

A total of three themes were identified based on the interview questions answered by each participant. The questions were derived from preliminary analysis of the research survey findings and participants were asked to review the results and provide their experiences. It should be noted that additional analysis of the survey findings provided further insights into the data, leading to a difference in percentages of responses (e.g., 50% of participants found some value in the GTKAC activity versus updated analysis of 42% of participants reported that the GTKAC activity had low value). The results of the additional analysis are represented in Chapter 4. The questions provided in this chapter are the questions that were asked in the survey session interviews at the end of Fall 2022 to maintain the integrity of the activity. The three themes that emerged included: (1) relational, (2) peer, and (3) individual.

In order to provide further level of analysis, I calculated the percentages of each of the emergent themes and categories by the number of participant responses. This was intended to provide a richer analysis in several ways: (1) it assisted in determining overall quantity for each theme and category identified in participant responses, (2) provided additional scaffolding to reduce personal bias during interpretation of data, (3) provided a somewhat consistent unit of measurement across all data, and (4) added another element for use in comparative analysis. Throughout this chapter, I used excerpts from participant data and references to research where applicable. This was intended to provide a more complete understanding of the data and generated themes. Findings related the interviews are presented in sequential order beginning with the first question

Perceived Value of the GTKAC Activity

To explore each participants' perceived value of the Get to Know a Classmate activity (GTKAC), they were asked the following question: "According to the survey responses, approximately 50% of students indicated that the Get to Know a Classmate activity was valuable, was this your experience? Why or why not?" Of the seven participants, five indicated that the activity had high value, and two indicated that it had low value. The data suggested that the five participants assigned high value to the GTKAC activity due to its potential to provide opportunities for practicing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and/or possibilities for connections with peers. For example, a participant, Rafael shared:

> *I think this assignment showed that, A. you need to learn how to talk and communicate with people, whether it's through email, video, or what have you, and B. creativity, which comes down to, you get all the information from someone, but you have to actually put it down on paper.*

Rafael's response seems to indicate aspects of the relational theme: engagement (description of assignment tasks and required competencies), communication ("you need to learn how to talk and communicate with people," "you get all the information from someone"). His response also might indicate the peer theme with perspectives ("you get all the information from someone," "you have to actually put it down on paper"), and collaborative skills (referencing communication skills and creativity). His statement might also indicate the individual theme regarding technology ("communicate with people, whether it's through email, video, or what have you"). Each of these aspects may have contributed to Rafael's perceptions of the value of the GTKAC activity and his experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Jules, expressed that:

> *[The GTKAC activity] gave you the opportunity to actually connect [with a peer] and also practice interview skills. It wasn't that nerve wracking because it's a peer, so it just made it a little more intentional rather than it just being busy work.*

Jules' response might indicate aspects of the relational theme. These aspects may include engagement ("opportunity to connect," "practice interview skills," "wasn't that nerve wracking," mentioning intention, rather than busy work regarding the activity), peer connection ("actually connect," "nerve wracking because it's a peer"), and communication ("practice interview skills"). Her statement might also reflect aspects from the peer theme: social support ("wasn't that nerve-wracking because it was a peer"), perspectives ("opportunity to connect," "interview skills"), and collaborative skills ("practice interview skills," "wasn't that nerve wracking because it's a peer"). Her statement might also indicate the individual theme with trust (her feeling that practicing interview skills with a peer is less nerve-wracking). Each of these aspects may have

contributed to Jules' perception of value of the GTKAC activity and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Javier, shared:

I would say it was very valuable, because I guess for me, I always had trouble talking to people, but this [activity] brought me out of my shell. So, I think that this was a very good experience for all of us classmates.

Javier's response seemed to relate to aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("this [activity] brought me out of my shell," "was a very good experience") and communication ("always had trouble talking to people," "brought me out of my shell"). His statement might also align with aspects of the peer theme: perspectives ("had trouble talking," "brought me out of my shell," "all of us classmates"), and collaborative skills ("always had trouble talking," "brought me out of my shell"). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Javier's perception of the value of the GTKAC activity and his experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Maire expressed:

I think that for me, [the value] was about having the connection that I typically don't have in my other classes because I typically don't have the ability to reach out to them and actually have those conversations and actually meet them.

Maire's response might indicate aspects relating to the relational theme. This aspects might include engagement ("having the connection," "the ability to reach out to them," "have conversations and actually meet them"), peer connections ("having the connection" to reach out, have conversations, and meet her classmates), and communication ("reach out," "have those conversations"). Her statement also might indicate aspects of the peer theme: social support (the value of "connection," "conversations," and meeting classmates not typical in her "other

classes"), perspectives ("have those conversations," "actually meet them"), and collaborative skills (ability to "reach out," have "conversations," and meet classmates). Each of these aspects may have contributed to Maire's perceptions of the value of the GTKAC activity and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Amahle, shared:

> *It was easy to make a connection with the person that I was partnered with, and then it was like, "Okay, I also have a friend now in my class." So yes, I would say it was definitely valuable.*

Amahle's response might indicate factors that relate to the relational theme. These might include engagement ("easy to make a connection," "have a friend now in my class"), and peer connections ("a connection with the person," "I also have a friend in my class"). Her response might also include factors form the peer theme. These could include social support ("easy to make a connection," "I also have a friend now in my class") and perspectives (shift from being paired with someone for the activity to considering that person a friend). Each of these factors may have contributed to Amahle's perceptions of value of the GTKAC activity and her experiences in RJC3000.

Summary of Perceived Value of the GTKAC Activity

Of the seven participants, five participants expressed that they thought the activity had value. The value of the activity according to these participants seemed to include (1) opportunity for establishing a connection with a peer student, and (2) practicing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Regarding the two participants who perceived low value in the GTKAC activity, data suggested issues related to an assigned partner and a misalignment between the activity and participant preferences.

Thematic analysis of the seven participant responses resulted in three themes: relational, peer, and individual. The relational theme emerged across all participant responses (100%). This indicated that the categories of engagement, peer connection, and communication emerged during analysis. The category of engagement (100%) was indicated in all participant responses. The next relational category was communication (86%), and the third category was peer connections (43%).

The peer theme seemed to be present across all participant responses (100%). This indicated that the categories of social support, perspectives, and collaborative skills emerged during analysis. Two categories in this theme were widespread, perspectives (71%) and collaborative skills (71%). Social support was interpreted in three instances (43%).

The individual theme might have been indicated in two instances (29%). This could mean that time and trust emerged during analysis. Trust was the most common category in this theme (29%), and time (14%) was indicated by one participant. See Figure 5.1 for a visual of the value of the GTKAC activity by category.

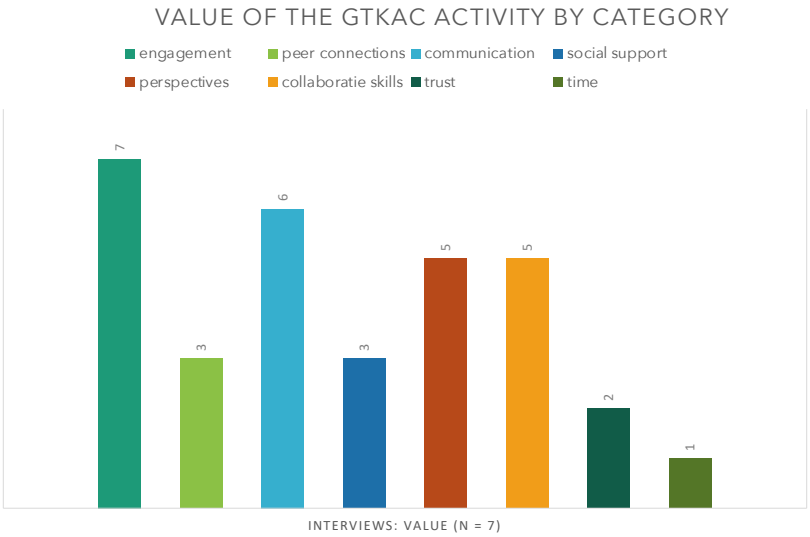

Figure 5.1: Value of the GTKAC activity by category

Overall, the data seemed to indicate that the GTKAC activity had value for most participants. This value might have been perceived by participants through engagement, communication, perspectives, collaborative skills, peer connections, and social support. The next question concerned the preferred frequency of GTKAC activities over the semester. Participants offered a variety of suggestions in this regard, which are explored in the next section.

Ideal Frequency of the GTKAC Activity

To explore participants' perception of the ideal frequency of activities like the GTKAC, they were asked the following question: "According to the survey responses, approximately 41% of students indicated that they would like more activities like the Get to Know a Classmate activity in asynchronous online courses, does this reflect your experience? Why or why not?" All seven participants indicated that more activities like the GTKAC were preferred. The data indicated that the seven participants wanted more activities like the GTKAC activity for a few

reasons. These included: to further establish existing peer connections with partners, potential preparation for group activities, to provide more opportunities to connect with a peer, and to integrate the activity into all online courses at the university. For example, Jules, shared:

> *I feel like [more activities] will help the connection, because after we were done, we talked about a few assignments here and there, but it wasn't how we connected on the get to know your partner thing.*

Jules response seemed to indicate aspects related to the relational theme. These might have included engagement ("I feel like [more activities] will help the connection," "talk about a few assignments"), peer connections ("will help the connection," "it wasn't how we connected on the get to know your partner"), and communication ("talk about a few assignments"). Her statement may also indicate aspects of the peer theme: social support (discussed assignments), and collaborative skills (discussed assignments). Her statement may also indicate the individual theme with time (implication of activities to maintain and/or enhance the peer connection). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Jules' perception of the ideal frequency of activities like the GTKAC and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Maire, shared:

> *Definitely. I feel like having those meetings more than once throughout the semester really makes sure that the partners keep in touch and that they do have someone to go through the semester with. So that students are not always feeling alone.*

Maire's statement seemed to indicate features related to the relational theme: engagement ("partners keep in touch," "have someone to go through the semester with," "not always feeling alone"), peer connections ("partners keep in touch," "someone to go through the semester with," "students are not always feeling alone"), and communication ("partners keep in touch"). Her

response may also indicate aspects of the peer theme: social support ("partners keep in touch," "someone to go through to semester with," "students are not always feeling alone") and collaborative skills ("someone to go through to semester with"). Her statement may also indicate the individual theme with time ("more than once," implication of activities to maintain and/or enhance the peer connection) and trust ("students are not always feeling alone"). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Maire's perception of the ideal frequency of activities like the GTKAC and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Other participants indicated that more frequent activities like the GTKAC activity could contribute to preparing students for collaborative projects. For example, Tiffany, expressed:

> *I think getting to know you project first, assignment next, then you can jump into the group projects.*

Tiffany's response seemed to indicate aspects of the relational theme: engagement (suggestion of a specific sequence of activities), and peer connections ("I think getting to know you project first"). Her statement might also indicate the peer theme: social support (suggested sequence of progressive support), and collaborative skills ("jump into the group projects"). Her response might also include the individual theme with time (sequence of activities to maintain or enhance working together for group projects). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Tiffany's perception of the ideal frequency of activities like the GKTAC and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Evere, shared that having more activities like the GTKAC might provide opportunities to engage with and meet other peers:

> *I would like more, because I think that the potential to get to know someone through [the activity] is actually really high.*

Evere's statement seemed to indicate aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("I would like more," the potential of connecting with a peer) and peer connections ("get to know someone through [the activity] is actually really high"). Her statement may also indicate aspects of the peer theme with collaborative skills ("know someone through [the activity]"). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Evere's perception of the ideal frequency of activities like the GTKAC and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Lastly, Javier, suggested implementing the GTKAC activity into all online courses at the university:

> *We're doing online, this would be good for every class and every teacher, this was a very good idea. And I think going forward, all professors at the university should do the activity.*

Javier's statement seems to indicate factors relating to the relational theme: engagement ("this would be good for every class," "was a very good idea," all instructors should include this activity in their online courses), and peer connections ("We're doing online, this would be good for every class and every teacher"). His response might also indicate the peer theme: social support ("all professors at the university should do the activity"). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Javier's ideal frequency of activities like the GTKAC and his experiences in RCJ3000.

Summary of The Ideal Frequency of the GTKAC Activity

While all seven participants (100%) expressed that they wanted more activities like the GTKAC, the type and goals of such activities varied based on participant preferences and individual goals. Activity frequency and goals seemed to include (1) providing the GTKAC activity as means for maintaining and enhancing established peer connections between partners,

(2) building a foundation for collaborative group work, (3) to provide more opportunities to meet peers, and (4) as a standard activity in all context university online courses.

Thematic analysis of the seven participant responses resulted in three themes: relational, peer, and individual. The relational theme emerged across all participant responses (100%). The categories revealed included: engagement (100%), peer connections (86%), and communication (43%).

Additionally, the peer theme seemed to emerge across all participant responses (100%). These categories included: social support (71%), collaborative skills (71%), and perspectives (14%).

The individual theme was interpreted in five participant responses (71%). The categories included: time (71%) and trust (14%). See Figure 5.2 for a visual of the frequency of the GTKAC activity by category.

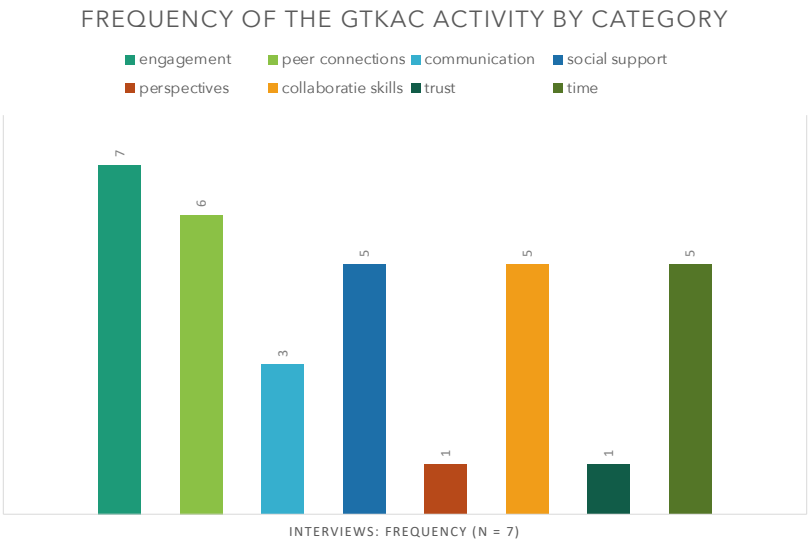

Figure 5.2: Frequency of the GTKAC activity by category

Overall, the data might indicate that participants would like more activities like the GTKAC activity in their AOLEs. The possible outcomes of providing additional activities according to the data might include engagement, peer connections, communication, social support, collaborative skills, and time. The next question concerned perceived enjoyment of the GTKAC activity. Participants provided several points for analysis that are explored in the next section.

Perceived Enjoyment of the GTKAC Activity

To explore each participants' perceived enjoyment of the GTKAC they were asked the following question: "According to the survey responses, approximately 41% of students enjoyed the activity, was this your experience? Why or why not?" Of the six responses (one participant was not asked this question), five indicated that they enjoyed the activity and one indicated that they "enjoyed getting a grade". The five participants seemed to indicate that they enjoyed the

GTKAC activity mostly due to meeting and talking with their partners during the synchronous conversations. For example, Rafael, shared:

> *I did enjoy getting to know the classmate I was assigned with. Sometimes it's nice to get to know other people because they might have similar interests that you may have, or they may have gone through similar things that you've gone through in life.*

Rafael's statement seemed to indicate factors related to the relational theme: engagement ("did enjoy getting to know the classmate," "nice to get to know other people"), peer connection ("nice to get to know other people"), and communication (talking and finding out information about others). His response may also include aspects of the peer theme: perspectives ("similar interests," "gone through similar things"). Each of these factors may contribute to Rafael's perceived enjoyment of the GTKAC activity and his experience in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Maire, shared:

> *I enjoyed the fact that I did get to meet someone in my class, because in my other classes that are online, I really don't have any correspondence with my other classmates. And no one ever says anything, so you're just kind of sitting there, and you're alone. So, I think that yes, it was an experience for me that I did enjoy.*

Maire's statement may indicate aspects of the relational theme. These might include engagement ("enjoyed the fact that I did get to meet someone in my class," it was an enjoyable experience"), peer connections ("meet someone in my class"), communication ("don't have any correspondence," "no one ever says anything"). Her statement might also include aspects of the peer theme: social support ("I did get to meet someone in my class," "you're alone"). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Maire's perceived enjoyment of the GTKAC activity and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Amahle, expressed:

I did [enjoy the activity]. I feel like we all meet people for specific reasons, or nothing is a coincidence. I was just like, "Okay, this is so cool. I just made a friend in one day." Yeah, I definitely enjoyed it.

Amahle's response might indicate aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("I did [enjoy the activity]," "this is so cool," "I definitely enjoyed it"), and peer connections ("I just made a friend in one day," "all meet people for specific reasons"). Her statement might also indicate aspects of the peer theme: social support ("made a friend in one day"), and perspectives ("nothing is a coincidence"). Each of these aspects may have contributed to Amahle's perceived enjoyment of the GTKAC activity and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Summary of the Perceived Enjoyment of the GTKAC Activity

Six of the five participants expressed that they enjoyed the GTKAC activity. The reason for this perceived enjoyment seemed to be related to the experience of meeting, talking with, and learning about their partners during the synchronous session. One of the participants indicated that they enjoyed "getting a grade."

Thematic analysis of these six participant responses resulted in two themes: relational and peer. The relational theme emerged across all responses (100%). The categories included: engagement (100%), peer connections (67%), and communication (67%).

The peer theme seemed to emerge in five of the responses (83%). The factors that emerged from this theme included: social support (67%) and perspectives (33%). See Figure 5.3 for a visual of the enjoyment of the GTKAC activity by category.

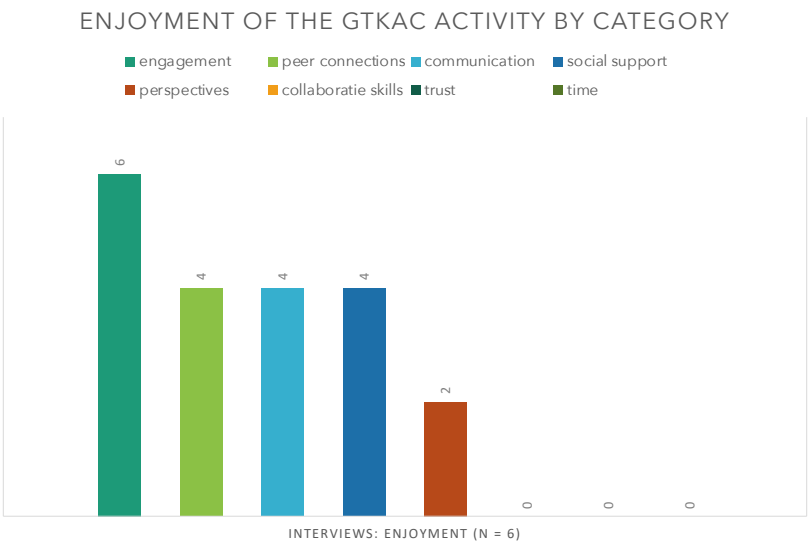

Figure 5.3: Enjoyment of the GTKAC activity by category

Overall, the data might indicate that participants' perceived enjoyment of the GTKAC activity included factors of engagement, peer connections, communication, social support, and perspectives. The next question concerned perceived connection with partners resulting from the GTKAC activity. Participants provided numerous points for analysis that are explored in the next section.

Perceived Connection with Partner and the GTKAC Activity

To explore each participants' perceived connection with their partner due to the GTKAC, they were asked the following question: "According to the survey responses, approximately 65% of students indicated that the Get to Know a Classmate activity resulted in some kind of a connection with their partner. Do you feel like you made a connection with your partner/classmate? Why or why not?" Of the seven participants four reported that the activity

resulted in a connection with their partner and three indicated that the activity did not result in a connection with their partner. For example, Maire shared:

> *I think that me and my partner did make a connection. We really haven't spoken since [the activity], maybe just because of life and just school in general. But I think that we did make a connection.*

Maire's statement might relate to aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("I think that me and my partner did make a connection"), peer connections (affirmation of a connection with her partner), and communication ("haven't spoken since [the activity]"). Each of these aspects might have influenced Maire's perceived connection with her partner and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Amahle expressed:

> *We definitely talked about stuff other than class, and I think that's why I liked that project so much, because it was an instant connection between me and my partner.*

Amahle's response might indicate aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("we definitely talked about other stuff than class," "I liked that project so much"), peer connection ("an instant connection between me and my partner"), and communication ("talked about stuff other than class"). Her response may also indicate aspects of the peer theme. These might include social support ("talked about stuff other than class") and perspectives ("talked about stuff other than class"). Her response may also indicate the individual theme with trust ("talked about stuff other than class"). Each of these aspects may have influenced Amahle's perceived connection with her partner and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Javier also shared:

> *I definitely made a connection. It's not every day that you go to class online and you meet somebody that you can fully connect with and have a friend.*

Javier's response might indicate factors associated with the relational theme. These could include engagement ("definitely made a connection," "meet somebody that you can fully connect with"), and peer connection ("made a connection," "fully connect with and have a friend"). Each of these factors might have contributed to Javier's perceived connection with his partner and his experiences in RCJ3000.

Exploring Connections

The following section presents probing questions intended to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the reported peer connections between four of the seven participants (Roulston, 2010). These participants were encouraged to share their beliefs about aspects that enabled the connection between them and their partner. Most seemed to express that it was the discovery of similar interests and life experiences. For example, Maire, shared:

> *As we started talking, we realized that we had a lot of things in common, a lot of music that we listened to in common, a lot of TV shows and things like that. So, for me, I think that it helped. And I think that we did make a connection.*

Maire's response might indicate aspects related to the relational theme: engagement ("we started talking," "I think that it helped," "we did make a connection"), peer connection ("we did make a connection"), and communication ("as we started talking"). Her response might also indicate aspects of the peer theme: perspectives ("realized that we had a lot of things in common," common music and tv shows). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Maire's perceived connection with her partner and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Amahle, expressed:

> *We talked about the things that we battled in school and just making sure that we stay on top of things for this class.*

Amahle's response seemed to indicate factors associated with the relational theme. These might include engagement ("we talked about the things," "stay on top of things for this class"), and communication ("talked about things that we battled in school"). Her response might also indicate factors from the peer theme: social support ("making sure that we stay on top of things for this class"), collaborative skills (mutual accountability), and perspectives ("talked about things that we battled in school"). Her response might also indicate the individual theme with trust ("talked about things we battled in school"). Each of these factors might have contributed to Amahle's perceived connection with her partner and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Of the four participants that indicated a connection, two of them revealed that they continued to contact their partner after the GTKAC activity was completed (Jules and Amahle). When asked to share some of the content and frequency of these interactions, it seemed that the relationships had evolved into friendships, which provided social support. For example, Amahle, shared:

> *We promised each other that we would keep reminding each other of things, and we would help each other out throughout the semester. We have each other's phone number, so if we ever needed help with something, we would just send each other a quick text.*

Amahle's response might indicate factors associated with the relational theme: engagement ("we promised each other," "we would help each other"), peer connection ("we promised each other," "we have each other's phone number"), and communication ("keep reminding each other of things," "send a quick text"). Her response might also indicate the peer theme: social support ("reminding each other of things," "help each other out throughout the semester," would reach out if needed assistance), and collaborative skills (discussion course content, providing help to each other). Her response might also indicate aspects of the individual theme: trust ("have each

other's phone number," "we promised each other"), and technology ("send each other a quick text"). Each of these factors might have contributed to Amahle's perceived connection with her partner and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Jules, expressed that:

> *That's how it was for us like, "Hey, did you understand this assignment?" I was able to not feel uncomfortable asking for help because it was my partner that I knew so much about.*

Jules' response might indicate aspects of the relational theme. These may include engagement ("I was able to not feel uncomfortable," talking with partner about course content), peer connections ("not feel uncomfortable," able to contact her partner for help), and communication (discussing assignments, "asking for help"). Her response might also indicate aspects of the peer theme: social support (discussing assignments, "asking for help"), perspectives ("my partner that I knew so much about"), and collaborative skills (discussing assignments, "asking for help"). Her response might also indicate aspects of the individual theme: trust ("able to not feel uncomfortable asking for help"). Each of these aspects might have contributed to Jules' perceived connection with her partner and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Out of these two participants, one indicated a desire to move their relationship from online to an in-person meeting. Amahle shared:

> *I would love to meet her in person, and that's weird, but I feel like when somebody gives you a good vibe then you're like, "Okay, we could actually be friends outside of school, outside of this class."*

Amahle's response might indicate factors associated with the relational theme: engagement ("I would love to meet her in person," "I feel like when somebody gives you a vibe"), peer

connection (“love to meet her in person,” “someone gives you a good vibe,” “could actually be friends outside of school, outside of this class”), and communication (“meet her in person”). Her response might also indicate factors of the peer theme: social support (“be friends outside of school, outside of this class,” “I would love to meet her in person”). Her response might also indicate aspects from the individual theme: trust (“meet her in person,” “friends outside of class”). Each of these factors may have contributed to Amahle’s perceived connection with her partner and her experiences in RCJ3000.

Summary of Exploring Connections

Out of seven participants, four reported a connection with their partners. When asked to share what they believed enabled the connection between them and their partners, these four participants seemed to indicate the sharing of personal information and the discovery of similarities. While the data might have indicated this as a consistent finding amongst connected interview pairs, an outlier emerged in the case of Rafael. While Rafael provided evidence for discovering commonalities with his partner, this did not result in a connection or relationship.

Overall, the data seemed to indicate the following factors as possibly contributing to perceived connections between partners in the case of these four participants: engagement (100%), communication (100%), peer connections (75%), perspectives (100%), collaborative skills (75%), social support (50%), trust (50%), and time (14%). See Figure 5.4 for a visual of factors contributing to peer connections.

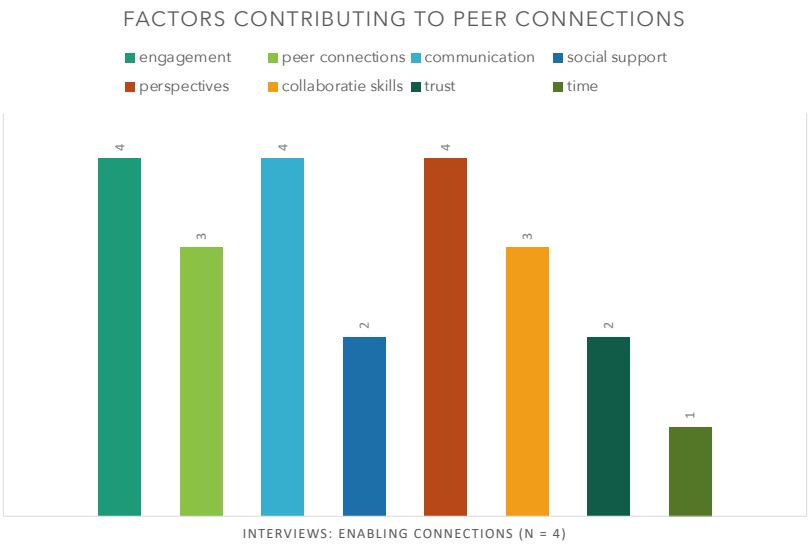

Figure 5.4: Factors contributing to peer connections

Jules and Amahle seem to have indicated continued contact with their partners. In these two instances the following factors might have emerged: engagement (100%), peer connections (100%), communication (100%), social support (100%), collaborative skills (100%), trust (100%), and perspectives (14%). See Figure 5.5 for factors contributing to ongoing partner contact.

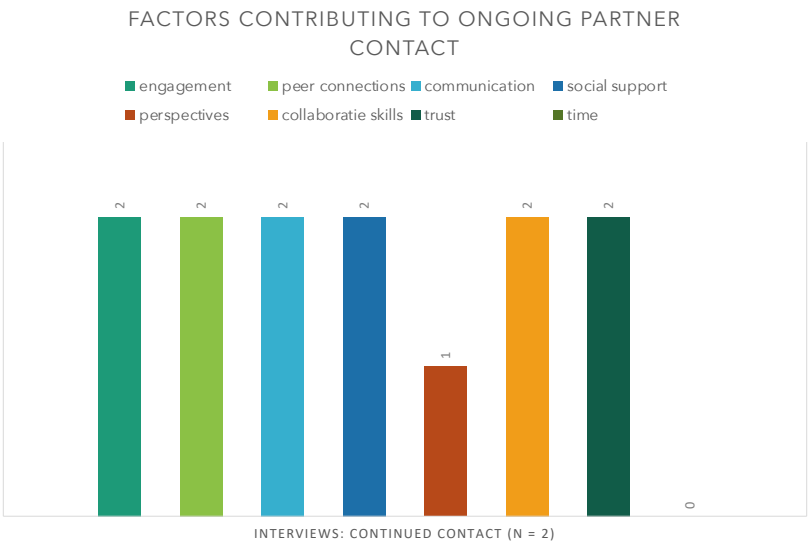

Figure 5.5: Factors contributing to ongoing partner contact

Lastly, Amahle seemed to indicate a desire to meet her partner "in person." Based on the data, engagement, communication, social support, and trust may have been contributing factors in this occurrence. The next section provides additional findings from two interview participants that indicated that the GTKAC activity had no impact in Chapter 4. Further exploration of these two individuals provided additional data for understanding participant experiences.

No Connection

Out of the seven participants, three did not indicate a connection with their partner. The data seemed to indicate the following reasons: (1) a single meeting was not enough to result in a connection, (2) issues with their assigned partner, and (3) misalignment with preferences. For example, Rafael, shared:

> *I don't know if I necessarily made a connection, because I only had to talk to them one time, so really you can't take too much from that one experience.*

Rafael's response may indicate factors within the relational theme: engagement (not sure if he made a connection, "only had to talk to them one time"), peer connection ("don't know if I necessarily made a connection," "can't take too much from that experience"), and communication ("talk to them one time"). Each of these factors may have contributed to Rafael's perceived connection with his partner and his experiences in RCJ3000.

Another participant, Evere, expressed:

> *I didn't necessarily have any interest in getting to know her any better just because it didn't feel like she was respecting my time. Even after she did eventually respond to me, she took a really long time to finish the assignment.*

Evere's statement seemed to indicate aspects of the relational theme: engagement ("I didn't have any interest in getting to know her," "She did eventually respond to me"), and communication ("did eventually respond to me"). Her response might also indicate the peer theme with collaborative skills ("to finish the assignment"). Her response might also indicate the individual theme: time (partner not respecting her time, "long time to finish"). Each of these aspects could have contributed to Evere's perceived connection with her partner and her experiences in RCJ3000. See Figure 5.6 for a comparative categorical analysis of peer connection and no peer connection.

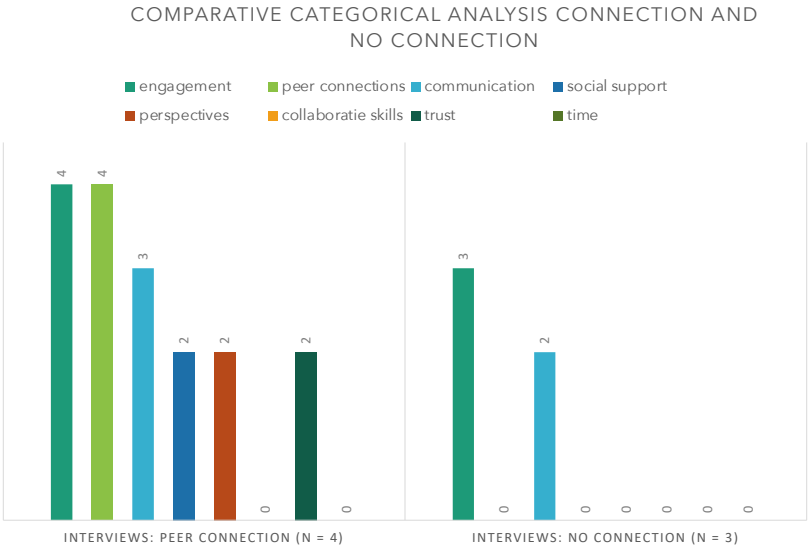

Figure 5.6: Comparative categorical analysis of connection and no connection

Summary of Perceived Connection with Partner and the GTKAC Activity

Of the seven participants, four seemed to indicate a connection with their partner and three seemed to indicate that they did not have a connection with their partner. Thematic analysis of the seven responses resulted in three themes: relational, peer, and individual. The relational theme emerged across all participant responses (100%). This seemed to indicate that engagement, peer connections, and communication were revealed during analysis. The factor of engagement was indicated in all participant responses (100%), communication might have emerged in five responses (71%), and peer connections might be indicated in four responses (57%).

The peer theme also might have been indicated in three participant responses (43%). This might indicate the factors of social support, perspectives, and collaborative skills. Of these factors social support seemed to emerge in two responses (29%), perspectives might have been

indicated in two responses (29%), and collaborative skills may have been indicated in one response (14%).

The individual theme might have emerged in three participant responses (43%). This seemed to indicate the factors of time (14%) and trust (29%). See Figure 5.7 for a visual of peer connections and the GTKAC activity by category.

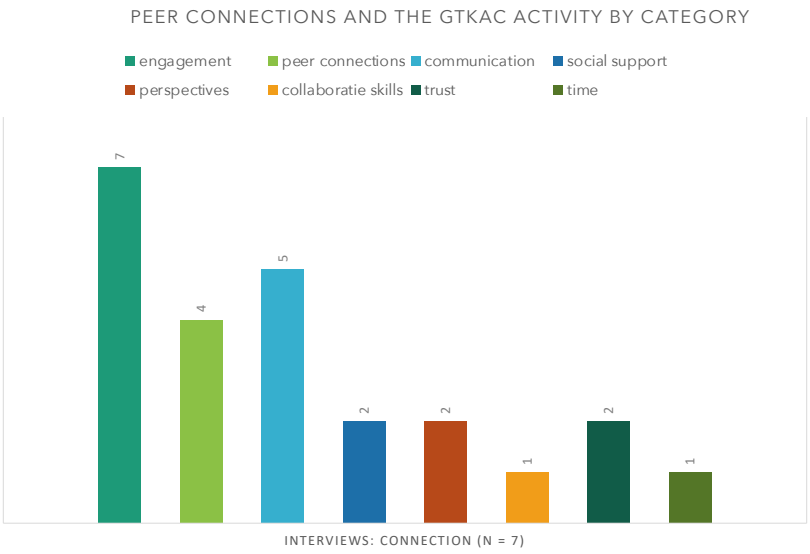

Figure 5.7: Peer connections and the GTKAC activity by category

Overall, the data might have indicated that some participants perceived a relationship or connection with their assigned partner as a result of the GTKAC activity. The contributing factors for these relationships might include engagement, communication, peer connections, social support, perspectives, collaborative skills, and trust.

Exploring No Impact

In Chapter 4, an exploration into the perspectives of the 25 participants who reported no perceived connection or relationship from the GTKAC activity revealed interesting insights.

Survey results showed ten participants from this category further expressed that the activity had no impact on their experiences in RCJ3000 (40%). Exploring participant open-ended responses corresponding with no impact in Chapter 4 provided data that framed the GTKAC activity in the context of individual social preferences and expectations in AOLEs. The subsequent interviews provided a deeper understanding, revealing that responses of no impact might not have captured the complexity of participants' experiences.

Rafael and Tiffany, two participants that expressed no impact, provided perspectives that highlighted both the limitations and possibilities associated with the GTKAC activity. This section explores their experiences from perceiving no impact to sharing nuance in their engagement with the activity.

In the case of interview findings, data seemed to indicate that regardless of his response of no impact, Rafael may have attributed some perceived value to the activity. Furthermore, both Tiffany and Rafael indicated a desire for additional activities like the GTKAC activity. Notably, they both seemed to express appreciation for specific elements of the activity. These insights furthered understanding of participants' possible acknowledgement of the activity's potential value and enjoyable traits during the interview sessions.

In Chapter 4, Tiffany indicated very valuable for the Likert Scale question detailed in Table 4.17. However, her response to the open-ended survey question indicated that the activity was "just another assignment." During the interview, Tiffany shared that:

> *I don't think it was as valuable for me because I enrolled in an asynchronous course to get through the course for myself. I wasn't interested in getting to know people, so I don't think it was valuable for me.*

Tiffany's response seemed to indicate that the activity was misaligned with her social preferences and expectations for an asynchronous online course. When asked to elaborate, she expressed that she completed the assignment because it was for a grade. This reflects the findings of researched conducted by Conrad (2002), which determined that some adult learners noted limitations on the amount of time they could allocate to social activities. Tiffany's response acknowledging the activity's importance being tied to grading paralleled Rafael's motivation for completing the task. In general, requiring the activities and assigning grades emerged as critical for participant completion.

Rafael and Tiffany both indicated that they would like more activities like the GTKAC activity. Their objectives for these additional activities centered around preparation for collaborative group work in AOLEs. Both participants indicated a desire for more group work in RCJ3000 and provided evidence that they perceived the GTKAC activity as a "good" activity to enhance collaborative processes. Tiffany suggested that the group based GTKAC activities be assigned following Drop/Add:

> *So that we know that we are all stuck in the class together for the remaining part of the semester and we're in this thing together, and then this group can do getting to know me assignments.*

Rafael also suggested assigning group based GTKAC activities following Drop/Add and to provide these activities throughout the semester. He shared:

> *When the class ends, let people share how their experience was with the class and how well they were able to work with other classmates, this class would benefit from a lot more group work.*

These responses seemed to align with Rafael and Tiffany's indicated preferences for asynchronous online learning modalities, e.g., they seemed to be task-based and successful working independently, but indicated the importance of group work and how getting to know fellow classmates may improve collaborative processes.

Rafael indicated that he enjoyed the GTKAC activity based upon the data provided above, while Tiffany expressed that she "enjoyed turning in an assignment and receiving a grade." However, when asked if she would elaborate upon her experience during the activity, Tiffany shared:

> *I was paired with someone who was obviously the complete opposite to myself, which I didn't hate the assignment. It was good to get to know about someone else who was different than myself. It's always good to get to know about new people and learn about different things.*

Tiffany's response seemed to indicate that while her perceived enjoyment of the activity might have been attributed to the grading process, she highlighted the potential benefits of engaging with peers through activities like the GTKAC activity. In particular, she mentioned the opportunity to encounter diverse perspectives through interactions with others. The benefits of working with diverse individuals were emphasized in a study by Ordovás de Almeida et al. (2014) who found that combining individuals from different backgrounds, knowledge levels, and experiences can result in innovative ideas that may enhance learning.

Overall, the data from Rafael and Tiffany seemed to indicate that Rafael perceived some value from the GTKAC activity, Tiffany and Rafael would like more activities like the GTKAC activity, specifically to enhance collaborative group work, and both participants indicated some perceived enjoyment or benefit from meeting, talking with, and learning about a peer student.

Despite their self-disclosed busy schedules and preferences for independence in online spaces, engaging with a classmate might have augmented their experiences in RCJ3000.

The variability of responses from Tiffany and Rafael highlighted the importance of data triangulation in qualitative studies. As such, the research survey and the interviews were intended to capture data from multiple sources in order to examine the same phenomenon (Saldaña, 2014). As demonstrated in the data, an individuals' perception of an experience may undergo changes for several reasons. These reasons include possible influences from external forces (e.g., being interviewed by the activity designer) and should be noted. The next section provides a summary of the interview findings.

Summary of Interview Findings

The findings of the survey session interviews were presented in this chapter. The findings were explored through the following topics: (1) perceived value of the GTKAC, (2) ideal frequency of activities, (3) perceived enjoyment of activities, (4) perceived connection with partners, and (5) exploring no impact. The data indicated that six of the seven participants perceived that the GTKAC activity had value, all seven participants indicated that they wanted more activities like the GTKAC in online courses, five out of six participants seemed to indicate perceived enjoyment of the GTKAC activity, four out of the seven participants suggested a perceived connection with their partners, two participants had ongoing contact with their partners following the GTKAC activity, and two participants provided additional data pertaining to a no impact response from Chapter 4. These two participants seemed to indicate that while the GTKAC activity was misaligned with their preferences in AOLEs, some perceived value and enjoyment seemed to result from their experience meeting, talking with, and learning about a peer student.

Additionally, data might indicate a perceived connection with partners as a contributing factor in each of the four topic areas (value, frequency, enjoyment, connection). Having a connection with a peer student seemed to contribute to the perceived value of the activity for some participants, the type of additional activities suggested by some participants included affective and social-based activities to further partner connections, and perceived enjoyment of the activity to include the process of meeting a peer student for some participants. Data seemed to reveal that a possible factor contributing to the perceived connections with peers might be the sharing of personal information and discovering commonalities between partners. Overall, data may indicate that many interview participants enjoyed meeting, talking with, and learning about their partners. See Figure 5.8 for a visual of categorical frequency across question topics.

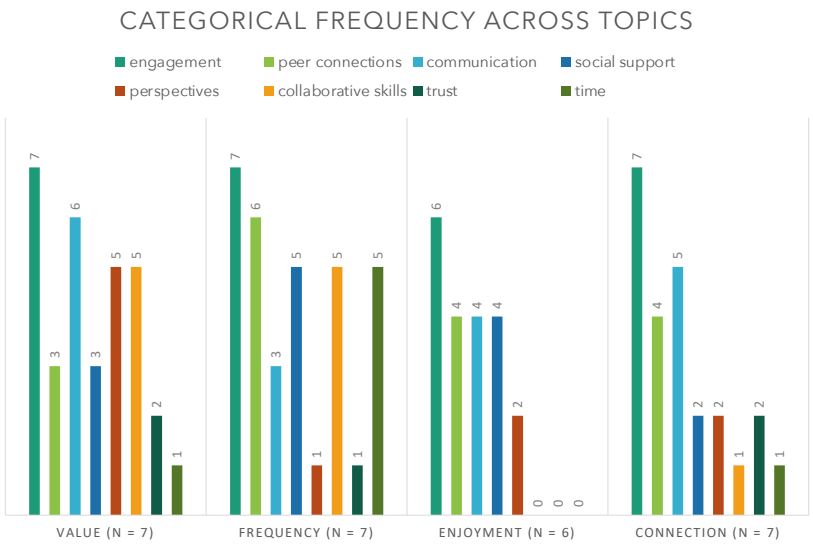

Figure 5.8: Categorical frequency across question topics

The data from the interviews might indicate that the two required student-to-student relationship development activities in RCJ3000 impacted participants in three areas, relational (100%), peer (81%), and individual (37%). These areas included the following categories and outcomes. In the relational area, data might have indicated the categories of engagement (100%), communication (67%), and peer connections (63%). In the peer area, data might have indicated social support (54%), collaborative skills (41%), and perspectives (37%). In the individual area, data may have indicated time (26%) and trust (19%). In the next chapter, I present my overall interpretation of the findings provided in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the impact of required student-to-student relationship development activities on the experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in the asynchronous online learning environment (AOLE), RCJ3000: Research Methods in Criminal Justice. To develop an understanding of student experiences as described in the research question and arrive at conclusions, I administered a research survey and interviewed undergraduate students enrolled in an AOLE. Overall, 36 survey responses and seven participant interviews were selected for inclusion and analysis in this study.

This chapter presents the cumulative findings of the study, an overall interpretation of the findings in relation to the literature on student-to-student relationships in online learning environments, and the theoretical framework selected for this study, which included Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the Phases of Engagement Model (PoEM). The qualitative case study design with an interpretive lens resulted in the identification of several factors that may contribute to the impact of required student-to-student relationship development activities on student experiences in RCJ3000. This chapter also includes a discussion of the implications for theory and practice, limitations and delimitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a brief conclusion.

Cumulative Findings of the Study

In Chapters 4 and 5, a detailed analysis of the findings of the study were provided. Drawing on the results from the survey and interviews, the summary of findings is presented in the context of the research question. The research question and summary of findings are presented below.

How do required student-to-student relationship development activities impact student experiences in asynchronous online learning environments?

Participants seemed to indicate that the two required student-to-student relationship development activities impacted their experience in RCJ3000 in a variety of ways. While outcomes are always dependent on the subjective preferences and experiences of individual students, overall, the GTKAC activity seemed to emerge as a supportive element in RCJ3000 in that the activity resulted in many participants having an opportunity to meet, converse, and learn about a peer student, and the activity seemed to provide a sense of social presence and/or support throughout the semester for some participants. Further, several participants indicated that the activity was valuable and one that they enjoyed. Moreover, the findings from the in-depth thematic analysis seemed to indicate that participants' experiences in RCJ3000 were impacted through the (1) *relational factors* of engagement, peer connections, and communication, and (2) the *peer factor* of social support. The interpretation of the findings is presented by integrating results across the survey and the interviews and grounding them in the literature.

Overall Interpretation of the Findings

The findings from the research survey and interviews were consistent across the themes and categories identified, resulting in triangulation and saturation of data. The findings from the five participants who contributed to both the survey and the interviews were constant across the

two instruments. This provided further evidence for data validity. A detailed discussion of the interpretation of the findings follows below starting with overall findings and then the thematic analysis.

Meet, Converse, Learn and the GTKAC Activity

As detailed in Chapter 4, survey data suggested that the majority of participants did not report a perceived connection with their partners due to the GTKAC activity. However, the reported outcomes regarding the impact of the GTKAC activity, the impact of a peer connection, and the interview data in Chapter 5 yielded consistent findings. Thus, the data suggested that the reported impact of the GTKAC activity on participant experiences remained constant, regardless of whether participants reported a perceived connection or relationship with a peer student resulting from the activity.

In general, many participants expressed an impact in terms of (1) valuing and/or enjoying the process of meeting, conversing with, and/or learning about a peer student, and/or (2) experiencing a sense of social presence and support throughout the semester. For instance, survey participants, Shonda and Malcolm, conveyed perceived enjoyment derived from getting to know their partners and mutually sharing information, a result of their reported perceived connection with a peer student. Similarly, survey participants, Tawana, Lucia, and Audrey, despite not reporting a perceived connection with their partners, also expressed perceived enjoyment in conversing with their peers – an outcome they attributed to the GTKAC activity.

Interview participants, Rafael, Jules, and Javier highlighted their perceived value resultant from the GTKAC activity. They expressed this perceived value as instrumental in helping them “communicate more effectively,” “practice interview skills,” and providing a platform that “brought me out to talk and whatnot.” This perceived value appeared to be closely

associated with the opportunity the activity provided to practice interpersonal and intrapersonal skills during interactions with peer partners. Interview participants, Amahle and Maire expressed their perceived value of the GTKAC activity as “having the connection that I typically don’t have in my other classes,” and “I have a friend now in my class, so I would say it was definitely valuable.” Their perceived value seemed to be associated with the relationship established with a peer student afforded by the activity. These findings may align with research by Kaufmann and Vallade (2022), which found higher satisfaction among online students who had the opportunity to establish interpersonal connections with their peers. Consequently, these results suggested that participants’ perceived value and/or enjoyment of the GTKAC activity were not dependent on wither they reported a perceived connection or relationship with a peer student.

Survey participants, Tiffany and Kayla, expressed a propensity for independent work and indicated time constraints allocated for "relationship activities," however, both participants might have experienced a sense of belonging through the GTKAC activity. Tiffany acknowledged the inherent value of learning about others, stating, "it's always good to get to know about new people." Similarly, Kayla reported a positive experience, noting that her partner was great, and they worked perfectly together. These instances implied that the GTKAC activity might have contributed to a sense of inclusion, even for individuals with demanding schedules who might prefer independent work.

This may align with the work of Conrad and Donaldson (2012) and Su et al. (2005), which emphasized that learning is both a social and individual activity, thus student relationships may foster a sense of belonging or inclusivity. Moreover, the findings of Farrell and Brunton (2020) may further support this notion, which determined that both formal and informal interactions may result in a sense of belonging. These studies collectively highlight the potential

value of social interactions in enhancing learning experiences, even for those who may consider themselves more inclined toward independent study.

Enjoyment in education has been tied to the concept of rapport (Glazier, 2016; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Rapport concerns the perception that "one has a personal connection and positive enjoyable interactions with others" (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022, p. 1796). While instructor-student rapport has been identified as a significant factor in student success (Glazier, 2016), student-to-student rapport may further contribute to perceptions of more connected learning spaces and lead to increased student participation and retention (Archambault et al., 2022; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Additionally, students that perceive higher levels of rapport with their classmates might experience less loneliness and isolation in the online learning space (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022).

Participants who expressed perceived enjoyment in their responses used phrases like, "I enjoyed the overall experience," "I enjoyed talking to my partner," and "we did enjoy our conversation that day." While additional research is necessary to explore building student-to-student rapport in online environments (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022), the findings in this study suggested that many participants perceived enjoyment from interacting with a peer student through the GTKAC activity. According to research, this interaction might have contributed to building rapport among participants in RCJ3000. Additionally, findings might suggest building rapport to be a more distributive process, augmenting the ongoing instructor-student interaction strategy, as demonstrated in Glazier's work (2016). However, additional research is needed to investigate building rapport as a potential outcome of the two required relationship development activities.

Social Presence and Support

Social presence has been extensively researched in online learning contexts and involves how students perceive and relate to others in digital spaces (Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Weidlich et al., 2021;). Particularly, it refers to the extent to which students in a learning environment feel real and connected to one another (Weidlich et al., 2021). The study findings seemed to indicate that some participants expressed a sense of social presence and/or support throughout the semester due to the GTKA activity. For example, survey participant, Isserly, shared "I felt that if I ever needed help from a classmate, I could reach out to them." This statement seemed to indicate social presence as a possible outcome associated with her experience of the GTKAC activity. This outcome was similarly shared by Maire, an interview participant, who expressed that due to the connection with her partner, she "wasn't always feeling alone," which might further indicate social presence.

Additional, participants that indicated social presence described outcomes of the GTKAC activity or their peer connection as "security in the class" and being "here for each other." This finding may align with research conducted by Lowenthal et al. (2020), which found that synchronous communication can help decrease isolation and improve social presence.

Social support refers to the assistance, encouragement, and information that individuals may provide to each other (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Farrell & Brunton, 2020). When students collaborate, social support may emerge as means to provide accountability, navigate challenges, and retain motivation in online courses (Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2016; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Shea et al., 2022). Rihanne, a survey participant, seemed to describe social support due to the GTKAC activity, sharing "I did add her to this GroupMe with other classmates, to discuss the class and all." Likewise, survey participant, Ashia shared "it gave me

the opportunity to reach out or to provide help throughout the course." Ashia's statement seemed to describe social support resulting from her connection with a peer student. These findings may support the research of Farrell and Brunton (2020), Lehman and Conceição (2010), and Weidlich et al. (2021), which emphasized the importance of providing online students with opportunities to relate to one another, which may contribute to support and a sense of belonging.

Additional, participants that indicated social support in their responses described it as "the opportunity to reach out or to help throughout the course" and "we would help each other out throughout the semester." These findings may suggest that participants perceived their peers as fulfilling a supportive role in their learning experience. This aligned with the findings of Farrell and Brunton (2020), which highlighted the importance of informal peer support in online communities and its contribution to fostering a sense of belonging.

While social presence focuses on feelings of "being there" and connectedness to others (Lehman & Conceição), social support may help learners succeed in their academic endeavors (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Both are important contributors to an engaging and positive online learning experience. In the case of this study, some participants seemed to indicate both social presence and social support in their responses regarding the impact of the GTKAC activity or the impact of a peer connection. These outcomes from interacting with a peer student seemed to align with findings from studies on the benefits of student-to-student interactions. Such benefits may include engagement, belonging, and rapport (Farrell & Brunton, 2021; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Martin & Borup, 2022; Shea et al., 2022; Weidlich et al., 2022).

Thematic Analysis

The categories within each of the broad themes of relational and peer factors resulted in common findings across participants. See Figure 6.1 for a visual of cumulative categorical frequencies in this study.

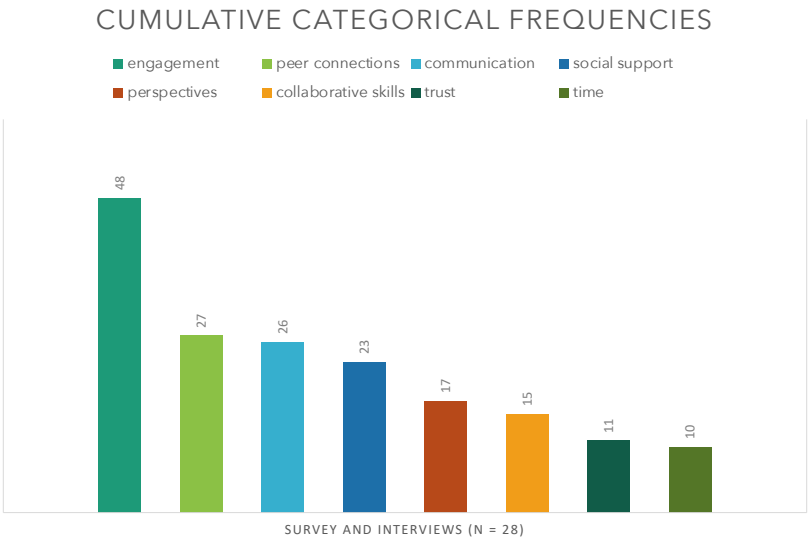

Figure 6.1: Cumulative categorical frequencies in the study

Relational Factors

In terms of relational factors comprising the interpersonal and social aspects of the participant experience, the findings resulted in three categories: (1) engagement, (2) peer connections, and (3) communication. Examples and outcomes for each of these categories are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Engagement. In terms of engagement, the data indicated that the GTKAC activity contributed to participants' engagement in RCJ3000. For the purposes of this study, engagement comprised interaction with peers, course activities, and affective responses describing

experiences. The conceptual definition proposed by Martin and Borup (2022) was appropriate for capturing both dimensions of learner engagement and the environmental affordances of influence. As detailed in findings of this study, engagement primarily took place through communication, interaction, presence, and collaboration (Martin & Borup, 2022).

The findings of this study provided evidence that integrating asynchronous video activities may promote engagement. This may align with findings from research by Martin and Borup (2022) and Lowenthal et al. (2020), which found that using asynchronous video in online learning spaces may encourage engagement and foster community. The survey results indicated that 83% of participants interacted with the FlipGrid video introductions of their classmates. This reflected behavioral engagement with a social icebreaker as suggested by Conrad and Donaldson (2011, 2012). In addition, 42% of participants indicated viewing their assigned partner's FlipGrid video prior to meeting them, which revealed cognitive engagement as participants demonstrated "mental energy exerted toward productive involvement with course learning activities" (Borup et al., 2020, p. 813).

Participants' viewing of their partner's FlipGrid video may also have demonstrated a link between the IYFG and GTKAC activities, illustrating an association between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the PoEM (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012). Thus, findings suggested that the IYFG activity resulted in affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement for participants. This finding is consistent with existing studies focused on increasing student engagement through the use of asynchronous videos (Lowenthal et al., 2020; Martin & Borup, 2022) and instructional guidance for effective ice breaker activities in online course design (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012).

In the case of the GTKAC activity, participants seemed to indicate engagement during the activity, which included five tasks required for completion. The communication requirement of the synchronous session seemed to promote student-to-student engagement as indicated in the work of Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009), Shea et al. (2022), and Weidlich et al. (2022). Additionally, scaffolding the synchronous session for participants with an optional conversational prompt might have contributed to the success of these sessions (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, 2012; Mancino, 2011).

Findings from the study suggested that participants were engaged through the writing and reading of the biographical narratives. The writing requirement was intended to encourage engagement through writing about others as indicated in the work of Biber (2020) and Lawlor (2016). The partner approval prior to submission was intended to function as a form of peer review to promote engagement. Results from this study illustrated that engagement did occur for many participants, which is similar to the findings in the study of Farrell and Brunton (2020), which found that fostering peer interactions contributed to online student engagement.

Furthermore, the participants' engagement seemed to contribute to the perceived value and enjoyment of the GTKAC activity as evidenced by findings. The perceived value of the GTKAC activity seemed to emerge via engagement through technology, peers, and affective responses to the required course activities. For example, survey participant, Rihanne, wrote "It was nice getting to know my partner, we both are busy, so the texting wasn't at the same time, but [we] got to know each other still. I think there should be more projects like this because it's hard to meet people." Perceived enjoyment of the GTKAC activity seemed to manifest through engagement with peer students as previously indicated in the findings above.

Peer Connections. Participants demonstrated various types of interaction with peers as detailed in the findings. These peer interactions were promoted through the two required course activities. To complete the IYFG activity, participants interacted first by posting an introductory video of themselves and second through voluntarily watching posted videos of their classmates. These steps were intended to promote social presence and foster a sense of community by incorporating asynchronous video and engaging participants in asynchronous communication. This approach reflected findings of Lowenthal et al. (2020) and Shea et al. (2020), where the utilization of asynchronous video facilitated a sense of connection, encouraged individual reflection, and enhanced collaborative knowledge construction, respectively.

The GTKAC activity provided additional opportunities for participants to interact with a peer. The five tasks afforded participants to interact with, cognitively consider, and contact their partners (Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Weidlich et al., 2022). The synchronous session, writing the biographical narrative, and peer approval of the narrative were tasks that seemed to facilitate meaningful student-to-student interactions (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016). These tasks aimed to foster connection, decrease isolation, and improve social presence (Biber, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Lowenthal et al., 2020).

The relational factor of peer connections seemed to contribute to the perceived value and enjoyment of the GTKAC activity, as evidenced by findings in this study. The emergence of perceived value and enjoyment seemed associated with the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills required for activity completion, along with lingering social presence and/or support for some participants.

Communication. The data indicated that the two required relationship development activities appeared to enhance communication pathways between participants and their partners.

The synchronous session, a key component, provided a familiar platform for interacting with classmates, and aligned with established research on the use of communicative technology tools during the pandemic (Lowenthal et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2020). The design of the conversational prompt questions, coupled with the suggested timeframe for the synchronous session, aimed to foster rapport and connectedness, drawing on insights from the research conducted by Kaufmann and Vallade (2022).

According to Kaufmann and Vallade (2022) connectedness is encouraged between students through opportunities to "smile, laugh, and engage in small talk" (p.1797). In the context of this study, participants seemed to engage in informal communication with their assigned partners. For example, survey participant, Amahle, wrote "I love the fact that we can chat about not only the class, but life in general." Informal communication was further evidenced in interview responses, with participant, Jules, sharing "I would say we had a little virtual luncheon." In addition, survey data indicated that many participants exceeded the recommended time for communicating with their partners during the synchronous session. Existing research suggests that promoting connectedness through communication may also reduce perceptions of loneliness, a possibility suggested by study findings but not conclusively confirmed (Driver, 2018; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022).

The synchronous session, narrative writing, and approval process were intended to promote collaborative learning as defined by Jeong and Hmelo-Silver (2016) as "two or more people working together toward a shared learning goal" (p. 247). Based on findings, the activities listed above seemed to have provided participants with the opportunity to share knowledge, life experiences, and perspectives with each other. For example, survey participant,

Malcolm, wrote, “We had a very positive connection… meeting someone who is in college and went through the same experiences as me.”

Participants also seemed to demonstrate communication skills as they interpreted the information they learned about their partners for the biographical narrative. Survey data suggested that most participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the story written about them. This may indicate that participant success in sharing their personal backgrounds and experiences with each other and reproducing that information accurately for their classmates (Biber, 2020; Mancino, 2011). These tasks may have contributed to creating social bonds between partners through emotional intelligence. For example, survey participant, Tawana, wrote “I did enjoy talking to my partner and [reading] the story that they wrote about me.” This reflected the response from interview participant, Tiffany, who expressed “It was really nice reading what she wrote about me.” This finding appeared to correspond with research conducted by Katzman and Stanton (2020), which indicated that peers who exchange personal information might be more aware of each other in the learning environment, potentially fostering a sense of belonging in online learning contexts.

In summary, the relational factor of communication seemed to have contributed to the perceived value and enjoyment of the GTKAC activity as evidenced by findings from this study. The data provides evidence that perceived value and enjoyment emerged from communicating with a peer student for many participants.

Peer Factors

In terms of peer factors originating from interactions between peer students through course activities and the relational factors shared between them, the findings resulted in the

category of social support. Examples and outcomes for this category as revealed in the findings are provided in the following section.

Social Support. In terms of social support, participants not only had the opportunity to receive support from their peers but also to reciprocate this support. Furthermore, the required course activities offered participants the choice to sustain this social support if they wished. According to the findings, social support seemed to manifest as social presence, evident in discussions of course content, informal conversations, the sharing of additional resources by peers, and in some instances, accountability throughout the semester. Consequently, the required course activities might have played a role in mitigating the sense of solitude often associated with online learning, as interpreted in the experiences of some participants (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022).

While some participants seemed to experience social presence without ongoing communication, others expressed sustained communicative support. This discovery aligned with the findings of a study conducted by Lowenthal et al. (2022), which advocated for the effective use of technology tools to promote connectedness amongst distance learners. The use of the virtual conferencing tool during the synchronous sessions not only provided participants with a familiar environment for their sessions, but also established the groundwork for continued contact, should they prefer such engagement.

The findings of this study may indicate an important role of social support in diminishing feelings of isolation and loneliness, concurrently fostering connectedness amongst some participants as determined by Kaufmann and Vallade (2022). To illustrate, Maire, an interview participant, expressed that the activities afforded her with “someone to go through the semester

with. So, I'm not just always feeling alone." Thus, social presence may have contributed to lessening her sense of solitude.

Furthermore, the findings from this study suggested that participants, when given the opportunity to engage with their peers, made deliberate choices regarding the continuity or conclusion of these relationships after completing the activities. This seemed to reflect a study conducted by Boyle et al. (2010), where students were granted the option to self-enroll in informal mentoring programs rather than be automatically enrolled. In the study, this approach empowered participants with autonomy and control over their learning, aligning with the independent learning preferences often exhibited by online learners (Boyle et al., 2010; Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2022).

The personal nature of the questions provided in the conversational prompt were intended to encourage the sharing of personal information quickly, but without intrusiveness. Some participants indicated that the personal content of the information they knew about their partner helped them feel more at ease when seeking help or clarification of course content during the semester (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022, Rovai, 2002). For example, interview participant, Jules, shared "I was able to not feel uncomfortable asking for help because it was my partner that I knew so much about." Jules' sentiment was reflected by other participants who found reaching out to their partner more favorable than "posting on a discussion board," "texting in a GroupMe," or "emailing the instructor." This finding seemed to align with the work of Rovai (2002) regarding trust and retention in online learning spaces, which indicated that mutual trust encourages students to share knowledge gaps and seek assistance, rather than withdraw. Moreover, trust and knowledge sharing may also contribute to rapport according to research (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Rovai, 2002).

Overall, the peer factor of social support, seemed to emerge as a contributor to the perceived value and enjoyment of the GTKAC activity, as evidenced by the findings. Some participants seemed to indicate that they derived perceived value and enjoyment from a heightened sense of social presence and support throughout the semester, as discussed in a previous section.

Implications for Theory

Chapter 2 provided a theoretical framework including two components: Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the Phases of Engagement Model (PoEM). The results of this study indicated that these two components provided a robust lens to examine the two required student-to-student relationship development activities in RCJ3000. SEL provided the process for creating course activities imbued with opportunity to enhance interpersonal and intrapersonal skills through promoting holistic human connections. PoEM assisted in providing the instructional strategy to deploy the SEL-based activities, while promoting engagement. The findings and implications in relation to each of these components are discussed in the following sections.

Social Emotional Learning

SEL competencies played a pivotal role in shaping the two required activities in this study. The activities sought to cultivate participants' emotional intelligence, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and overall well-being. By adopting a holistic perspective, SEL recognized students not only as learners in an online course but as individuals striving for success in various aspects of their lives (Conley, 2015; Elias et al., 1997). The development of course activities aligned with the intention of assisting students in acquiring skills essential for success in future online courses, gaining insights into their peer community, and potentially applying these skills in their future careers. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that designing activities with the

intent of fostering these competencies does not guarantee their manifestation. Subsequent research should delve into questions surrounding SEL skills, potentially conducting a longitudinal study throughout the semester to ascertain participants' achievement or increased skills regarding the five competencies.

In this study, participants exhibited diverse perspectives, yet a common thread emerged in their attitudes toward relationships. Shared sentiments, such as an interest in forming new relationships and challenges encountered in establishing relationships post-pandemic, were evident in the survey results. These results mirrored the challenges many individuals have faced regarding forming connections with peers after the 2020 pandemic and further highlighted a need for effective relationship strategies (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Yang, 2021). Interviews echoed a desire for companionship and social interaction among participants, coupled with hesitancy to initiate these interactions. Maire, an interview participant, shared “I enjoyed that I did get to meet someone in my class. [Because] you go through a six-month semester and you don’t know anyone, and it’s like, ‘okay, I don’t want to reach out,’ you run a risk with speaking out.” Maire’s expressed hesitation highlighted the potential risks associated with reaching out in an academic setting. In light of such relational challenges, the SEL framework could serve as a guide (Walker, 2020). Further exploration of SEL as a framework for enhancing students' relationship skills, social awareness, and self-awareness, especially considering the lingering effects of the pandemic, may provide valuable insights into assisting online students in learning how to initiate and cultivate relationships.

Survey results seemed to reveal heightened awareness and increased peer support interactions in response to the GTKAC activity, which also aligned with the SEL competencies. Expressions of gaining new perspectives, learning about classmates' lives, and recognizing

diversity seemed to indicate social awareness. These peer interactions might reflect the development of relationship skills, essential for fostering a positive online learning environment, community, and collaboration. For instance, survey participants, Eliza, Crystal, and Shameka expressed heightened awareness, stating “it gave me a new perspective on my classmates as a whole,” “an interesting way to learn about my classmates,” and “made me see just how different people’s lives are.” Participants seemed to indicate that the GTKAC activity facilitated peer interactions and may have promoted recognition of others within their learning experiences. This discovery may align with research by Croft et al. (2014) and Katzman and Stanton (2020), suggesting that SEL curriculum could increase social behavior, offering support for the development of SEL competencies, including social awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and self-awareness.

Intrapersonal skills seemed to be activated through participant experiences with the GTKAC activity, which required interaction with someone they had never met. Javier's disclosure “I don’t usually stay on the phone that long, so it felt like it brought me out to talk and whatnot,” seemed to align with social and emotional awareness (Kamei and Harriott, 2020) and may be consistent with SEL competencies of self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision-making.

In summary, this study provided exploratory evidence regarding participants' potential activation of the five SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. However, further research, explicitly measuring participants' acquisition or enhancement of these competencies through the two required student-to-student relationship development activities, is necessary for a more comprehensive understanding.

The Phases of Engagement Model

As an instructional strategy, the PoEM provided an intentional approach and sequence to the two required course activities. Following the recommendations of Conrad and Donaldson (2011, 2012) the IYFG activity served as an individual introductory activity for Phase 1. As a social ice breaker, the IYFG activity focused on promoting engagement and social presence (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). Survey findings indicated that the IYFG activity contributed to both behavioral and affective engagement, meeting the primary goal of Phase 1 by familiarizing students with course technology and encouraging them to share some personal information. Positive feedback from participants, such as interview participant, Evere, who expressed that she "enjoyed watching bite-sized bits of people talking about themselves," illustrated the effectiveness of the social ice breaker.

The GTKAC activity, was designed to achieve Phase 2 objectives by creating an atmosphere conducive for deeper communication between students, yielded encouraging outcomes (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). Survey findings revealed extended conversations between some participants during the synchronous sessions, and the provided conversational prompt facilitated the sharing of personal information, which may have contributed to the development of relationship skills (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Rotar, 2022). However, while these findings suggest effective implementation of the initial phases, a comprehensive investigation of the subsequent three phases is warranted to fully assess the PoEM's efficacy.

Survey and interview findings revealed that some participants expressed interest in advancing to Phase 3, emphasizing the potential value of further exploration into the impact of the PoEM model. This interest seemed to indicate a desire to progress into the collaborative phase of the model. However, to further understand the implications of the PoEM for fostering

collaborative learning and sustained engagement throughout the semester, additional research is recommended.

Implications for Practice

The results from this study served to broaden understanding of AOLEs by exploring the impact of required student-to-student relationship development activities on student experiences. The outcomes of this study provided a basis for the following implications for practice: (1) creating activities to promote engagement in AOLEs, (2) supporting social presence and support in AOLEs, and (3) valuing and promoting peer interactions in AOLEs. Each of these implications for practice are described in detail below.

Creating Activities to Promote Engagement in AOLEs

The outcomes of this study underscore the role of intentionally designing activities that foster learner engagement in AOLEs. The findings revealed that engagement was facilitated through several elements, including asynchronous video, collaborative scheduling, synchronous sessions, and peer review. Notably, the GTKAC activity emerged as a potent catalyst for enhancing engagement among participants in RCJ3000, potentially owing to its multi-step nature and repeated partner interactions. This insight suggests that synchronous activities with direct partner engagement may yield more profound impacts when compared to activities where students post artifacts in an online space and move on. Crafting activities that stimulate behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagement, in alignment with the conceptual definition provided by Martin and Borup (2022), emerged as a central consideration for effectiveness.

Additionally, it is important to align such activities with the diverse preferences and needs of the student population. This study included both traditional and non-traditional students, with 97% of participants managing additional responsibilities, such as caregiving, part-time, and

full-time jobs. The design of the GTKAC activity facilitated scheduling flexibility, which acknowledged students' busy lives. Despite concerns about time constraints, some participants seemed to indicate a sense of belonging, highlighting the potential impact of well-designed activities on student experiences.

An essential, albeit perhaps obvious, finding was the role of grading in motivating participation. Many participants expressed that without grading, they would not have completed the activities. This underscores the need to consider external motivators, such as grades, when designing and implementing these types of activities in AOLEs.

The success of the IYFG and GTKAC activities in fostering affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement highlighted the importance of thoughtful instructional design, leveraging both synchronous and asynchronous elements. The scaffolding of activities and the incorporation of optional conversational prompts proved instrumental in promoting meaningful engagement during the synchronous session. These findings suggested that the intentional design of activities, informed by the principles of learner engagement, may contribute to creating a participatory online learning community, ultimately enhancing the overall student experience. Future instructional practices should consider integrating similar engagement-promoting activities, drawing on the outcomes of this study.

Supporting Social Presence and Support in AOLEs

The outcomes of this study highlighted the potential benefits of fostering social presence and support in AOLEs. The GTKAC activity seemed successful in generating a sense of social presence and support among some participants in RCJ3000. Social presence, as described by participants' experiences, indicated a feeling of authenticity and connectedness in the online learning space (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). The expressions of "security in the class" and

"being here for each other" suggested that some participants perceived a link with their peers, which may contribute to a sense of belonging (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Weidlich et al., 2021).

Social support, another outcome, emphasized the importance of interactions among participants to provide and seek assistance, encouragement, and share information (Archambault et al., 2022; Rovai, 2002). Some study participants described social support as "the opportunity to reach out or to help throughout the course" and "we would help each other out throughout the semester." This emphasized the potential for peer interactions to serve as a source of accountability, assistance in overcoming challenges, and sustaining motivation in online courses (Jeong & Hmelo-Silver, 2016; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Shea et al., 2022).

To support social presence and support in AOLEs, instructors should consider integrating activities that facilitate meaningful student-to-student interactions. The success of the GTKAC activity suggests that well-designed synchronous sessions and collaborative tasks can contribute to students' perceptions of social presence and support. Furthermore, acknowledging the importance of informal peer support in online communities aligns with findings from previous research (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Instructors should encourage activities that not only promote engagement but also nurture a supportive online learning community. Future instructional practices should leverage these insights to design activities that foster both social presence and support, which may contribute to a more positive and connected learning environment.

Valuing and Promoting Peer Interactions in AOLEs

Online instructors should recognize the value students seem to place on peer interactions, as indicated in this study. The findings highlight the importance of crafting opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with their peers. In this context, the synchronous sessions

proved indispensable for encouraging the student-to-student interactions explored in this study. Not only did it provide a chance for students to communicate in real time, but it required them to engage in an activity that provided skill development while potentially decreasing isolation as indicated in the work of Lowenthal et al. (2020). Furthermore, as students transition from academia to professional roles, the ability to communicate effectively through synchronous video technology will be critical.

Interview participant, Rafael, shared that the GTKAC activity "showed that you need to learn how to talk and communicate with people, whether it's through email, video, or what have you." In this study, many participants seemed to indicate that part of the perceived value of the GTKAC activity was in their ability to practice interpersonal skills. Participants' perceived value and enjoyment, underlines the potential benefits of promoting peer interactions in AOLEs. The findings of this study align with previous research, which suggests that a key to facilitating meaningful interactions is providing opportunities for students to share personal information and discover similarities with one another (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Koh et al., 2010). Moreover, this study suggests that providing more than one opportunity for students to build peer relationships can be effective (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022).

In light of these findings, instructional designers and online instructors should consider incorporating scaffolded synchronous sessions between online students in AOLEs to facilitate real time communication and skill development. Furthermore, providing structured activities, like the GTKAC, that encourage interpersonal and intrapersonal skill practice may enhance the overall student experience. Additionally, offering multiple opportunities for students to engage with their peers, such as through different phases or activities, may contribute to the

establishment and maintenance of meaningful interactions. Emphasizing the relevance of these interactions to students' future professional roles, where effective communication is crucial, can further underscore the importance of valuing and promoting peer interactions in AOLEs.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Despite the contributions of this study, there are limitations and delimitations that need to be acknowledged. These included participant recruitment, language used in instruments, participant prior knowledge of researcher goals, truncating the PoEM, and conducting research amid the vestiges of a global pandemic. In this section, I provide descriptions of these limitations and their potential impact on the study's results.

Participant Recruitment

This study originally aimed to conduct in-depth interviews with six participants throughout the semester; however, recruitment posed challenges, resulting in only one viable participant completing all three interviews. The primary means of recruitment were through email and course announcements, which may have been overwhelmed by the numerous communications students received, particularly at the beginning of the semester. Additionally, requesting participants to dedicate three additional hours to a research study during their semester preparations might have been perceived as excessive, considering many of these participants' existing commitments.

To address this delimitation and enhance participant engagement, the research survey was introduced at the end-of-the semester, leading to the recruitment of additional participants and providing a more comprehensive understanding of student experiences in the course. The final study includes an in-depth analysis of 36 survey participants and seven survey session interview participants, representing a sample of the overall class (n = 50). This expansion was necessary

due to the identified challenges in recruiting participants for in-depth interviews. Despite offering incentives, participants remained reluctant to commit additional time beyond their expected course loads, likely influenced by their full-time employment, substantial coursework, and various personal obligations. This delimitation underscores the practical constraints faced by educational researchers and serves as a contextual backdrop for interpreting the study's findings.

Language of Instrumentation

In retrospect, a potential limitation emerged related to the language used in the survey and interview questions, critical components of the study's instrumentation. The consistent use of terms such as "connection" and "relationships" throughout the survey and interview might have inadvertently influenced participant responses, in Likert scale, open-ended questions, and the protocols. The inherent subjectivity of these terms introduces a level of ambiguity, as individual interpretations of "connection" or "relationships" can vary widely. To address this limitation, future iterations of the study could benefit from providing a clear and context-specific definition for these terms to enhance participant understanding and standardize responses. Alternatively, another approach may involve removing these terms altogether, allowing participants to express their experiences with assigned partners using their own language. This adjustment could potentially yield more nuanced and authentic insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

Prior Knowledge of Researcher Goals

The researcher's goals and the phenomenon under study were shared with participants in the initial recruitment email, in the survey's introduction, and outlined in interview protocols. While important for ethical considerations, providing this information might have influenced participant responses in both instruments. Throughout the interviews, I clarified my role in creating the required activities and my intention to study connections and relationships between

peer students. This aspect could be considered a limitation, as participants may have been inclined to align their responses with researcher goals rather than providing an unfiltered account of their experiences.

Despite this, the interviews revealed ostensibly candid responses, with participants expressing when the activity had no impact or did not result in an ideal experience. It is important to acknowledge that the overall findings might lean more positively due to the nature of semi-structured qualitative interviews and the empathetic rapport I sought to establish. In future studies, withholding specific study details or framing the goals in a more neutral manner may be considered to minimize potential bias. Additionally, collaborating with another researcher not involved in creating the activities could reduce personal bias and foster more authentic conversations and information sharing among participants.

Truncating the PoEM

Another potential limitation of this study stems from the practical challenges associated with fully implementing Phases 3 to 5 of the PoEM within the confines of the RCJ3000 course. Given time and institutional constraints, the comprehensive integration of these later phases proved unfeasible. Nevertheless, the inherent adaptability of the PoEM framework allows for customization, enabling adjustments to suit specific contexts. Given the undergraduate population, limiting the activities to Phases 1 and 2 was considered appropriate and sufficient for achieving the study's objectives (Cannon 2019/2020). Notably, during analysis of survey data, some participants expressed a desire for group work in addition to the two required activities, with interviewees providing additional insights suggesting an expectation toward an eventual group project. While this may indicate the efficacy of Phases 1 and 2 in preparing students for group work in AOLEs, a more thorough exploration of the PoEM is recommended. Subsequent

studies should consider a comprehensive investigation, implementing the PoEM in its entirety, to reveal the complete range of potential outcomes associated with this instructional strategy.

Conducting Post-Pandemic Research

A final potential limitation of this study concerns the broader post-pandemic context and its impact on participants' engagement. The study was conducted in a time marked by the aftermath of a global pandemic, which has impacted the landscape of education and human interaction. The lingering effects of the pandemic may have influenced participants' overall engagement levels, affecting their willingness and ability to actively participate in the study. Factors such as heightened stress, changes in learning environments, and other external factors might have played a role in shaping participant experiences and responses. While efforts were made to create a supportive and inclusive research environment, acknowledging the broader context is important when interpreting the study findings. This limitation underscores the dynamic nature of educational research within the evolving socio-cultural landscape.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study provide several potential directions for future research and exploration. The outcomes of this study have inspired four possibilities for future research. These areas of potential exploration include: (1) comparative studies, (2) different methodological approaches, (3) underrepresented perspectives, and (4) building rapport in AOLEs. These recommendations for future research are indicated in the following section.

Comparative Studies

Future research could include comparative studies to deepen the understanding of the impact of required student-to-student relationship development activities in AOLEs. Comparative studies could explore variations in the effectiveness of these activities across

different academic disciplines, demographic groups, or institutional contexts. Investigating how cultural factors may influence the outcomes of relationship-building initiatives in online courses could also provide valuable insights. Additionally, comparative studies might explore the differential impact of various types of student-to-student activities, such as synchronous versus asynchronous interactions or different modes of communication in AOLEs. This comparative approach could enhance the generalizability of findings as well as offer nuanced insights into the specific conditions under which these relationship development activities are most beneficial. Furthermore, examining the impact of these activities across diverse educational settings, including synchronous online learning environments, and cultural contexts could contribute to the development of more tailored and effective strategies for fostering meaningful interactions among students engaged in online learning.

Differing Methodological Approaches

Future research may include methodological augmentation to deepen the rigor and breadth of investigations into required student-to-student relationship development activities in AOLEs. Incorporating quantitative analyses, such as correspondence analysis, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the patterns and associations within the collected data. This analytical approach may unveil hidden relationships and reveal intricate connections between different variables, contributing to a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings. Additionally, expanding the reach of surveys to a more diverse and extensive population could enhance the external validity of the results. By involving a broader range of participants, researchers could capture a more representative sample of the student body, allowing for generalizations that extend beyond specific courses or institutions. Furthermore, adopting mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative analyses with qualitative insights could offer a

richer, more holistic perspective on the impact of required student-to-student relationship development activities, providing a more robust foundation for evidence-based recommendations in online education.

Underrepresented Perspectives

Future research endeavors might intentionally address the underrepresented perspectives within the context of required student-to-student relationship development activities in AOLEs. Building on this study's foundation in a minority population, further investigations could delve into the unique experiences, challenges, and preferences of diverse student groups. For example, exploring perceptions of "social safety" within an online learning environment may prove crucial, especially when considering the potential impact on underrepresented students who may encounter additional barriers or concerns in engaging with their peers (Slavich, 2022). Understanding the role of social safety may enable additional insights for creating inclusive online spaces that foster meaningful connections for all students. Additionally, future research could place emphasis on the significance of discovering peers with similarities, investigating how shared characteristics or backgrounds contribute to the establishment and sustainability of student-to-student relationships. This exploration may shed light on the nuanced dynamics of diverse student interactions and inform strategies to enhance inclusivity and support in AOLEs.

Building Rapport

Exploring the nuanced aspects of building rapport within AOLEs, considering the specific context of required student-to-student relationship development activities, is another opportunity for future research. According to existing research, an essential element for successful online instructors is the ability to build rapport with and among students (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Existing research has primarily been conducted in face-to-face educational

contexts, and even less research exists regarding building rapport through student-to-student interactions (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022). Given the insights gained from this study, further research on applying the required course activities to enhance rapport in AOLEs may contribute to best practices for engaging online learners and reducing feelings of isolation.

Furthermore, exploring the mechanisms and strategies that contribute to the establishment and cultivation of rapport among students engaged in these activities may provide valuable insights. This could include investigating the impact of different communication modes, the role of synchronous sessions, and the effectiveness of various prompts or activities in fostering a sense of belonging and trust. Additionally, considering the diverse nature of online learner preferences and backgrounds, research could explore how instructors and instructional designers can tailor rapport-building activities to accommodate various learning styles and cultural contexts. Insights from such investigations could contribute to the development of evidence-based practices for promoting rapport in AOLEs, ultimately enhancing the overall online learning experience for students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study investigated the impact of two required student-to-student relationship development activities within an AOLE, shedding light on the potential benefits and challenges associated with fostering connections and/or relationships among peer students. The results suggested that the GTKAC activity emerged as a supportive element within an environment that often tends to be isolating. According to an interpretivist lens, it is vital to recognize that each student's experience is unique, shaped by their individual needs, context, and goals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, the effectiveness of the two required course

activities varied among participants, reinforcing the diverse ways in which learners engage with and perceive learning experiences (Creswell, 2014; Jonassen, 1991).

The findings emphasized that activities like the IYFG and the GTKAC, while not universally effective, can provide support for some students. By addressing the potential isolation in online learning environments, these activities may have contributed to mitigating some of the challenges faced by students. Despite the complexities introduced by the post-pandemic online learning landscape, this study reiterated the continuing importance of fostering relationships in learning, whether in online or physical spaces (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022).

Thematic analysis provided nuanced insights into the impact of the two required relationship development activities on student experiences in RCJ3000. The implications for theory, practice, and recommended future research outlined in this study merely serve as a starting point for continued exploration. A key takeaway is the ongoing need for intentional efforts by instructors and instructional designers to create opportunities for online students to meaningfully engage with each other. Despite the challenges involved, this study's results affirm the value of course activities that facilitate interaction and shared experiences, challenging the perception that online learning must be inherently isolating. As the educational landscape evolves, sustained attention to cultivating a sense of community among online learners remains paramount, offering rich opportunities for both practitioners and researchers to further explore and enhance the online learning experience.

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APPENDIX A

Initial Recruitment Email

Good afternoon,

My name is Karah Hagins, and I am a doctoral candidate conducting my research under the direction of Dr. Janette Hill at the University of Georgia. I am interested in how certain activities in asynchronous online learning environments may result in connections and relationships between students and how this impacts your perceptions and experiences of online learning.

I have partnered with Ellen Ballard, your instructor for RCJ3000: Research Methods in Criminal Justice, to conduct my research study this semester in her online course offered through the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies.

I am seeking participation from undergraduate students enrolled in the Fall 2022 section of RCJ3000: Research Methods in Criminal Justice. For the research, you will be asked to share your work for the following course activities: (1) Introduce Yourself Activity and (2) Get to Know a Classmate. As part of your participation, you will be asked to complete three interviews over the course of the semester. Each of these interviews is expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes and take place in Zoom or WebEx.

Only those who consent to share their course activities will be asked to participate in the interviews. The interviews are intended to provide feedback about how certain activities impact your learning experience, discuss factors that might better support your perceptions of online learning, and allow me to track perceptual changes over the course of the semester. Each of these three interviews will be recorded. The first interview will take place after you complete the two course activities (after 9/11), the second interview will take place mid-semester (after 10/15), and the third and final interview will take place near the end of the course (after 12/05).

Due to the large enrollment in RCJ3000 and the nature of my data collection, I am only able to accept 6 participants in this study. In order to ensure that these are chosen at random, I will be using a digital randomizer called Random Name Picker. This tool will allow me to input all the names and then output only 6. I will contact the chosen students to get formal consent and schedule the interviews. I will then contact the remaining students to thank you for your interest in participating in my study.

I understand that you are all busy. As a token of appreciation for your time spent engaging in the interviews, I will provide you with a $20 digital gift card at the end of the third interview. Full participation requires that you participate in all three interviews over the course of the semester.

At the end of the third interview, I will email you a link with instructions for accessing the digital gift cards.
If you are interested in participating, please take a moment to reply to this email with your name so that I can place it in the randomizing tool. If your name is chosen, I will reach out and provide you with a link to the research consent form. Once I have your consent, I will email you to schedule the first interview.

Thank you for considering participating in my research study!

Warmest Regards,

Karah Hagins

SMALL PRINT:
Please remember that your participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate it will not have any impact on your grade for the course. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. This dissertation research is being conducted by Ms. Karah Hagins under the direct supervision of Dr. Janette Hill in the Mary Francis Early College of Education, Department of Career and Information Studies at the University of Georgia. If you would like to contact the researcher or Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please email Karah Hagins at khagins@uga.edu or Dr. Janette Hill at janette@uga.edu.

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

I am interested in how certain activities in asynchronous online learning environments may result in connections and relationships between undergraduate students and how this impacts your perceptions and experiences of online learning.

As part of your participation in this research study you are asked to allow me to collect data from the following course activities in RCJ3000: (1) Introduce Yourself and (2) Get to Know a Classmate. As part of your participation, you are also asked to complete three individual interviews over the course of the semester. Each of these interviews is expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes, will take place in Zoom or WebEx, and be recorded. The first interview will take place following the completion of the above-mentioned course activities, the second interview will take place around mid-semester, and the third and final interview will take place near the end of the course. Only those who consent to share their course activities will be asked to participate in the interviews.

As a token of my appreciation for your participation in the interviews, I will provide you with a $20 digital gift card upon the conclusion of the third interview. Full participation requires that you participate in all three interviews over the course of the semester.

Please remember that your participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate it will not have any impact on your grade for the course. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study, for any reason, and without any prejudice. This dissertation research is being conducted by Ms. Karah Hagins under the direct supervision of Dr. Janette Hill in the Mary Francis Early College of Education, Department of Career and Information Studies at the University of Georgia. If you would like to contact the researcher or Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please email Karah Hagins at khagins@uga.edu or Dr. Janette Hill at janette@uga.edu.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible on a mobile device.

- I consent to participate in the study (sharing the two course activities and participating in the three interviews)
- I do not consent; I do not wish to participate in the study

[If students choose “I consent…” they are then directed to the following request for information] Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Please provide me with your email address and name so that I have a record of your official consent to participate in the research.

Thank you!

Name (First Last) / Email

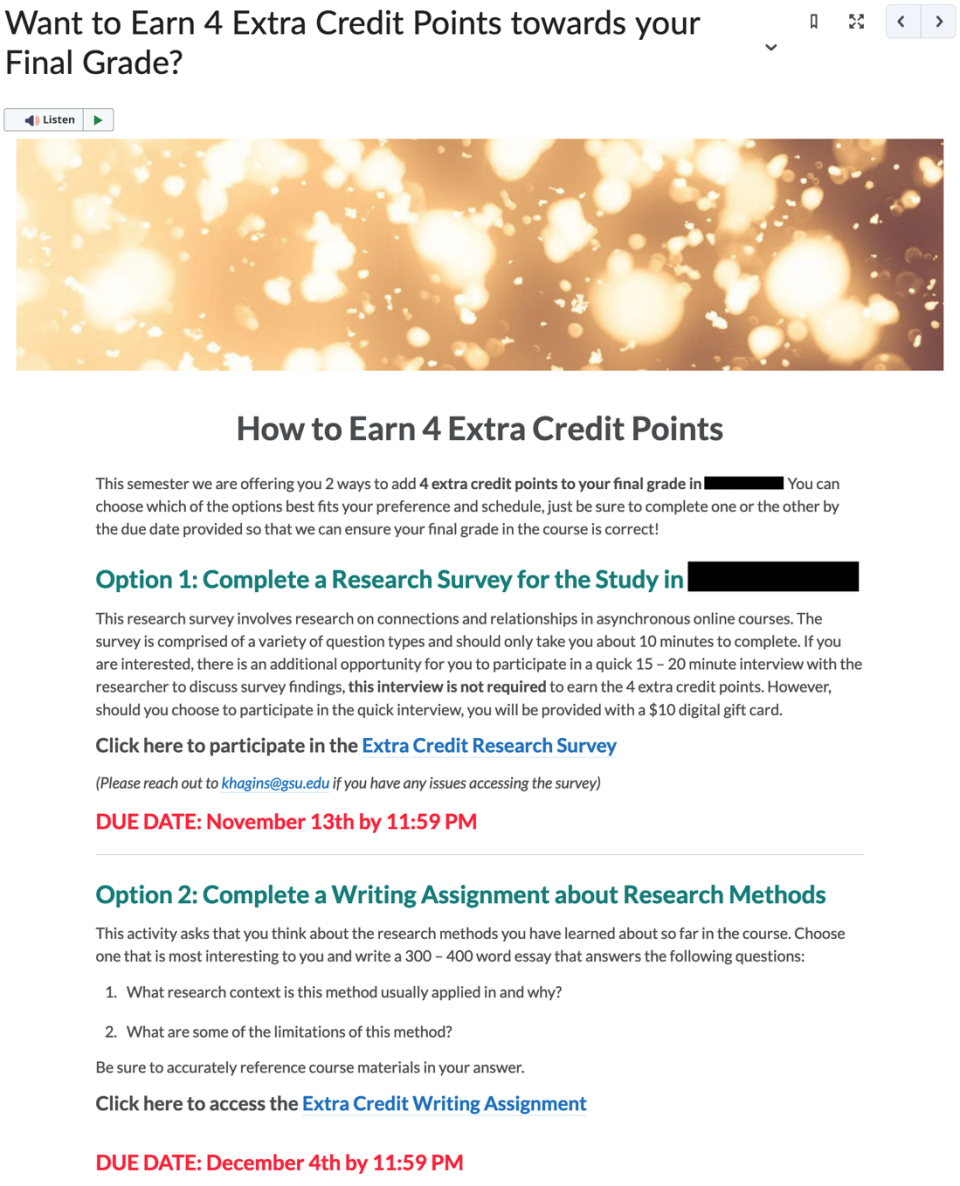
[text field]

APPENDIX C

Survey Access Links

Figure C1

HTML content page in RCJ3000 online course



Want to Earn 4 Extra Credit Points towards your Final Grade?

Listen

How to Earn 4 Extra Credit Points

This semester we are offering you 2 ways to add **4 extra credit points to your final grade in** [redacted] You can choose which of the options best fits your preference and schedule, just be sure to complete one or the other by the due date provided so that we can ensure your final grade in the course is correct!

Option 1: Complete a Research Survey for the Study in [redacted]

This research survey involves research on connections and relationships in asynchronous online courses. The survey is comprised of a variety of question types and should only take you about 10 minutes to complete. If you are interested, there is an additional opportunity for you to participate in a quick 15 – 20 minute interview with the researcher to discuss survey findings, **this interview is not required** to earn the 4 extra credit points. However, should you choose to participate in the quick interview, you will be provided with a $10 digital gift card.

Click here to participate in the Extra Credit Research Survey

(Please reach out to khagins@gsu.edu if you have any issues accessing the survey)

DUE DATE: November 13th by 11:59 PM

Option 2: Complete a Writing Assignment about Research Methods

This activity asks that you think about the research methods you have learned about so far in the course. Choose one that is most interesting to you and write a 300 – 400 word essay that answers the following questions:

1. What research context is this method usually applied in and why?
2. What are some of the limitations of this method?

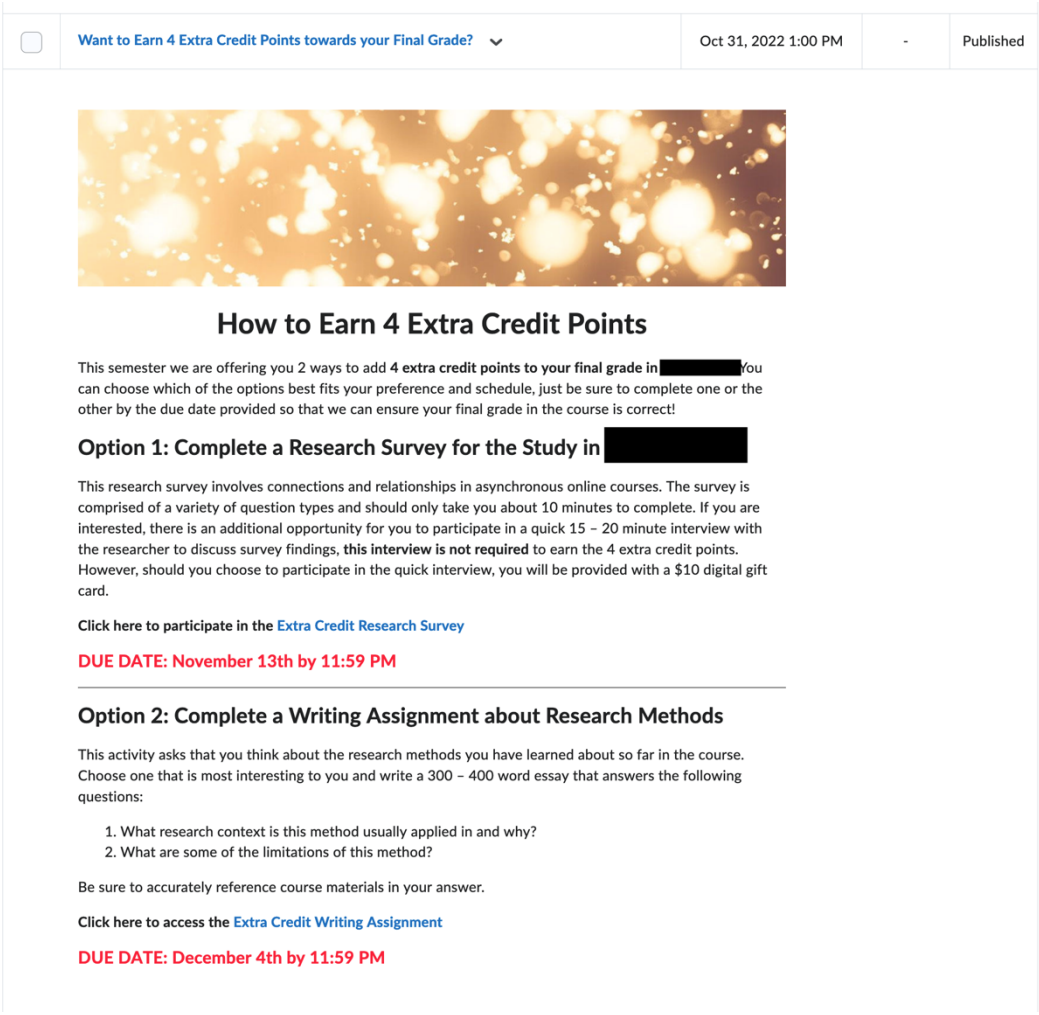
Be sure to accurately reference course materials in your answer.

Click here to access the Extra Credit Writing Assignment

DUE DATE: December 4th by 11:59 PM

Figure C2

Announcement page in RCJ3000 online course



Want to Earn 4 Extra Credit Points towards your Final Grade? | Oct 31, 2022 1:00 PM | - | Published

How to Earn 4 Extra Credit Points

This semester we are offering you 2 ways to add **4 extra credit points to your final grade in** [redacted] You can choose which of the options best fits your preference and schedule, just be sure to complete one or the other by the due date provided so that we can ensure your final grade in the course is correct!

Option 1: Complete a Research Survey for the Study in [redacted]

This research survey involves connections and relationships in asynchronous online courses. The survey is comprised of a variety of question types and should only take you about 10 minutes to complete. If you are interested, there is an additional opportunity for you to participate in a quick 15 – 20 minute interview with the researcher to discuss survey findings, **this interview is not required** to earn the 4 extra credit points. However, should you choose to participate in the quick interview, you will be provided with a $10 digital gift card.

Click here to participate in the Extra Credit Research Survey

DUE DATE: November 13th by 11:59 PM

Option 2: Complete a Writing Assignment about Research Methods

This activity asks that you think about the research methods you have learned about so far in the course. Choose one that is most interesting to you and write a 300 – 400 word essay that answers the following questions:

1. What research context is this method usually applied in and why?
2. What are some of the limitations of this method?

Be sure to accurately reference course materials in your answer.

Click here to access the Extra Credit Writing Assignment

DUE DATE: December 4th by 11:59 PM

APPENDIX D

Introduce Yourself FlipGrid Activity

Figure D1

Introduce Yourself FlipGrid Activity instructions as provided to students in the course

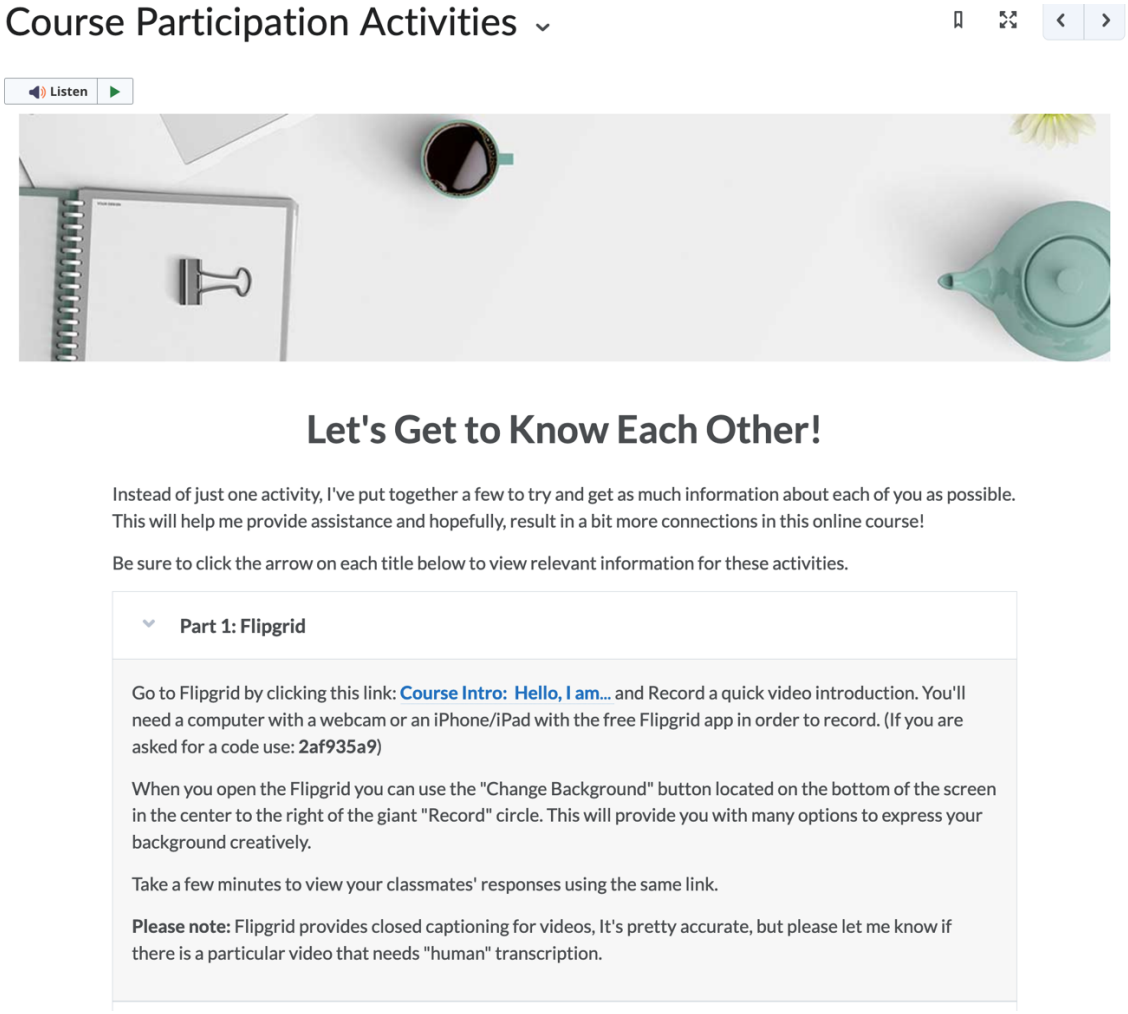
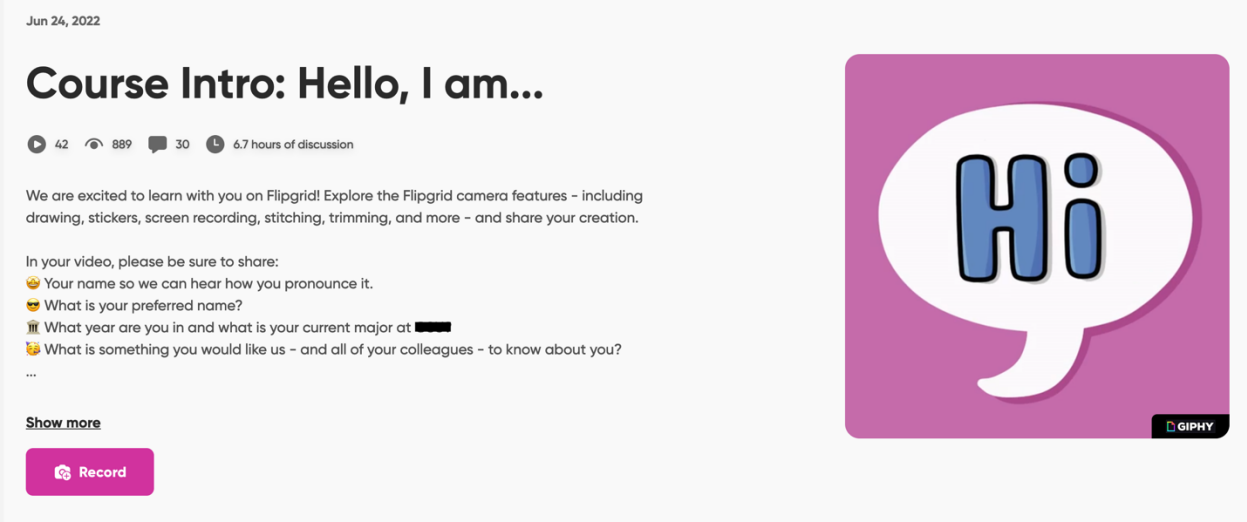


Figure D2

Introduce Yourself FlipGrid Activity as presented to students in FlipGrid platform



APPENDIX E

Conversational Prompts

We hope that you allow for your conversation to evolve with your partner naturally during this activity, but also understand that it can be hard to get things started when you are meeting someone for the first time. Below you will find a few suggested prompts to help move things along. Remember that you'll want to have enough information to write your 250 – 400 word biographical narrative and this can include descriptive language. Such language may explore facial expressions, describing emotions, non-verbal cues, etc. The prompts below have been borrowed from StoryCorps®.

StoryCorps® is a non-profit organization devoted to compiling and archiving the voices of all different kinds of people. The StoryCorps® mission involves "supporting adults and youth in building relationships and creating more compassionate schools, families, and communities" (StoryCorps, 2021). The questions below have been pulled and/or inspired from the StoryCorps® educational documentation and provide you with a list of "great questions to ask yourself and peers".

1. What's something people wouldn't know about you just from looking at you?
2. Share an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, which marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.
3. Tell a story about a place or perhaps a trip that is especially important to you and why.
4. Share a story about the most meaningful gift you've ever received. Or share a meaningful gift you have given to someone else.
5. Share a story about a beloved pet, how did you meet your pet, and what makes your relationship special.
6. Think about a smell or food that reminds you of a happy moment from childhood, describe this to me like a story.
7. The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later successes. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
8. Share a story about something you did to help someone else and why you felt the need to help them.
9. Share a story about someone in your family that you appreciate and what you do together that is special.
10. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

StoryCorps® (2021). *Tips for effective interviews: Great questions*. Retrieved from https://s3.amazonaws.com/diy.storycorps.org-assets/uploads/2020/05/SC.TipsforEffectiveInterviews.GreatQuestionList.pdf

APPENDIX F

Get to Know a Classmate Activity

Get to Know a Classmate Activity as presented to students in the RCJ3000 online course

Get to Know a Classmate Activity

This activity is designed to invite you to get to know one classmate a little bit more. It might seem different from activities that you've done in online courses up to this point, but we hope you'll find it fun and helpful! This activity is comprised of three parts #1, #2, and #3. You will have until **Sunday, September 11 at 11:59 PM** to complete these steps, continue reading for details.

Be sure to click the arrows next to each title in order to read important information about this activity.

Part 1: Meet with a Partner

We have paired you up with a classmate for this activity.

Click this link to find out who your partner is as well as get access to their [redacted] Campus email address. Over the next **two weeks**, you will work together to **schedule a synchronous "meet and greet" using WebEx or Zoom**. Be sure to find a time that works with both of your busy schedules and plan to have a conversation for about 20 to 30 minutes. You can work together to schedule your session using your [redacted] Campus email.

We have put together a few Conversational Prompts to help you get started, but please feel free to revise the questions and allow for free-flowing discussion. If you or your partner are uncomfortable with using the video feature of WebEx or Zoom, you are welcome to change to an audio-only session. If there are technical difficulties with the video feature, we understand that as well.

While we encourage you to use the video feature, if you and your partner decide that audio-only is preferred, you may do so. This is supposed to be fun and informal!

Part 2: Write a Story

After you have both had a chance to answer each other's questions and learn about each other during the synchronous "meet and greet" we ask that you **write a short biographical narrative about your classmate.** You'll write this as a short story and include any insights and/or details that you were able to piece together about your classmate.

For example:

"Si grew up in Sparta, Georgia, and is the second of three daughters. While she showed promise as a track star in high school, her passion was always with animals. One of her favorite memories is of her first dog, 'Jack'..."

This part of the activity is to encourage you to "walk in your classmates' shoes" for a short time and hopefully, this will lead to a more authentic relationship throughout the semester. For your narrative, please **write between 250 and 400 words.** We aren't looking for formal writing and will not be reading for grammar or anything of that nature. We are sure you'll have plenty to share once you begin this activity!

FYI: Please remember that these stories will be made available to the entire class and if there is any sensitive information that you would not want others to know, please keep this in mind for your interview/conversation. Likewise, as a good interviewer, this is why you will get approval from your interviewee prior to sharing the narrative with the class.

Part 3: Share and Submit your Story

Once you are satisfied with the biographical narrative of your classmate, **share it with your partner** so they can read it over, request any revisions, and ultimately **approve it for sharing with the entire class!** Once you've received their approval, please submit your biographical narrative link by adding it to the Read about Your Classmates discussion topic and submit it to the 1.2 Get to Know a Classmate Activity assignment folder. Please use the following title format so that we all know who is writing about who:

"Si Hepler written by Jared Carter "A Story about Racing and Jack"

We hope you enjoy completing this activity as much as we think you will! Keep in mind that this is intended to be stress-free and fun! We hope that you look forward to you getting to know each other and reading the stories that you write about each other!

Discussion Topic: Read about your Classmates

Assignment Folder: 1.2 Get to Know a Classmate Activity

Please Note: As with all our activities and opportunities for sharing in this course, we expect that your submissions be kind, polite, and professional. Any deprecating remarks or implications will not be tolerated. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with this or any activity that is assigned in this course, please reach out to us and we will work with you to remedy the situation (eballard4@gsu.edu, khagins@uga.edu).

APPENDIX G

Interview: Beginning-of-Course-Protocol

Introduction

Welcome! Thank you for taking a few minutes out of your day to meet with me and talk about your experience so far in RCJ3000.

Do you have any questions for me before I begin recording? I'll provide additional information about this process before we "officially" begin.

Click Record & Start Timer

I have already taken some time to view your introduction video on FlipGrid and I was able to read your written narrative about your partner, so some questions will be based off the work I've been able to review prior to our meeting today.

Let's talk a bit about your experiences with learning online

1. I enjoyed watching your introduction video, I believe you said that you are a [redacted] student…
2. Please talk about your comfort level / satisfaction with online courses.

Share with me a little bit about RCJ3000 (Based on info from Video Introduction)

1. Let's talk about your choice to [redacted due to personal nature] can you tell me a little bit more about why you chose this university?
2. Tell me about the course delivery methods you have chosen this semester, online / F2F mixture?
3. You also mentioned that you are interested in going to [redacted], can you share a little more about that? (Why, what type, where)
4. How does RCJ3000 align with your goal of attending [redacted]?

Let's talk a bit about some of the activities in the course, FlipGrid Introductions

1. Is some kind of introduction activity in your online classes something you are familiar with? What are they usually?
2. What are your thoughts on the relevancy or benefits (lack thereof) of these types of activities?
3. Did you take time to view the videos of your classmates or partner and/or write any comments? Why or why not?

Let's talk more about the Get to Know a Classmate Activity specifically the Video or Audio Portion of the activity

1. What were your initial thoughts when you read the activity? Were you wondering how it aligned with course content?
2. How did you prepare for your assignment to write about your partner?
    - Did you watch their FlipGrid video?
3. How was the organizational process for setting up the meeting?
4. Did you read over and/or choose to use any of the prompts that were provided?
5. Did you and your partner use the visual setting or just audio?
6. About how long would you say that the meeting lasted?
7. Can you describe how you felt at the beginning of the session as you started to engage with your partner?
8. Describe if and how your feelings changed over the course of the session, i.e., did things become more "natural" and/or enjoyable? Please explain.
9. When you completed the "encounter" how did you feel? (Accomplished, happy, did you have enough information to determine if you "liked" your partner?)

Let's talk more about the biographical narrative portion of the activity

1. How did you approach writing about your partner, what were some of your goals?
2. Your writing seemed to cover a few different topics, how did you go about choosing what to write and what not to?
3. Were there any interesting aspects of your conversation with your partner that you didn't write, but would like to share?
4. As you were writing, do you remember what you were thinking about? Can you share that with me?
5. What were your thoughts and/or feelings about your partner's story about you?
    - Do you think that your partner captured you adequately?
6. What did you think about this activity overall? You can be completely honest!

Follow Up Potentials

- If relationship is brought up…What does that word mean to you?
- What if any meaning, do you consider a result of this encounter?

Overall and ending question(s)

1. Do you have any additional thoughts, comments, or suggestions regarding the activities or anything else we spoke about?

Thank you so much for your time and thoughtful answers to my questions today! I look forward to meeting with you again in a few weeks! Please remember that you can reach out to me at any point during this study with questions, comments, or thoughts!

APPENDIX H

Interview: Mid-Course Protocol

Introduction

Welcome! Thank you for taking a few minutes out of your day to meet with me and talk more about your perspectives and experience in RCJ3000.

Do you have any quick questions for me before I begin recording? I'll provide additional information about this process before we "officially" begin.

Press Record & Start Timer

Welcome to the second of three interviews, I am excited to learn more about how it is going in the course as well as gather information about connections and/or relationships in the course.

Asynchronous Online Learning Environment Perceptions, Expectations, and Experiences

1. How are things going so far in the class or in general this semester?
2. One of the things we didn't get a chance to explore last time was your partner's story about you. Did you have a chance to read it? Did they email it to you?

3. We talked last time about how enjoyable it was for you and your partner to meet each other. Have you stayed in touch? Why or why not? Tell me about your interactions.
    a. Frequency
    b. Mode (email, video, feedback)
    c. Nature (informal, formal, subject)

4. Have you taken any time to reach out to anyone based on their intro video or from reading their story on the discussion board?

5. How does having a relationship with your partner from the "Get to know a Classmate" activity currently impact your experience in RCJ3000?

6. How would you describe the relationship with your partner, i.e., how is it different or similar to what you've experienced in other online courses?

7. What are your thoughts about the value of this type of relationship with a classmate in asynchronous online courses? Past and present?

8. Do you feel the need for any additional connection and/or community-building activities at this point in the semester? Why or why not?

    a. What kind of activities would you recommend?
    b. Would you want to focus on the existing relationship you have with your partner, or the potential to meet other classmates?

9. Do you think the activity in any way had an impact outside of your online course? Like, did it have any effect on your confidence with regard to meeting new people?

10. Do you want to share any additional comments, concerns, or suggestions with me about your feelings of connection and/or community in RCJ3000 at this point in the semester?

Demographics

So, after our first interview, I realized that I didn't get any demographics information. This information is important for the research so that I can accurately describe my participants and make sure that you are represented truthfully. Would you mind if I just asked you for that information now? Great, also if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you can just say "prefer not to answer". If not, would you be willing to provide that information in an email?

What is your race/ethnicity?

What is your gender?

What is your age?

What year are you in school?

What kind of course load are you currently taking? For example, part-time is less than 12 hours per semester and full time is more than 12 hours per semester.

Do you have a preferred class delivery modality? For example, do you prefer F2F classes on campus, online classes, a mixture of on-campus and online, or no preference?

What responsibilities do you have in addition to working towards your degree? Examples include being a caregiver, working full-time, working part-time, single parent, parent with a partner, any other things you can share?

Thank you so much for your time and thoughtful answers to my questions today! I look forward to meeting with you again in a few weeks! Please remember that you can reach out to me at any point during this study with questions, comments, or thoughts!

APPENDIX I

Interview: End-of-Course Protocol

Introduction

Welcome! Thank you for taking a few minutes out of your day to meet with me and talk more about your perspectives and experience in RCJ3000.

Do you have any quick questions for me before I begin recording? I'll provide additional information about this process before we "officially" begin.

Welcome to the final interview, I am excited to learn more about how it is going in the course as well as gather information from your perspective regarding connections and/or relationships in the course. Since this is the final interview, I'll ask some specific questions, but also am interested in your overall experience in the course.

Press Record & Start Timer

General questions about online courses and RCJ3000

1. Can you describe, in your opinion, the most important relationship to have as a student in an asynchronous online learning environment?
2. Can you share how the activities in RCJ3000 changed the importance or your perspective of connection and relationships in AOLEs or if they did not, can you describe that as well?
3. I've used the terms relationship and connection interchangeably throughout this study, do you think those terms are the correct ones to describe what the activity was trying to do? Why or why not?
    - Do you have other terms that you feel are more appropriate that you can suggest?
4. Please describe how you think instructors could create environments conducive for connection and relationships in AOLEs.
5. Was your experience in RCJ3000 considered a typical online learning experience? Why or why not?
    - What made this course different or what did it have in common with other online courses?
6. Do you think online courses can be improved? If not by relationships and connection, is there another suggestion you'd like to share?
7. Do you have any additional information to share with me or questions?
8. For the data findings, I am planning to use pseudo names for each of the participants, do you have a preferred pseudo name that you'd like for me to use for you?

Thank you so much for your time and contributions to this study! It has been a pleasure meeting with you over the course of the semester and I wish you the best of luck in your future academic endeavors. As promised, I'll email you a link so that you can redeem your $20.00 gift card. Take care and please do not hesitate to contact me with study related questions, should you think of any in the next few weeks.

APPENDIX J

Interview: Survey Session Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to complete the research survey provided in RCJ3000 and even more thanks for joining me today for a brief interview about the results of that survey. This session should last between 15 – 20 minutes and it will be recorded. I will be asking you a few questions and welcome as much honesty and feedback as you can provide. If at any time you would like to stop the session or prefer not to answer, you can do so with no consequences.

Do you have any questions for me before I click record and we officially get started?

Click Record & Start Timer

Out of 50 students, I had 39 respondents, which is a 78% response rate. This is a great response rate and better than anticipated.

1. According to the survey responses, approximately 50% of students indicated that the Get to Know a Classmate activity was *valuable*, was that your experience? Why or why not?

2. According to the survey responses, approximately 41% of students indicated that they would like *more activities* like Get to Know a Classmate in asynchronous online courses, does this reflect your opinion? Why or why not?

3. According to the survey responses, approximately 41% of students *enjoyed* the activity, was that your experience, why or why not?

4. According to the survey responses, approximately 65% of students indicated that the Get to Know a Classmate Activity resulted in some kind of a connection with their partner. Do you feel like you made a connection with your partner/classmate?
    a. If Yes – What do you think enabled that connection to happen?
    b. If No – What do you think prevented a connection from happening?

5. Do you have any comments, suggestions, or concerns that you would like to share with me before I conclude our “official” session?

Thank you so much for spending a bit of time with me today! As a token of my appreciation, I will send you a link to your $10.00 digital gift card, is the email address I have on file the best

one to send that to? If you have any issues accessing the card, please reach out to me via email and I'll make sure you receive your card.

APPENDIX K

Research Survey

Research Question

- How do required student-to-student relationship development activities impact student experiences in asynchronous online learning environments?

Informed Consent

My name is Karah Hagins, and I am a doctoral candidate conducting my dissertation research under the direction of Dr. Janette Hill in the Francis Early College of Education at UGA. I am interested in how certain activities in asynchronous online learning environments may result in connections and relationships between students and how this impacts your experience in online learning.

This survey should take you around 15-20 minutes to complete. In exchange for completing this survey, you will receive 4 points added to your final grade in the course, RCJ3000: Research Methods in Criminal Justice courtesy of Ellen Ballard, the instructor of record. Please remember that your participation in this survey is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the survey, for any reason, and without any prejudice. If you would like to contact the researcher or Principal Investigator in the study to discuss this research, please email Karah Hagins at khagins@uga.edu or Dr. Janette Hill at janette@uga.edu.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible on a mobile device.

- [Radio button] I consent, begin the survey
- [Radio button] I do not consent, I do not wish to complete the survey

Relationships in Online Asynchronous Courses

Prior to taking RCJ3000, how important were the following relationships to you in asynchronous online courses? Use the scale where 1 is low (not at all important) and 5 is high (extremely important).

- A relationship with the instructor
- A relationship with a Teaching Assistant or GRA
- A relationship with my classmates

Likert Scale
1 = Not at all important
2 = Somewhat important
3 = Neutral
4 = Very important
5 = Extremely important

Creating relationships following the Pandemic and COVID19

Since the pandemic of 2020, please rate your interest in making new relationships. Use a scale of 1 - 5 where 1 is low (no interest) and 5 is high (high interest).

Likert Scale
1 = No interest
2 = Somewhat interested
3 = Neutral
4 = Interested
5 = High interest

Has it been easier, harder, or mostly the same for you to make new relationships since the pandemic of 2020?

- It has been easier to make new relationships
- It has been harder to make new relationships
- It has been mostly the same to make new relationships

Relationship Building Activities in RCJ3000

Indicate to what extent the following activities resulted in a connection with your classmate(s) in RCJ3000. Use the scale where 1 is low (least connected) and 5 is high (most connected).

- Introduce Yourself Flipgrid Activity
- Get to Know a Classmate Activity

Likert Scale
1 = No connection
2 = Somewhat of a connection
3 = Neutral
4 = connection
5 = High connection

For the Introduce Yourself Flipgrid Activity, how many classmate videos did you view? (located in FlipGrid)

- 0 or just my own
- 1 - 3
- 4 - 6
- 7 - 10
- 11 - 15
- Half (at least 25 videos)
- I watched all of the videos

For the Get to Know a Classmate Activity, how many classmates' biographical narratives did you read? (located in the discussion board)

- 0 or just my own
- 1 - 3
- 4 - 6
- 7 - 10
- 11 - 15
- Half (at least 25 narratives)
- I read all of the narratives

Did you watch your partner's introductory Flipgrid video before meeting them for the Get to Know a Classmate Activity?

- Yes
- No
- My partner didn't submit a video

Get to Know a Classmate Activity

When you met with your partner for the interview, did you use the suggested conversational prompts to ask questions?

- Yes, I used the prompts
- No, I did not use the prompts
- I did not meet with my partner

---If did not meet, participants are directed to this question---

If you did not meet with your partner using audio or video, how did you work to complete the assignment? [choose all that apply]

- Email exchanges
- Text messages
- Social media
- Other [text field]

-----If yes or no for prompts, participants come here---

When you and your partner met for the interview (audio or video) how much time did you spend talking to each other?

- Less than 5 minutes
- More than 15 minutes
- More than 25 minutes
- More than 30 minutes
- More than 40 minutes

----Everyone back together here----

When you read the story that your partner wrote about you, how satisfied were you with their portrayal of you? Use a 1 - 5 scale with 1 being the lowest (no satisfaction) and 5 being the highest (very satisfied) or choose “I have not read the story my partner wrote about me.”

Likert Scale
1 = Unsatisfied
2 = Somewhat satisfied
3 = Neutral
4 = Satisfied
5 = Very satisfied

6 = I have not read the story my partner wrote about me

Do you want more activities like the Get to Know your Classmate Activity in asynchronous online courses?

- Yes
- No
- Neutral

Please describe your partner for the Get to Know a Classmate Activity.

- I partnered with the instructor
- I partnered with a classmate
- Other [text field]

Did the Get to Know a Classmate Activity result in a connection or relationship between you and your partner?

- Yes
- No

---If Yes, participant will be directed to the following question---

What elements of the Get to Know a Classmate Activity resulted in the most connection between you and your partner. Rank the elements 1 - 5 with 1 being the element that had the strongest connection and 5 being the least connection. [drag and drop ranking question]

- Meeting with your partner using video or audio
- Writing your partner's story
- Sharing your partner's story with them for approval
- Reading the story your partner wrote about you
- Posting your partner's story to the discussion board

Have you and your partner contacted each other since the activity was completed? [choose all that apply]

- Yes, email
- Yes, phone call
- Yes, video call
- Yes, face-to-face meeting
- Yes, text/chat
- Yes, social media
- No
- Other [text field]

How often have you and your partner been in contact with each other since the activity was completed?

- We have not been in contact
- 1 - 2 times
- 2 - 5 times
- Weekly
- Daily
- Other [text field]

How likely are you and your partner to remain in contact with each other after the RCJ3000 course ends in December? Use a 1 - 5 scale with 1 being the lowest (very unlikely) and 5 being the highest (very likely).

Likert Scale
1 = very unlikely
2 = unlikely
3 = neutral
4 = likely
5 = very likely

What is your overall satisfaction with the Get to Know a Classmate Activity as a way to create a new relationship with a classmate in asynchronous online courses. Use a 1 - 5 scale with 1 being the lowest (no satisfaction) and 5 being the highest (very satisfied).

Likert Scale
1 = Unsatisfied
2 = Somewhat satisfied
3 = Neutral
4 = Satisfied
5 = Very satisfied

Please take some time to describe how your relationship with your partner has impacted your experience in RCJ3000 so far this semester. [open-ended]

---If No, participant will be directed to the following question---

How valuable do you think activities like Get to Know a Classmate are as part of your asynchronous online learning experience? Use a 1 - 5 scale where 1 is low (not valuable) and 5 is high (very valuable).

Likert Scale
1 = not valuable
2 = somewhat valuable
3 = neutral
4 = valuable
5 = very valuable

Please share how the Get to Know a Classmate activity has impacted your experience in RCJ3000 so far this semester. [open-ended]

---Everyone together for these concluding questions---

Would you be interested in meeting with me (the researcher) for a quick 15 - 20 minute Zoom/WebEx interview to talk about the findings from this survey? I will provide you with a $10 digital gift card to thank you for your time. If you are interested, please check "yes" below:

- Yes, I'd like to do quick interview and claim my 4 points of course credit
- No, I would not like to be interviewed, but would like to claim my 4 points of course credit

---if yes or no, students are directed to a section where they provide their contact information--

- Name (First Last) [Text Field]
- Email Address [Text Field]

Please feel free to share any additional comments, concerns, or suggestions with me about your feelings about connections and relationships in RCJ3000 (or online courses in general). [open ended]

Demographics

To ensure that this research captures the characteristics of all participants, I need to ask a few questions regarding your demographics. I know this is a sensitive topic, so rest assured that your information will be kept private and will only be used to ensure that the descriptions provided in the research represent participants accurately. If you are not comfortable answering a particular question, feel free to skip it. Thanks for your understanding and help!

- Race/Ethnicity [Radio Buttons]
    - American Indian or Alaska Native

    - Asian
    - Black or African American
    - Hispanic or Latino
    - Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander
    - White
    - Other [Text field]
    - Prefer not to respond

- Gender [Radio Buttons]
    - Male
    - Female
    - Transgender
    - Non-binary/non-conforming
    - Other [Text Field]
    - Prefer not to respond

- Age Range [Radio Buttons]
    - 18 - 24
    - 25 - 30
    - 31 - 35
    - 36 - 40
    - 41 - 45
    - 50 +

- Year in School [Radio Buttons]
    - First year
    - Second year
    - Third year
    - Fourth year
    - Fifth year +

- What kind of course load are currently taking?
    - Part-Time (less than 12 hours of classes per semester)
    - Full-Time (12 hours or more of classes per semester)

- Do you have a preferred class delivery modality?
    - I prefer face-to-face classes on campus
    - I prefer online classes
    - I prefer a mixture of on-campus and online classes
    - No preference

- What responsibilities do you have in addition to working towards your degree? [choose all that apply]
    - I am a caregiver
    - I work full-time
    - I work part-time
    - I am a single parent
    - I parent with a partner
    - Other [text field]

SUBMIT

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this research survey and I wish you the best for the rest of the semester!

APPENDIX L

IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Tucker Hall, Room 212
310 E. Campus Rd.
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-3199 | FAX 706-542-5638
IRB@uga.edu
http://research.uga.edu/hso/irb/

Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

January 4, 2022

Dear Janette Hill:

On 1/4/2022, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Creating Connections: Identity Development and Empathy in Asynchronous Online Learning Environments
Investigator:	Janette Hill
Co-Investigator:	Karah Hagins
IRB ID:	PROJECT00004950
Review Category:	Exempt 1 FERPA, 2(ii)

We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt. The research activities may begin 1/4/2022.

Please note that HSO staff modified the submission to indicate that the described research activities meet the criteria for Exemption. This project was reviewed only to confirm eligibility for Exemption. Please be sure to review the policies for inclusion of students, FERPA protections, and the requirements for consent disclosure. The PI is responsible for ensuring that this project is conducted in accordance with these requirements.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/IRB-Exempt-Review.pdf). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" activity.

A progress report will be requested prior to 1/4/2027. Before or within 30 days of the progress report due date, please submit a progress report or study closure request. Submit a progress report by navigating to the active study and selecting Progress Report. The study

may be closed by selecting Create Version and choosing Close Study as the submission purpose.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Jennifer Freeman, IRB Analyst
Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia

APPENDIX M

Category Descriptions

Engagement
This category pertains to factors and strategies related to student engagement. While engagement focuses on levels of interaction with content, instructor, and peers, there is another dimension that entails the technology. Thus, I am using a definition provided by Martin and Borup (2022): "*Online learner engagement* is the productive cognitive, affective, and behavioral energy that a learner exerts interacting with others and learning materials and/or through learning activities and experiences in online learning environments" (p. 164).

Peer Connections
This category includes the formation, dynamics, and/or affective acknowledgment of successful interactions with a peer partner from the GTKAC activity. Such interactions may be beneficial for collaboration and knowledge sharing. This category does not necessarily denote a "connection" between partners, rather it comprises the relational interactions of the partnership.

Communication
This category includes various aspects of communication in online learning, including modes, strategies, challenges, and frequency between students. Communication facilitates information exchange, knowledge generation, collaboration, and engagement. Can include, email, text, chat, video calls, etc. Also has to do with opportunities to communicate in online courses.

Perspectives
This category encompasses interacting with others to learn about who they are, how they may be similar or different in their experiences and perspectives. These discoveries can be cognitive, physical, historical, and/or cultural. Such encounters may contribute to critical thinking, creativity, and promote inclusive environments. Specifically, communicating with someone via an exchange of personal and background information. Either you learn that you are similar or different, but you gather that information and have an encounter in the form of conversation, email, reading narrative.

Social Support
This category includes various factors that may contribute to social support in online learning. These factors may contribute to a sense of belonging, encourage collaboration, help with accountability, and provide peer support. Such factors may include checking in with the peer, sharing challenges, asking for clarify of course content, and "being there" for one another. This category may also manifest as social presence and security in the online course space.

Collaborative Skills
This category includes the skills and abilities related to effective collaboration between students in online learning. Such skills enable students to work effectively in teams, communicate ideas, and explore different perspectives. Also pertains to teams of at least two. Includes the development of inter and intrapersonal skills, soft skills, and teamwork.

Time
This category encompasses the temporal aspects and management of time within online course spaces, both by student partners and by the activity's due date. Includes scheduling and time management strategies. This is one of the most important aspects of online learning and students being self-directed enough to complete coursework amongst other responsibilities.

Trust
This category includes the development, maintenance, and impact of trust between students in the online learning environment. Includes trust amongst peers, the instructor, and the learning process. This helps students take risks, reach out for help, engage in collaborative activities and have a positive environment (Rovai, 2002).