

12-20-2016

## Teacher/Student Interpersonal Engagement And Customer Service Principles: A Phenomenological Study

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Teacher/Student Interpersonal Engagement and Customer Service Principles:

A Phenomenological Study

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

At the University of New England

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Portland & Biddeford, Main

December 2016

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Teacher/Student Interpersonal Engagement and Customer Service Principles:  
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Abstract

The importance of understanding the effects of teacher and student engagement in online learning is especially pertinent to the online teacher and the online student as well as the college as a whole. This qualitative phenomenological study involved discovering if interpersonal online engagement between teacher and student involved those principles used in business customer service. The focus of this phenomenological study is on the lived experience of online students relative to interpersonal engagement – it is about the students’ stories. Accordingly, the questions asked what the participants felt when their teachers were engaged and if the engagement was augmented with customer service principles and, if not, what the participant felt when their instructors did not engage with them using customer service principles. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to understand and interpret findings. The study involved 10 Associate Degree nurses who were in the RN to Bachelor of Science nursing program. The data was analyzed using NVivo11 by QSR to discover the most emergent themes or patterns in the transcripts. From the collected data, four advantageous themes emerged: personalized professionalism, valued feeling, effective feedback, and good-natured humor. Additionally, there was one disadvantageous theme that emerged: lack of instructor personal approach. The importance of this study lies in the potential for transformation of the online learning environment and community.

University of New England

Doctor of Education  
Education Leadership

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to thank those who made this study possible. There are instructors, mentors, and advisors who gave the constructive criticism needed and my children who stood by me when times were hard and gave the requisite support. However, one son stands out, Kevin, who not only assisted with this study but also cheered it on. Finally, there is one special person who has always championed my successes and to whom I will always be thankful - my husband.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is a fair amount of research that examines interpersonal teacher and student engagement in online learning (Kahu, 2013; Dixson, 2013; Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011). Most consider teacher and student engagement essential to the success of the online learner (Dixson, 2015; Trowler, 2010; Kahu, 2013). A recent report found that 32% of all college students are taking at least one online course, and 69% of chief operating officers felt that in their institutions online learning was important to the institution's success (Dixson, 2015).

To date, studies have largely focused on the effects of teacher and student engagement and how this can promote success and satisfaction of the student (Brinthaupt et al., 2011; Dixson, 2012). A constructivist approach to teacher and student engagement suggests that institutions need to engage the whole person and the instructor presence along with collaboration with the student are important (Dixson, 2012). As teacher and student engagement becomes increasingly important in the success of the online student (Dixson, 2015), ways to enhance online engagement also exponentially increase. One way to enhance online engagement is by augmenting this concept with those principles used in customer service.

Raisman (as cited in Walton, 2012) found that colleges are realizing revenue depends on its customers (students). Raisman (2014) believed that students want to experience the principles used in customer service such as instructors who are courteous, respectful, honest, and who know their students' names. The students want to be in an environment that encourages and supports their learning and is welcoming (Raisman, 2014). To this end, a quality education experience is defined by the students' belief of what makes a quality education. Therefore, the

lived experience, or the experience happening in a person's life that has meaning must be reflected on to be understood (Schumacher, 2010).

The focus of this phenomenological study is on the lived experience of online students relative to interpersonal engagement – it is about the students' stories. This study is about discovering how students felt about their experience of interpersonal engagement with faculty and whether their engagement was integrated with customer service principles. Accordingly, the questions for these students asked what they felt when their teachers were engaged and was the engagement augmented with customer service principles and, if not, what they felt when their teachers did not engage using customer service principles. The term engagement is synonymous with teacher and student interaction and defined as effective interaction that creates a respectful learning environment (Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011, para 7). Customer service is a philosophy that is based in customer satisfaction through awareness, values, and application (Turban, Lee, King & Chung as cited in Soisson, 2013, p. 4; Martinez, Smith & Humphreys, 2013, p. 4). The customer service principles used in this study include those of being friendly and caring, defining on time, resetting the customers expectations, resolving a problem effectively and using language that adds a human touch (Inghilleri & Solomon, 2010). Additional customer service principles used in this study were identified by Kinni (2011) as greeting every guest with sincerity, giving honest and caring feedback, being true to self and admitting when wrong, being a positive role model, and replacing negativity with a positive attitude.

Therefore, engagement combined with customer service provides a straightforward conceptual framework that is supported by theory in which the phenomenological method of study can be used. The phenomenological method of study is the examination of how one finds

himself in relation to others as well as how the world is lived and constructed (Vagle, 2014). For this reason, phenomenology is an effective way to study the lived experiences of teacher and student engagement from the student perspective, particularly as it relates to the faculty use of customer service techniques.

The importance of this study lies in the potential for transformation of the online learning environment and community. It is theorized that the lived experiences of the participants in this study will encourage this researcher as well as those who teach in online education to examine their practices and beliefs about online engagement. In doing so, the online learning community could undergo a positive transformation that will ultimately lead to greater student success.

### **Problem**

In an ideal situation, a college student would have the opinion that their education is of high quality, satisfying, valuable, and occurring in an environment where they can express themselves (Su, Bonk, Magjuka, Liu, & Lee, 2005). When students feel connected to the college community as well as to their teachers, they will excel academically (Duberstein, 2009). However, if students feel they have been treated apathetically, without respect for their needs, and without feeling engaged, anxiety and hopelessness take over their learning experience and they will start to question their college choices (Leibow, 2010). Sadly, the effect of a lack of teacher and student engagement has been cited as a reason for college students to drop out (Duberstein, 2009).

The importance of understanding the effects of teacher and student engagement in online learning is especially pertinent to the online teacher and the online student as well as the college as a whole. However, little is known about enhancing engagement practices with customer service principles and how this could affect the student's learning experience. When teacher and

student engagement also includes basic customer service principles, the experience becomes transformative and results in genuine engagement, common goals, and mutual benefits as described by Butcher, Bezzina, and Moran (2010). This study could transform the online teacher and student interpersonal engagement experience from one of a superficial transactional exchange to one of a profound interaction. Thus, this study could positively alter the way in which students perceive their learning, which in turn could transform the organization and create a stronger community of learners.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand what students feel when engaged with their teacher and to determine whether interpersonal engagement includes customer service principles and if so, what impact that has on the students' sense of engagement? The ultimate objective of the study was to discover and understand how the students feel when instructors teaching online are either engaged or not engaged, and if engagement is enhanced with the principles of customer service does it increase students' feelings of being respected, reduces anxiety, and enable them to be more hopeful about their learning experience.

### **Research Question**

This question for this study is narrow and can easily be studied and reported on. The central research questions for this study were: What are the lived experiences of online students as they engage with online faculty? How do their experiences reflect customer service principles? Does interpersonal engagement contained those principles used in customer service?

The important literature and theory underpinning this question is Moore's 1980 theory of transactional distance (Falloon, 2011). Moore stated that the looked-for interaction between



teacher and student is “purposeful, constructive, and valued by each party” (as cited in Wright, p. 122, 2015). Therefore, in addition to engagement and customer service interview questions, additional and specific questions related to Moore’s theory would include whether the student feels valued by the teacher, whether the student feels the teacher was focused on the student’s learning, and the extent to which the student feels that interaction between the teacher and student was positive.

This researcher has experience as both an online learner and an online teacher. It is because of these experiences there was such a strong desire to study interpersonal engagement and how simple, quick, and meaningful engagement can make a difference to the student. For example, being a positive role model, friendly, caring, approachable, and by making the student feel special by adding a human touch shows the student that they are respected (Inghilleri & Solomon, 2010). Based on the literature reviewed for this study, this researcher believes that when students feel respected they will be more successful and satisfied with their collegiate experience.

### **Conceptual framework**

In Raisman’s seminal work (2002), Raisman links the concept of customer service business principles to academia. Raisman (2002) stated that “most everyone who judges his or her collegiate experience as a quality learning experience will point to a professor with whom he or she developed a customer-intimate relationship” (p 2). Therefore, the quality of an educational experience is often viewed as how the educator has assumed a stakeholder position (being invested) in the lives of students (Raisman, 2002).

The concepts informing this research are those of interpersonal teacher and student engagement and customer service. The concept of teacher and student engagement is recognized

as a significant component of achievement and learning in higher education (Kahn, 2013; Dixson, 2015; Trowler, 2010; Kahu, 2013). Moreover, teacher and student engagement is critical to online student learning where students can frequently feel isolated and disconnected (Dixson, 2015, Moore as cited in Falloon, 2011).

The concept of customer service is well defined in organizational culture. Inghilleri and Solomon (2010) stated that principles of customer service include anticipating the needs of customers and recognizing and responding to customers' needs. Kinni (2011) echoed Disney's customer service strategies of respecting others, replacing a negative attitude with a positive attitude, and greeting every guest with warmth and sincerity. Jayasundara, Ngulube, and Minishi-Maja (2010) studied customer satisfaction in universities and found service quality determinants that mirrored Inghilleri and Solomon (2010) and Kinni's (2011) customer service principles.

Both concepts—interpersonal engagement and customer service--are pertinent in this research study as the importance of teacher and student online engagement cannot be over stated. For example, a study by Swan et al. (as cited in Dixson, 2015) found that high levels of online student learning and satisfaction were underpinned by quality interactions with teachers. The importance of customer service principles can be realized when students begin to engage more with their educational experience in a positive way (Soisson, 2013). Therefore, by integrating the important concept of interpersonal teacher and student engagement along with the significant principles in customer service, the perceived value of the educational experience can be enhanced.

The theoretical foundation for this study is Moore's theory of transactional distance. Moore (as cited in Falloon, 2011). Moore stated that what is important in distance education is the quality of dialogue between teacher and learner. This theory hypothesizes that the distance

between the instructor and student in online learning can lead to gaps in communication with the possibility of misunderstandings between instructors and students (Falloon, 2011). It is fitting that this theory will underpin the concepts of engagement and customer service in online learning by providing the lens through which these concepts can be studied.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Bias, and Scope**

Based on this researcher's experience as an online instructor some assumptions were made regarding this study. First, it was assumed that online students want and expect teacher-student engagement to enhance their learning. This assumption is based on the premise that teacher and student interpersonal engagement is critical to learning (Dixson, 2015; Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Secondly, it was assumed that teachers believe student interpersonal engagement is important to student success. Researchers guide this assumption when they state that the teacher's social presence in the online classroom will promote learning (Wright, 2015). Finally, it was assumed that students would have a feeling of isolation if they did not have interpersonal engagement (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

### **Limitations**

There were unavoidable limitations in this study. This researcher's presence in data collection could have affected the participants' responses because the researcher is the director of the program from which the sample was drawn. Additionally, the data collected was self-reported by students, thus, unable to be verified.

To address the limitations, these limitations were acknowledged initially. The University of New England (UNE) and advisors at the college where the study was conducted reviewed and advised during this research process. Although there are limitations in this study, this study is

cutting-edge in teacher-student interpersonal engagement; therefore, the new knowledge provided in this study will be an opportunity for further research.

### **Bias**

It is inevitable that there could be bias in the proposed study. Crotty (as cited in Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013) stated that it is not humanly possible for researchers to avoid bias. Pannucci and Wilins (2010) asserted that bias (selecting one answer or result over another) can occur at any phase of the research process. In this study, this researcher was biased in believing that students will feel respected and will excel academically if teacher and student interpersonal engagement is enhanced with customer service principles. To lessen bias this researcher used bracketing, a method to put aside the personal values and beliefs the researcher has about the study (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

### **Scope**

The parameters of this phenomenological study include undergraduate students in higher education who are enrolled in either one or more online classes at a small liberal arts college and who feel that the teachers have been engaged with them online. The study involved 10 students who were taking online courses in the School of Nursing.

Because this study had a small sample size, the likelihood that it can be generalized to other settings is low. The questionnaire was semi-structured with questions that attempted to elicit the essence of the study—teacher and student interpersonal engagement enhanced with customer service principles. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the data.

## **Significance and Rationale**

The importance of this study lies in the transformation of the online learning environment and community. This study is significant for personal knowledge, educational leadership, and for the literature.

### **Personal Knowledge**

Understanding how a student feels when the teacher uses enhanced engagement practices could lead to better teaching practices. Shields (2010) called this a deep and equitable change in social conditions or simply doing things differently for a meaningful change. For this researcher it would mean challenging personal current teaching practices through reflection and action. In this way, this researcher would benefit.

### **Educational Leadership**

The significance of this study also lies in the final product—that of educational leadership as this research reaches above and beyond the traditional methods of interpersonal engagement in online education. The results of this study have the potential to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge (Shields, 2010), thereby changing for the better the way teachers engage with students in online courses. In this regard, the online students at the college would have an advantage over those in other colleges who may not yet have integrated customer service in online education, as this proposal is so new in education.

### **Customer Service**

Customer service principles used in higher education is about making the students believe they count and that their dreams can be made real by attending the college (Raisman, 2002). In this way customer service in higher education is transformative. Customer service principles also have the power to transform a student's education from one of dissatisfaction to one of

satisfaction with the ability to make the student feel successful, important, welcomed, and respected (Raisman, 2002). Accordingly, because of customer service principles students may stay at the college, thus increasing retention. As Raisman (2002) reported, the primary reason students leave college is that they are unhappy. They are unhappy with the inability to find a teacher outside of class, teachers not available during office hours, indifference, phone calls and emails not returned, and large class sizes with little personal attention (Raisman, 2002).

## **Literature**

Although there is much in the literature about teacher/student engagement, there is little on enhancing interpersonal teacher and student engagement. The phenomenological approach allowed students to tell their lived experiences of teacher and student enhanced engagement. Consequently, these experiences could fill the gap in literature left by the lack of works on enhanced teacher and student engagement. In this way the results could be transferable to other research studies.

## **Definition of Terms**

Concepts for this study are delineated as follows:

*Customer Service* is defined as an activity that enhances customer satisfaction – “a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction” (Turban, Lee, King and Chung as cited in Soisson, 2013, p. 4).

The *online learner* is sometimes described as an e-learner, distance education learner, or web-based learner. The online learner learns at a distance unlike the traditional seat-time learner. Characteristics of the online learner include a strong academic self-concept, fluency in online learning technologies, and valuing interaction and collaborative learning with self-directed learning skills (Dabbagh, 2007, p. 218).

*Interpersonal teacher and student engagement* is synonymous with teacher and student interaction. For the purposes of this study, interpersonal teacher and student engagement were defined as effective interaction that creates a respectful learning environment that “allows learning to flourish” (Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011, p. 25).

### **Summary**

Teacher and student engagement in education has been studied a great deal (Kahu, 2013; Dixson, 2013; Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011). Moore’s theory of transactional distance stressed the quality of dialogue between teacher and learner in distance education. Most consider teacher and student engagement essential to the success of the online learner (Dixson, 2015; Trowler, 2010; Kahu, 2013). If students feel they have been treated apathetically, they will start to question their college choice, which has been cited as a reason for students to drop out of college (Leibow, 2010; Duberstein, 2009). Although some work has been done on enhancing teacher and student engagement, there is a gap in the literature specifically in the area of the use of customer service principles to enhance student engagement. Therefore, this phenomenological study examined students’ lived experiences of the teacher and student interpersonal engagement to determine whether engagement included customer service principles and if so, what impact that had on the students’ sense of engagement.

There were assumptions in this research. The most important assumption is that students desire interpersonal engagement with their teacher. As with assumptions, there were limitations. A noteworthy limitation was that the researcher was the director of the online program participants were drawn from; however, this limitation was manageable and it the outcome of the study was not affected. The literature review follows.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review provides a summary and synthesis of the online learner, interpersonal engagement, customer service principles, the conceptual framework, and the theory underpinning this study. Finally, interpersonal teacher and student engagement integrated with customer service principles is theorized.

Bain (as cited in Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011) stated that excellent teachers have effective communication with and attitudes toward their students. Given Bain's belief, would online teachers and students benefit by enhancing teacher and student interpersonal engagement? To answer this question, this researcher's study sought to discover how students felt about their experience of interpersonal engagement with faculty and whether their engagement was integrated with customer service principles.

Accordingly, first, one must understand the online learner. Secondly, the concept of teacher and student interpersonal engagement in online classes is of importance. Next, the principles of customer service should be defined. All of these concepts will be underpinned, driven, and enhanced by Moore's theory of transactional distance (Falloon, 2011). Therefore, the themes that emerge for this literature review are online learner, teacher and student interpersonal engagement, and customer service. What follows is a review of the relevant research on these study themes and a conceptual framework, which includes the theory underpinning this study.

#### **Online Learner**

The online learner learns at a distance requiring the learner to not only learn the course material but also the technology associated with the learning environment (Layne, Boston, & Ice,



2013). There are many different characteristics of the online learner. Some of these include demographics such as gender and age, culture, and ethnicity.

### **Demographics**

Layne, Boston, and Ice (2013) stated that online learners are non-traditional as they possibly attend part-time, often have full-time employment, may be financially independent, frequently have dependents, and can be single parents.

Table 1 shows what Moore and Kearsley (2011) found were the typical characteristics of online learners.

Table 1  
*Characteristics of Online Learners*

Characteristic	Percentage
Average Age	37
Gender	55% male 45% female
Employed	73%
Employers Paid Tuition	34%
High School Diploma or GED	94%
Bachelors Degree	33%
Access to the Internet	93%

### **Gender**

An important characteristic that impacts the student's perception of online learning is gender. Ashong and Commander (2012) suggested that males have a more favorable perception of online learning than females; however, females have a slightly more positive attitude toward computer use, adaptability, and ability. Unlike Ashong and Commander's (2012) study, Yukseltur and Top (2013) found that males had greater self-efficacy toward the use of online

technology and females were more ready for online learning with a better perception of online learning viewing online education as socially richer as compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, they found that males and females and both workers and non-workers were different because of their responsibilities to a family, a job, or a family and a job (Yukseltur & Top, 2013, p. 725). For example, females have to balance their familial responsibilities differently than males, and workers have to manage their studying and working hours differently than non-workers.

### **Culture**

Culture is another area that warrants consideration in online learner characteristics. Culture is a concept with two faces: “the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; and the new observations and meaning, which are offered and tested” (Williams as cited in Jung, 2014, p. 22).

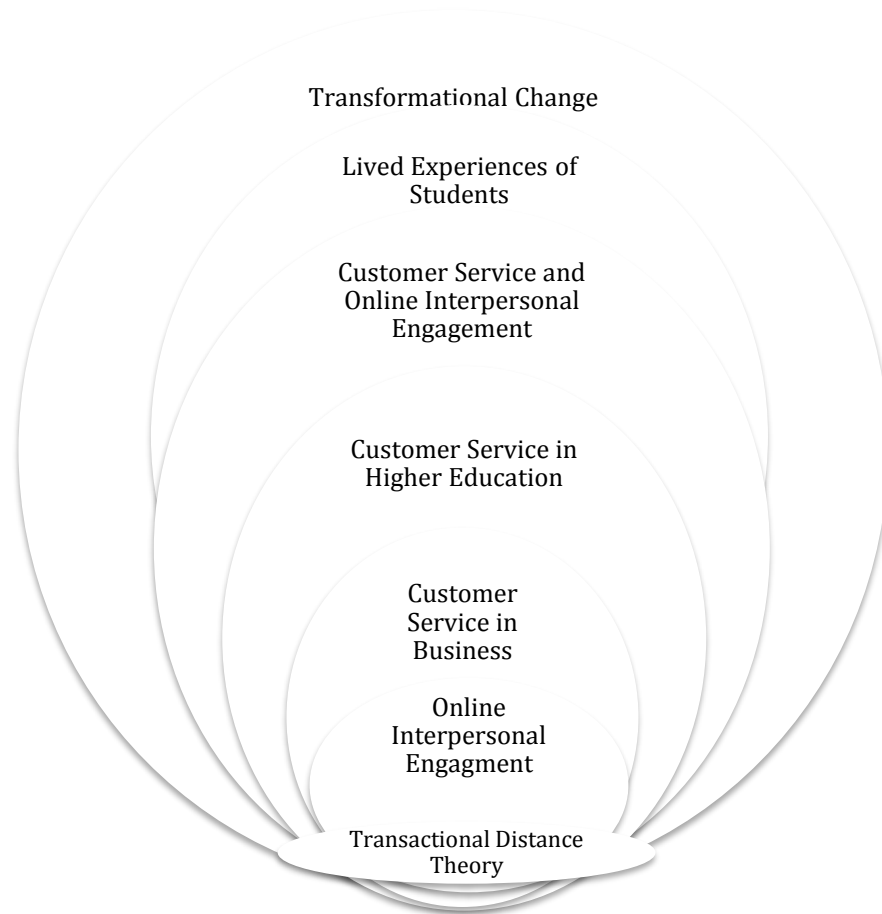
When it comes to the topic of culture inclusivity in online learning, Huffman (2005) found that Latina/Latino students thought of online learning as an option to seat time courses, but preferred the traditional courses because of personal and cultural attitudes. Comparatively, African-American students are dissatisfied with online learning, preferring the traditional classroom (Ashong & Commander, 2012). African-American students preferred face-to-face oral communication with their classmates, verbal contact with online instructors, and to complete work in face-to-face groups (Okwumabua, Walker, Hue, & Watson, 2010; Ashong, & Commander, 2012).

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is not about understanding the online or seat-time interpersonal teacher and student engagement practices. It is not about using customer service principles in seat time

courses or on college campuses. It is not about pedagogical practices—whether one believes interpersonal engagement is a part of pedagogy or, conversely, interpersonal engagement is outside of pedagogical practices. Instead, this study is about discovering how students felt about their experience of interpersonal engagement with faculty and whether their engagement was integrated with customer service principles. Ultimately, this researcher believes that by understanding the life experiences of students, by listening to their stories, a transformational change in online education will occur.

Therefore, the framework for this study is simple. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the conceptual framework that links or bridges the concepts of theory, most important principles of interpersonal engagement, most important principles of customer service business practices, interpersonal engagement linked with customer service business practices, students' stories and their lived experiences, and transformational leadership. Following the conceptual framework's visual representation is an overview of each of the concepts used in this study as well as Table 2 outlining Interpersonal Engagement and Customer Service Principles.



*Figure 1. Bridging Concepts*

### **Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance**

As shown in Figure 1, Moore's Theory of transactional distance underpins this study (Falloon, 2011). Moore's theory describes the impact of isolation on the process of online learning in higher education learning environments (Wright, 2015). In this theory, the geographical distance between teacher and student must be overcome for learning to occur (Wright, 2015). This distance is called the transactional distance and can cause a communication gap with potential misunderstanding between the teacher and student (Wright, 2015). The theory consists of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. These concepts interrelate in learner-instructor, learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-interface interactions (McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the elements of Moore's dialogue and learner-

instructor interaction were used as the foundation to examine interpersonal teacher and student engagement.

The concept of this theory is that distance is not a unit of measurement but rather it is described as a unit of communication, therefore distance communication requires an understanding between the teacher and student for learning to occur (Wright, 2015). This understanding between the teacher and student will then lessen feelings of isolation and lead to the development of a teaching and learning relationship between the teacher and student.

Moore's theory attempts to identify and close the gap in communication that occurs in online education. Moore believed that by doing so, the student would feel valued. This researcher's study posits that by using engagement practices enhanced with the principles of customer service, the gap in communication in online learning referred to by Moore can be lessened or possibly closed. Therefore, the student will feel that their engagement with their teacher is as Moore stated, purposeful, constructive, and valued (Falloon, 2011).

### **Online Interpersonal Engagement**

There is an abundance of information regarding online engagement that encompasses the perception, the technology, the importance, and the ways of engaging in teaching and learning (Wright, 2015; Kahu, 2013; Trowler, 2010). Moreover, there are websites, teacher blogs, books, literature reviews, research studies, and surveys on online engagement (Wright, 2015; Indiana University School of Education, 2015; Ferlazzo, 2015; Trowler, 2010; Su et al., 2005). As a result, combined, this information yields correlations between student involvement and positive outcomes of student success and development, "including academic achievement, persistence, satisfaction, and social engagement" (Trowler, 2010, p. 4).

It is important to note that in literature, interpersonal teacher and student engagement can also be described as teacher and student interaction or teacher presence (Su et al, 2005). A more holistic exploration of the literature can be examined by using teacher and student engagement and teacher and student interaction interchangeably. Also, the emphasis of this study is not on the many types of online interaction or engagement such as learner-learner interaction, learner-content interaction, learner-environment interaction, or learner-interface interaction (Su, Bonk, Magjuka, Liu, & Lee, 2005). The focus of this study is on interpersonal teacher and student engagement or interaction.

The terms *engagement* and *interaction* have many different meanings in the literature. In fact, Su et al. (2005) stated that there is substantial debate in the literature over the meanings. However, Su et al. (2005) believed that interaction between the learner and instructor is a process that is oriented and focused on dynamic actions in which the environment encourages the learners to understand the content. Brinthaupt et al. (2011) described engagement as creating effective interactions between the teacher and student.

Engagement is billed as a significant component of successful online learning (Kahu, 2013). Some scholars maintain online learning can support greater interaction than found in face-to-face classes; therefore, the learning is more meaningful to both teacher and student (Kucuk, Genc-Kumtepe & Tasci, 2010). Additionally, Kucuk et al. (2010) stated “the level of student-teacher interaction is the most significant contributor to learning and also one of the quality criteria for effective and efficient online teaching” (p. 53). Swan (as cited in Dixson, 2015) found that one of the three factors associated with students reporting increased levels of satisfaction was the frequency and quality of teacher and student interaction (p. 6).

Without engagement, students feel success is limited (Boston, et al., 2014). Sit, Chung, Chow, and Wong (2005) studied 198 students' views of online learning. They found that online learning was convenient, allowed the students to embrace a higher level of accountability, and permitted the students to learn independently. However, 64% of the students also reported an "inadequate" opportunity for human interaction, which the students felt was necessary for success. Ultimately, the authors suggested that innovation and creativity are needed in enhancing "human interface communication" (Sit et al., 2005, p. 146). Furthermore, the students suggested "face-to-face resource sessions so that dialogues among fellow students and teachers could be consistently sustained" (Sit et al., 2005, p. 147).

Boling et al. (2011) discovered that students viewed courses that emphasized text-based content and limited interaction less helpful than courses and programs that were more interactive. Prior to Boling et al.'s (2011) study, Su et al. (2005) found that all students want more interaction due to personality or learning style differences and that the expectation of interaction gets lowered when it comes to online learning.

Brinthaupt, et al. (2011) supported the research that teacher and student engagement are important to students in online education. But, Brinthaupt et al. (2011) went a step further and spoke to what good teachers do to enhance engagement believing the best teachers engage with their students in effective communication strategies to create what they call a student love of learning. Brinthaupt et al. (2011) stated that the best teacher sees the potential in every student, trusts their students, and encourages their student to be candid. These researchers believed that it is more important to engage with the student and look at the impact of engagement when examining the choice of a delivery mode for pedagogy.

Secondly, the framework consists of online interpersonal teacher and student engagement. Even though some believe teacher and student engagement is complex and multifaceted (Kahu, 2013), others believe that the importance of the value of engagement cannot be questioned (Trowler & Trowler as cited in Kahu, 2013). Swan (as cited in Dixson, 2015) found that one factor associated with a high level of learning and satisfaction was the frequency and quality of interaction with instructors. Young and Norgard (2006) discovered the same in their study when they stated that the importance of student satisfaction lies in the quality and timely interaction between student and professor and for online courses to be effective the teachers must be available to the student. Teachers being more communicative and available to the student are precepts of Moore's theory of transactional distance (as cited in Wright, 2015).

### **Pedagogy**

Pedagogy is defined as guidance-to-learn or "learning in the context of teaching, and teaching that has learning as its goal" (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013, p. 2). Given this definition, interpersonal engagement could be viewed as part of pedagogy. However, some believe that interpersonal engagement is a managerial and social part of the instructor's role and not pedagogical (Denne, Darabi, & Smith, 2007). For example, an instructor's role in online education includes that of a pedagogical agent, managerial agent, social agent, and technical supporter. Instructor-learner interactions are more of a managerial dialogue such as instructor expectations and feedback (Denne, Darabi, & Smith, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, the differences in definitions or beliefs about pedagogical practices are not a factor in literature or customer service principles. The focus of this study is on lived experiences of the interpersonal interaction between the teacher and student. It does not make a difference if the interaction is considered a part of pedagogy.



## Customer Service in Business

As with online interpersonal engagement, there is an abundance of information regarding customer service in business (Inghilleri & Solomon, 2010; Kinni, 2011; Fu Lam & Mayer, 2013). Customer service in business is defined as its relationship to the long-term success of an organization (Grigoroudis, Tsitsiridi & Zopounidis, 2013). Business advisors in customer service include Inghilleri and Solomon (2010) who wrote *Exceptional Service, Exceptional Profit* and Kinni (2011) who used Disney principles to highlight customer service and wrote *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service*.

Inghilleri and Solomon (2010) believed customer service happens when the employees and systems throughout the business anticipate the needs of the customers and learn to recognize and then respond to these needs. Inghilleri and Solomon (2010) stated there are four elements of customer service: a perfect product, caring delivery, timeliness, and an effective problem resolution process.

Kinni (2011) stated Disney's approach to quality service through four compass points. The first is guestology or the "art and science of knowing and understanding customers" (p. 19). This also means making guests happier than they expected to be. The next compass point consists of quality standards. Kinni (2011) stated that every business will have a common purpose with its own quality standards.

The third compass point, and one of greatest importance, is the delivery system consisting of employees, their setting, and their processes (Kinni, 2011). Organizations are starting to understand that it is the employees who control the operations of the process by which service is delivered (Kinni, 2011). At the Disney Institute, it is the employee who is the friendly, approachable, and helpful service member (Kinni, 2011). For example, language is important in

the Disney model of customer service and specific words such as guests, are used to describe customers and employees. Adding to language is the performance culture or behaviors, mannerisms, terms, and values.

The fourth compass point also consists of the setting and process. Disney states that the setting consists of wherever the customers wish to meet, and it is the setting that speaks sending a message to the guests. “That message must be consistent with the common purpose and quality standards, and it must support and further the show being created” (Kinni, p. 23). The process simply means whenever service processes meet guest expectations and fixing those processes that break down.

The final compass point is integration. This point combines knowing and understanding customers, quality standards, and the delivery systems. Disney (Kinni, 2011) stated that by combining all processes (guestology, quality standards, delivery systems, setting, and process) the result is a high-quality guest experience that drives the success of all organizations.

### **Customer Service in Higher Education**

Customer service in higher education is considered by some to be an oxymoron (Raisman, 2002). Some believe that students are not *customers* and should not be treated as such. In fact, these writers and researchers believe that the term *customer service* is demeaning and distasteful when referring to students (Keith, 2005; Demetriou, 2008). Demetriou (2008) would say that customer service is a series of activities that would enhance satisfaction. Demetriou (2008) did not believe that satisfaction is an adequate gauge of quality in higher education. In other words students may not be satisfied, but the quality of the education could still be good.

Conversely, there are those that believe we should look at the student as a customer because colleges are different than businesses, but when terms are changed just a bit, there is a

correlation of academic and business service (Raisman, 2002). Several authors have correlated the customer service business model to higher education (Raisman, 2002; Soisson, 2013; Martine, Smith, & Humphreys, 2013).

The primary author, Raisman (2002), stated simply:

Colleges are starting to see higher education in business-like realities. They are realizing that revenue depends on selling the college (recruitment) to its customers (students and parents). Sales (enrollment) are made based on the college's brand (image), product (courses, programs, degrees), and by creating a connection with the customer (customer service). (Raisman, as cited in Soisson, 2013, p. 3)

Raisman (2002) continued and stated that in higher education the customer and service provider need to develop an *intimate* relationship meaning that they need to become indispensable partners, therefore, the service provider takes a major stake in their customer's success (p. 2).

In Raisman's research on academic customer service, he stated good customer service in higher education consists of personalized situations (Raisman, 2002). In other words, faculty should put themselves in the student's position and ask themselves if there is an increase in the perceived educational value and quality when there is an increase in teacher and student interaction. Raisman (2002) identified that customer service makes a student feel valued and places a student at the center of their learning within an educational system that sell services in support of dreams.

Soisson (2013) stated customer service is "simply treating students with respect and courtesy" (p. 12). Soisson (2013) believed that customer service in higher education is representing the university as a brand and then delivering the service product that represents the

university. It is about the feeling provided by the representative of the organization. Soisson (2013) stated that colleges are exploring the concept of providing good academic customer service simply because of decreased revenues, lowering budgets, and dropping retention. Vailli (as cited in Soisson, 2013) stated that educators need to be responsive to the characteristics, needs, and expectations of the student.

Martinez, Smith, and Humphreys (2013) stated that many colleges are hesitant to adopt language associated with for-profit businesses. However, these authors also believed the foundational principles of service delivery are as “applicable to those working in higher education as they are to someone working at a grocery store or a five-star hotel” (p. 1). In fact, the implication of this foundational principle will help fulfill the needs of those who go to colleges (Martinez, Smith, and Humphreys, 2013).

It is therefore clear that the term *customer service* in higher education is objectionable to some (Keith, 2005; Demetriou, 2008) and yet used by some (Raisman, 2002; Soisson, 2013; Martinez, Smith, & Humphreys, 2013) in higher education. Disputes aside, it is not the language of customer service that is important, but the concepts used in customer service. So, it is about keeping the students at the center, maybe calling the students clients instead of customers, and engaging students as valuable learners by paying attention to their needs (Raisman, 2002). Therefore, it follows that the principles used in business customer service can be used in academia to enhance interpersonal engagement.

That said, there is a need to explain what customer service is not when applied to academia. First, customer service does not mean the student is always right. Students expect to be informed when they are wrong (Raisman, 2002). However, there is a responsibility in

customer service to make the situation right through an interaction of investment, process, and outcome (Raisman, 2002).

Secondly, satisfaction is not the gauge of successful customer service (Raisman, 2002). Satisfaction is fleeting and is not the service the student is purchasing. Third, instructors must not devalue the product, but respect the student like their college experience matters by giving the student the grade they deserve (Soisson, 2013). In this regard, there is a difference with respect for traditional customers and student customers in that students cannot expect to pay for and receive the product. Soisson (2013) states that students must work for what they get.

### **Customer Service and Online Interpersonal Engagement**

If online engagement is important to student success, and if customer service principles are important for college success, then customer service principles are important to online engagement.

Table 2 shows integration of the customer service principles of Inghilleri and Solomon (2010) and Disney combined with the interpersonal engagement principles suggested by Meyer (2014) and Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garner, Raffo, & Woodard (2011).

Table 2

*Interpersonal Engagement and Customer Service Principles*

Interpersonal Engagement	Customer Service Principles	Interpersonal Engagement Integrated with Customer Service Principles
<p>Meyer (2014) Assess each student's preferred learning style;</p> <p>Provide personal learning guidance;</p> <p>Provide clear feedback on the student performance;</p> <p>Design different ways to help individual students learn</p> <p>Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garner, Raffo, &amp; Woodard (2011) Strategize a high degree of contact and communication;</p> <p>Be approachable;</p> <p>Use faculty self-disclosure resources;</p> <p>Develop a trust with the student;</p> <p>Treat the student with decency;</p> <p>Use humor</p>	<p>Inghilleri &amp; Solomon (2010) Be friendly and caring;</p> <p>Define "on time" and meet it;</p> <p>Reset the customer expectations if they can't be met;</p> <p>Resolve a problem effectively;</p> <p>Use language that adds a human touch such as "we" and "our"</p> <p>Kinni (2011) Greet every guest and member with warmth and sincerity;</p> <p>Give honest and caring feedback;</p> <p>Be true to self and admit when wrong;</p> <p>Be a positive role model;</p> <p>Replace negativity and criticism with a positive attitude;</p> <p>Make every guest feel special; respect the ideas of others</p>	<p>Be a friendly instructor who uses words such as "we" instead of "you and I" and "our" class instead of "my" class;</p> <p>Add a human touch such as addressing students by name;</p> <p>Replace negativity and criticism with a positive attitude;</p> <p>Use humor where possible;</p> <p>Make every student feel special through substantive interaction or regular communication and collaboration;</p> <p>Design a learning product that assesses the student's preferred learning style and helps the individual student learn;</p> <p>Resolve a problem effectively by asking questions of the student and getting their input;</p> <p>Be a positive role model;</p> <p>Use personal examples of experiences outside of class;</p> <p>Be true to self and admit when wrong;</p> <p>Reset the student's expectations that can't be met by providing personal learning guidance;</p> <p>Give honest, caring, and clear feedback;</p> <p>Develop trust with a student by being on time, warm, approachable, and sincere; respecting their ideas; treating them with decency; and being approachable</p>

### **Lived Experiences**

The next level in the conceptual diagram as shown in Figure 1 is the lived experience, which refers to the stories or the experiences the students describe when their teacher interacted with them using interpersonal engagement and whether engagement was integrated with customer service principles. Or, if the teacher did not use these principles, the lived experience describes how the student would have felt. In this way, a rich and detailed experience of the students can be understood. Examining the lived experience of participants is a core concept in phenomenological research.

### **Transformational Change**

The importance of this study lies in the potential to transform the online learning environment. Understanding how a student feels when the teacher uses enhanced engagement practices could lead to better teaching practices by changing for the better the way teachers engage with students in online courses. Shields (2010) would say this was a deep and equitable change by doing things differently. This study is also transformative because it adds new knowledge to the current literature. Consequently, the lived experiences described by in this study could fill the gap in literature left by the lack of studies on enhanced teacher and student engagement.

### **Summary**

In summary, online higher education students come from a variety of backgrounds that include not only demographics such as race, age, and gender, but also traits such as employment experience, and family life (Moore and Kearsley, 2011). These characteristics create a more complicated environment for online learners; therefore, effective communication strategies are essential (Layne, Boston, & Ice, 2013).

There is a fair amount of research on the necessity of interpersonal teacher and student engagement in higher education online courses and how this contributes to student success (Kahu, 2013; Dixson, 2013; Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011). However this study proposes augmenting the concept of teacher and student engagement with the principles of customer service. Applying customer service principles such as giving honest and caring feedback, replacing negativity and criticism with compassionate guidance, and showing respect when communicating between teacher and student, can enhance engagement.

The conceptual framework for this study defines the lived experience when the concept of teacher and student engagement is integrated with the concept of customer service. Moore's theory of transactional distance underpins this framework.

The methodology for this study is introduced in Chapter 3. This includes the research design, the setting, the participants, data collection and analysis, and limitations of the study.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

Teacher and student engagement is considered an important influence on learning in higher education (Kahu, 2013; Dixson, 2013; Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011). Given the importance of the quality of teacher and student engagement in online learning, there would be value in enhancing this concept with those principles used in customer service.

The purpose of this study is to understand what students feel when engaged with their teacher and to determine whether interpersonal engagement includes customer service principles and if so, what impact that has on the students' sense of engagement? This researcher believes if teacher and student engagement were enhanced with application of customer service principles, the quality of teacher and student engagement would be improved.

For this study a qualitative phenomenological design with the ontological approach was used. A phenomenological design promotes an understanding of the social setting or activity as viewed from the participant or the lived experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 27).

Phenomena are described as the ways in which we portray experiences in the world on a day-to-day basis (Vagle, 2014). Vagle (2014) asserted that those who study a phenomenon do so because they are interested in how others experience their decision-making. In other words, Vagle (2014) stated that phenomenologists are not interested in the qualitative properties of the shape and texture of a tree but how one "finds him or herself in relation to the tree" (p. 21). Adding to this definition, hermeneutic phenomenologists describe how the participants interpret the lived experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

The ontological assumption refers to how researchers embrace the different realities of their participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 23). In this paradigm assumption, reality is subjective.

These realities are shaped by the lived experiences of the phenomena. Therefore, for the purposes of this study and in the purest sense of phenomenological research, the researcher did not measure teacher and student engagement. Instead, the focus and intention of this study was on the lived experience of the participants as it relates to engagement through the perspective of principles used in customer service in online courses and how the participants interpreted the experience.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was a private, comprehensive liberal arts college located in the Rocky Mountain West. The college has undergraduate and graduate programs. The college takes pride in the student to faculty ratio, which is 10:1. The average GPA of incoming freshmen is 3.5. There are 2,350 undergraduate students in the college and 900 graduate students in ten graduate programs. The College offers online liberal education courses, online business courses, and online RN to BS in nursing courses. In the nursing courses the students meet on campus at the end of the semester to present projects to teachers and classmates. This end of the semester meeting is called Seminar Day.

Choosing this setting can be justified by the following: First, the setting was convenient as this researcher is a faculty member there. Secondly, as with many colleges, and as mentioned, the college has online courses. Finally, the college had recently established the Online Learning Initiative in which they were attempting to build distinctive online courses. This initiative included smaller online classes and teacher and student high-touch interactions. The results of this researcher's study could augment the teaching and learning online environment at the college; therefore, the study fits nicely with the direction the College was taking on the Online

Learning Initiative. The Learning Initiative employed technology to provide students with new and creative learning, which encourages discussions and an interactive learning environment.

This researcher is the Director of the School of Nursing's online RN to BS nursing program, thus, had access to a room for data collection.

### **Participants**

The purposeful, criterion sampling strategy was used for this study. This sampling strategy identifies and selects information-rich reports when resources are limited (Palinkas et al., 2013). This means that there must be a collection of participants that are knowledgeable and willing to communicate about the phenomenon (Palinkas et al, 2013). Creswell (2013) described criterion sampling as all cases meeting some criteria. In addition to a type of sampling, criteria sampling helps to ensure quality.

The students at the college who take online classes in the School of Nursing align with the purpose of this study. These students were non-traditional as they were working RNs, many were married with families who were going back to school to complete their bachelor's degree, and were commuting students. These non-traditional students were the students who were given the opportunity to participate in the study.

Because this researcher is a nursing faculty member as well as the Director of the RN to BS program in the School of Nursing, there was access to the student information. Once other faculty members in the School of Nursing identified the students who met the criteria for the study, the students were contacted on a Seminar Day, the final day in a semester in which all students meet on campus for a day of presenting their projects.

The criterion for the study was simply that the participant had completed one online course in the semester they were finishing, and felt their teachers had engaged or interacted with them online.

### **Sample Size**

Ten of the 15 students who were asked to participate did so; this number was in line with Duke's (as cited in Creswell, 2013) recommended number of participants for a phenomenological study, which is 3 - 10.

Vagle (2014) suggested that the sample size is dependent on what makes sense. Vagle (2014) said if one participant makes sense given the phenomena being studied then there should be one participant, if 10 to 15 participants make sense then there should be 10 to 15 participants. In this study it made sense to have 10 participants. In this way there was adequate feedback on all of the phenomena under study. However, in keeping the sample size 10, it was anticipated that there would not be redundancy in responses. Further, this study was to describe and analyze the richness and depth of the lived experiences of a homogenous group and their similarity and differences, which could be done well with 10 participants.

### **Data Collection**

A qualitative research approach was selected for this study. Creswell (2012) stated that a choice of a research approach is related to the research problem and purpose. In this study, the problem was the conceivable lack of teacher and student engagement leading to students questioning their college experience. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand what students feel when engaged with their teacher and to determine whether interpersonal engagement includes customer service principles and if so, what impact that has on the students' sense of engagement? Because the qualitative research approach promotes an understanding of

an activity viewed from the research participant (Creswell, 2012), the qualitative approach was well suited to examine the research problem.

Within the qualitative research method are genres or a variety of traditions (Creswell, 2012). One such genre is the phenomenological approach to qualitative research. This approach investigates the lived experience of a participant to identify the essence of the human experience (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, this method lends itself to themes that establish an understanding of student engagement with customer service principles.

### **Instrumentation**

Merriam (2009) stated that the interview is the process where there is a conversation between the researcher and participant that focuses on the questions related to the study. A common form of the interview is the person-to-person interview in which the researcher discovers ““what is in the mind”” of someone else (Merriam, 2009, p. 92). The interviews in this study were recorded by using a new recording device that was reliable and unobtrusive. The questions used for the interview were semi-structured with prepared probes (Appendix A). The questions followed engagement and customer service principles outlined in the literature review. To increase data validity, this researcher’s advisor at both UNE as well as the college where the study took place reviewed the questions.

### **Data Collection**

The data was collected in a semi-structured, open-ended, audiotaped interview. The rationale for this type of data gathering followed Vagle’s (2014) suggestion that interviews are the most popular and straightforward way to gather data for phenomenological studies. Vagle (2014) stated that gathering data through a semi-structured format follows a questionnaire but allows the participant to answer in the way they want to answer the question about the

phenomena being studied. By using this method, the lived experience can be elicited with rich descriptions. Further, Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) suggested that a semi-structured open-ended interview technique gives the interviewer a chance to probe and clarify statements.

This researcher who conducted the interviews obtained permission for this study from the Dean of the School of Nursing, faculty who teach online courses in the School of Nursing and the college's IRB. After receiving permission, this researcher informed the potential participants about the study during Seminar Day in July 2016. Seminar Day is the last day of the semester in which the students meet with teachers and other students in their cohort to review concepts studied during the semester, present projects, and talk about the next semester. Only those students taking online courses attend seminar day.

After the study was explained, the students were assured that confidentiality would be maintained and then the students were given a card. The first question on the card asked the participant if they felt teachers have been engaged with them during an online course. If they checked the "yes" box they meet the criterion for being in the study. Next, those who elected to participate in the study were asked to check the box, "yes, I would like to participate" and fill in their name, phone number, and email address and return the card. The card was used only to contact the student. The student was reassured that their name would not be used in the study. Those students who did not wish to participate did not return the card. The participating students were then contacted by phone or email to set up a time for an interview.

The interviews were conducted in the School of Nursing at the College where a small and quiet conference room was used that offered privacy and convenience for the participants.

## **Interview Protocols**

The interview protocol followed Jacob and Furgerson's (2012) guide for effective interview protocols and included (a) a statement that the IRB at both UNE and their college had given approval for the study; (b) a statement about the when, where, and by whom the consent form (Appendix B) would be collected; (c) an interview script showing and explaining the open ended questions used in the study along with the probes that would follow the questions; (e) an explanation of how data would be collected by recording and then transcribing the interviews; (f) a statement explaining that the date of the interview would be put on all interview transcriptions and that numbers or pseudonyms would be assigned to each participant that matched the transcribed interview, thus ensuring confidentiality; (g) a statement that all documents related to the study will be kept in a locked file in the researcher's office and destroyed six months following the study.

## **Member Check**

The member check used in this study followed Colaizzi's method of data analysis, which is considered a rigorous approach to phenomenological research (as cited in Edward & Welch, 2011). This researcher contacted the participants after the data was collected and asked if they wished to review the data findings. If they did, a meeting was scheduled and the data reviewed. Changes were made to the data given the participants' feedback. By using this form of member check, the findings could be validated.

## **Impact of Study Data Decisions**

How data was collected and the results of the study could ultimately affect the understanding of the lived experiences of interpersonal teacher and student engagement. These findings could then impact and transform online teaching pedagogy. Therefore, it was important

to this researcher to understand the impact of the data decisions made for this study. For this reason, after researching different methods of qualitative research, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was chosen. In this way the researcher would be able to enter into the participant's world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012) to understand interpersonal engagement.

### **Research in Area of Employment**

Because this researcher works where this study research was conducted, there were some ethical concerns that deserve mentioning. The first concern dealt with the potential pressure on participants to be involved in the study because the participants may have known the researcher. Given this limitation, the participants were informed through the informed consent process that their participation was voluntary and would have no impact on their relationship with the college, its faculty, or the researcher. Also, participants were advised that if they wanted to withdraw from the study at any time they could do so through a third party, who in this case was the University of New England (UNE) researcher's advisor or the researcher's advisor at their college.

### **Data Analysis**

The aim of data analysis is to ensure that the reported findings are as accurate as possible as to what the participant said about their lived experience (Vagle, 2014). To this end, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used for the method of analysis.

IPA is a qualitative analysis approach that examines how people "make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 5). Additionally, IPA uncovers what happens when the lived experience has a specific meaning for people, their reflection of that experience, and how they make sense of the occurrence (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). For



this study, the emphasis was on the lived experience of students and how they felt about the engagement between teacher and student. The study also sought to determine whether the interactions included customer service principles.

### **Interpretation**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stated that the important question of reliability in a study lies in whether the findings are consistent and dependable with the data collected underscoring the necessity for accurate interpretations of the participant interviews. To clarify meanings that could be hidden in the phenomenon and identify experiences common to all participants, this researcher and advisor at the college could have been used to give a perspective of the interview meaning. Notes taken during the interview were also used to draw meaning from the interview.

Following Creswell's (2013) lead, the data is represented through textual descriptions by addressing what happened when the teacher and student interacted and were verbally engaged, how the engagement was experienced, and the essence of the engagement experience.

### **Coding**

The coding process consisted of steps that identified, arranged, and put concepts and ideas into categories (themes) that show a relationship and pattern that ultimately told a story (Davey, Gugiu, & Coryn, 2010). NVivo by QSR (a qualitative data analysis software) was used to find meanings in the rich data. These meanings were coded into theme and sub-theme clusters.

### **Co-Construction of Meaning with Participants**

Ultimately, this study aimed to discover and identify the students' lived experience of interpersonal teacher and student engagement augmented with the principles of customer service. By using the ontological approach to this study, there could have been multiple meanings in the participants' answers. However, the meaning of the question answers could be co-constructed

through collaboration between the researcher and participant. When the participant was asked an open-ended question, the interview became an open conversation in which the interviewer could then probe to clarify interpretation, thus, creating a partnership in understanding. For example, asking the interviewee to “please describe why you believe that”, or “give an example of what you just said,” or “how does that make you feel,” or “what difference did that make” could lead to a deeper meaning of the question being asked.

### **Internal Validity**

Generalizability is not the goal of this study; however, by using the rigorous processes of internal validity this study could provide a basis for other studies. There are several ways of increasing the internal validity in a study (Merriam, 2009). These are discussed in Table 3 along with how these methods are related to this study.

Table 3

#### *Methods of Internal Validity*

Internal Validity		Related to Study
One form of triangulation	Use of multiple sources (Merriam, 2009)	Comparison and crosschecking of the interview data collected through notes taken and observations during interviews with participants of different perspectives.
Member check	Solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2013)	When all of the data was collected, the participants were asked if they wish to view their transcribed data. If they wished to do so, their interview was made available to them.
Clarifying researcher bias	Reader understands researcher’s position	This researcher’s experiences, biases, and

	(Creswell, 2013)	prejudices were noted in the final analysis
Thick, rich descriptions	Researchers can make decisions regarding transferability (Creswell, 2013)	Details about the participants responses were provided using quotes
Peer review and debriefing	External check of the process (Creswell, 2013)	Uses UNE advisor and college advisor as the “devil’s advocate” to help to keep the research honest.

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### **Participant Rights**

An informed consent form (Appendix B) was used to safeguard the ethical research process. Before a student could participate in this study, this researcher explained the study and addressed student questions. If the student wished to participate, both the researcher and student signed the consent form. The informed consent form introduced the study and then addressed the following: a) reasons for the study; b) who would be in the study; c) what the participant would be asked to do; e) what the risks and benefits were of taking part in the study; f) if there was a cost to the participant in the study; g) how the participant’s privacy would be protected; h) what the participants rights are; i) and who the participant could contact with questions.

### **Confidentiality**

A crucial goal of this research study was to protect the participants’ confidentiality. This study maintained confidentiality by data cleaning or removing identifiers and replacing names with numbers or pseudonyms. Lastly, data will be stored in a secure location and destroyed six months following the study.

## **Unintended Outcomes**

In this study the only unintended outcome for the participants may have been feelings of anxiety that could be present prior to or during the interview. In this case, the participants were told their involvement in the study was completely voluntary and that they could choose not to answer any questions and/or they could withdraw from the study at any time.

## **Potential Limitations**

There are potential limitations for this study's methodology. First, while phenomenological studies do not require a high number of participants, this study drew from a small pool of potential respondents in a small college. It was anticipated that there would have been 10-15 respondents. Had the number of respondents been below the anticipated 10-15, transferability to other studies could be diminished. Nevertheless, the sample size of 10 gave adequate coverage of lived experiences of the participants to meet the purpose of the study (Patton, 2015).

Secondly, the interview method could have led to some researcher bias given the researcher's position in the college. To reduce this bias the concept of bracketing was used. By using bracketing, the researcher put aside either her own beliefs about the phenomenon under study or what the researcher knew about participants the study in order to accurately describe the participants' life experiences (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

Lastly, the participants' responses could have been brief generating less new knowledge than anticipated. The researcher used open-ended questions and probed during the interview to elicit additional responses for a more in-depth interview.

## Summary

Phenomenological studies explore lived experiences through the lens of the participants. Using this strategy, this study examined whether undergraduate students in online higher education classes would benefit when interpersonal teacher and student engagement exchanges are enhanced with those principles used in customer service. The sample for this study was drawn from the School of Nursing at a college in the Rocky Mountain West. There were 10 students in the study.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview script but where answers were probed for additional meaning. The interviewer took notes; additionally, the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. The participants were contacted a second time if they wanted the opportunity to read their individual transcript for accuracy and to add anything they believe more fully described their experiences.

The IPA qualitative analysis approach was used for data analysis. In this approach, data on the engagement experiences of the participants were classified into themes from which a thematic map was created. Participants in this study signed a detailed informed consent form and only participated after all their questions had been adequately addressed.

A potential limitation of this methodology is sample size of 10 students. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that even with a small sample size new knowledge will be obtained that will benefit both the teachers and students in online teaching and learning.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

Chapter Four of this study contains the results from the phenomenological analysis of the interviews with 10 students who have experiences in engaging with instructors in a virtual environment. The purpose of this study was to understand what students feel when engaged with their teacher and to determine whether interpersonal engagement includes customer service principles and if so, what impact that has on the students' sense of engagement? A qualitative analysis was performed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) where the participants' and the researcher's understanding and interpretations of the subject were valued and presented accordingly. NVivo11 by QSR was used to aid in the coding of the data and discovery of the most common emergent themes or patterns from the responses of the students. This chapter contains the following sections: demographics, data analysis, presentation of findings, and a summary of the key points of the chapter.

#### **Demographics**

Participants of the study were nurses enrolled in the RN to BS nursing program at the college. These participant students were considered non-traditional as they are nurses who are going back to school to get their Bachelor in Nursing degree. There were nine females and one male in the study.

#### **Analysis Method**

The approach employed was an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA. This phenomenological approach understands and comprehends the participants' experiences by the researcher aiming to develop personal interpretations from their experiences as well as the meanings that they have shared and attached to the experiences (Smith, 2011).

The interviews followed the interview script (Appendix A) and the answers were probed to encourage conversation and provide clarity. The interview was semi-structured to facilitate a comfortable interaction with the participant. Two interviews were conducted in a coffee shop per the participants' request. Three interviews were conducted in a quiet classroom at the college where the study took place. The final five interviews were conducted over the phone. All interviews were recorded, therefore, prior to interviewing, the participant was asked for permission. Additionally, prior to the interview, the following was read to the participant:

- Throughout this interview, if you have been enrolled in more than one online course, please refer to one course when answering the questions. Also please refer to a course in which I was not the instructor.
- Prior to this interview, you reported that you felt your online teacher was engaged with you as a learner. For this study we are defining interpersonal teacher and student engagement between teacher and student as effective interaction that creates a respectful learning environment. My set of questions is about customer service principles, whether you experienced those principles when engaged with your teacher, and how you felt about this interaction.

Because the interviewer is the Director of the RN to BS in Nursing program and all of the participants interviewed were in the RN to BS program, to lessen interviewer bias, bracketing, a method to put aside the personal values and beliefs the researcher had about the study (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013), was used.

The Presentation of Findings section contains the results of the interviews with the 10 students. There are five themes and 14 sub-themes that emerged.

## Presentation of Results

In completing the analysis of the 10 cases of the current study's participants, an extensive review and examination of the transcripts as well as coding of the themes was performed in order to establish and extract the most meaningful perceptions and experiences shared by the students. Five themes emerged during the analysis that provides a full understanding of the accounts and narratives of the participants' lived experiences. Within each theme, multiple sub-themes could be identified based on the frequency of their occurrence within the data. The researcher chose to identify four of the themes as *advantageous*, meaning that they reflected experiences that presented favorable circumstances for a chance of success, and one theme as *disadvantageous* as it reflected experiences that did not present favorable circumstances. Table 4 contains a breakdown of the frequency of the themes and sub-themes of the advantageous lived experiences of student's interpersonal engagement with their online faculty. Table 5 contains a breakdown of the themes and sub-themes of the disadvantageous lived experiences of student's interpersonal engagement with their online.



Table 4

*Themes and Sub-Themes of the Advantageous Lived Experiences of Student's Interpersonal Engagement with Their Online Faculty*

Advantageous Themes	Sub-Themes	Number of Occurrences	Total Number of Occurrences (Theme + Sub-Themes)
Personalized Professionalism	Feeling respected	11	22
	Supported personal and professional growth	4	
	Instructors as role models	7	
Valued Feeling	Constant motivation and encouragement	10	19
	Close attention and help	5	
	Faculty contact	2	
	Sense of accomplishment	2	
Effective Feedback	Timely	8	15
	Personalized	3	
	Noticeable concern from Instructor	4	
Good Natured Humor			5

Table 5

*Themes and Sub-Themes of the Disadvantageous Lived Experiences of Student's Interpersonal Engagement with Their Online Faculty*

Disadvantageous Theme	Sub-Themes	Number of Occurrences	Total Number of Occurrences (Theme + Sub-Themes)
Lack of Instructor Personal Approach	Absent genuineness	2	7
	Deficient in communication	2	
	Scarcity of instructor time	1	
	Lacking openness	2	

### **Advantageous Themes**

To date, studies have largely focused on the effects of teacher and student engagement and how this can promote success and satisfaction of the student (Brinthaupt et al., 2011; Dixon, 2012). The themes that emerged from this study show how engagement includes customer service principles and the impact on students' sense of engagement.

**Theme 1: Personalized professionalism.** The most frequently occurring theme established from the experiences of the participants was the instructors embodying personalized professionalism. This theme received 22 occurrences from the 10 interviewed participants. Personalized professionalism embodied: 1) feeling of respect; 2) supported personal and professional growth; and 3) instructors as role models.

Participant 6 believed that the instructor was very professional and well experienced in the field and even added that the skills of the instructor were much evident:

I think she handled herself very well and showed how she took over a class and taught it. She did good—because when you're trying to navigate through this and do it with the rest of life happening at the same time it kind of gets to the point where you forget what the focus is so I'm happy to know that there are people out there doing the same thing as you. It helps to keep you on your path of why you're doing what you're doing.

Just throughout the entire process any time I would email, it was always ... she would always talk to me like she was standing right next to me, not over an email, so I always felt like we were equals.

Participant 7 shared that her instructor was formal and professional even in her e-mails. She described that there was never a time or instance where the instructor went out of her limitations or boundaries:

In personal emails, yes. She would always, she was very formal in her writing and she had actually posted one time that she had wanted us to interact with her on a more formal level more of like addressing her, and thank you so and so, and so more of an actual email than when you would email a friend. She expected you to be more professional... She was very professional.

***Sub-theme 1: Feeling respected.*** The most frequent sub-theme that emerged for the theme of personalized professionalism was the feeling of respect the participant had when the instructor was professional. Participant 2 shared that if the instructor was not approachable and professional, then she would have had an opposite view of the program in general: "I can't think of one specifically, but I think all of these ideas go together. If she wasn't respectful of what I had to say and to treat me decently then I wouldn't approach her, I'd stay away." Participant 5

again emphasized that the instructor was professional in that he respected him [the participant] as a human being and felt important throughout the course:

We were talking about different cultures and how instructors were a little bit higher but being decent was like you were important. A lot of schools, I've been to some places where they say you're a product, you're not important. I felt like I was important.

Lastly, Participant 10 described her instructor's professionalism from her respectfulness and decency in communicating with her students:

It made me feel like an adult. It made me feel like I could like, even if I didn't have the same opinions, it was in a respectful way so I didn't take offense on it or her opinion. I just thought, okay, we can disagree and that's okay because it didn't affect my grade. She respected what I said and what I thought and I could do the same. I think about the examples that I've mentioned. Every single time, the teacher was respectful. She wasn't belittling or mean. It was respectful and courteous. I think decency shows when we communicate in a respectful way. I think sometimes the instructor... I mean, everyone in the class, we each have a responsibility but I think that the instructors, there are some that feel a lot of power and they can forget that the students are adults too. So if they can communicate in a respectful, adult way I think that shows decency.

***Sub-theme 2: Instructors as role models.*** The second most frequent sub-theme gathered and formed from the interviews regarding personalized professionalism was the students seeing their instructors as role models. The theme received seven occurrences from the 10 interviewed students. Participant 2 saw the instructor as a role model because of her credential in the field. She respected her experienced and professionalism as a nurse and instructor:

Well, she was definitely a role model because she worked as a nurse out in the field with older adults, so we were really modeling everything after her because of her experiences and she had a lot of experiences pertaining to that.

Participant 3 added that from experience, she found the instructor to be a role model, in all aspects: “I can. In talking to her she was very much telling me about her past and what she had done and where she was at that was a role model. Absolutely.” Participant 5 gave the different factors that made him believe that his instructor could be a considered a role model: “The appropriateness of the language, the warmth of the language, the timeliness of communication and the thoroughness of instruction and I thought were all professional.”

Participant 9 simply stated that from the instructor made her want to learn more: “She was just very – you can tell she had a passion for teaching. This made me want to learn.”

Finally, Participant 10 also shared that her instructor was a role model for the following reasons: “She was straight forward. She was knowledgeable. She cared. And flexible.”

***Sub-theme 3: Supported personal and professional growth.*** The final sub-theme that emerged in this theme was the experience of personal and professional growth. The theme received four occurrences. Participant 2 shared that she acquired and learned much from the program because of the effort and assistance of her instructor:

I think it was positive [instructor’s overall attitude]. I felt good about it – that it was positive. I felt like... it was successful because I really got something personal out of it that helped me grow as a person and I think that definitely had to do with the instructor’s feedback and her assistance.

Participant 3 shared that the program was very good because of the great interaction and experience that the instructor provided her. She then found that online learning could be a great method of education:

Great interaction. It was what I needed to get through this program. I'm a very visual person. I thought that I would absolutely have to be in a classroom and I learned that I don't have to be in a classroom. Online learning is a great thing and I think I could be very successful in online learning if I took the time out of my life to put in to the studying. You know what I'm saying?

Lastly, Participant 4 echoed that her experience was positive, again because of the instructor's mastery and work ethic:

Positive. I think it was very positive. Not off of the top of my head. She really resonated her belief in nursing and the importance of having your knowledge. Or knowing the student understood and could use that information in their practice.

***Theme 2: Valued feeling.*** The second most frequently advantageous theme that emerged was the participants' experience of feeling valued. Feeling valued meant the students: (1) had constant motivation and encouragement; (2) were given close attention; (3) had faculty contact; and (4) had a sense of accomplishment.

Overall the participants felt valued in their online engagement. This theme received 19 occurrences. Participant 1 stated her communication with her instructor made her feel important and noticed as a part of the class or program: "It made me feel more important, more like she was interested in what I had to say as a person... I would say a good 10. I would say highly valued." Participant 3 echoed that she felt highly valued. As a student she felt good that the

instructor would take the time to give comments and feedback about her work which made her want to improve and make more effort in getting high marks under this instructor's class:

Highly valued. More than just giving me assignments and me getting them done – cause sometimes I would just think I've gotta get this done, I've gotta get this done – that's when she would give me the feedback of okay, this looks good but maybe you could think about this or this wasn't... she wanted me to learn, she wanted me to not just get it done but she wanted me to grasp the concepts.

Participant 5 felt valued, as the instructor would show him respect. He added that even though the instructor was of a higher position, he always felt significant and important:

Just respectful, like a human being. And we were talking about different cultures and how Instructors were a little bit higher but being decent was like you were important. A lot of schools, I've been to some places where they say you're a product, you're not important. I felt like I was important.

Participant 6 described that the instructor made her feel important. She gave several examples when the instructor adjusted and listened to her personal issues and accommodated her without any negative remark or comment. She added that under the program instructor, she felt that her thoughts and opinions mattered:

Like I was valued. Like I meant something... So, for this last seminar day there was some confusion, I had changed jobs and so I on my end was panicking because I wasn't sure ... is it going to work if I show up on this day and she 100% was like, we'll make it work for you as long as you come and present what you're supposed to present. So it does, it definitely made me feel like I mattered. Even though my life is busy my time is just as important as hers as the other instructors, so, it matters.

I remember saying hey, what about, I'm not sure how to do this assignment the way that it was presented at first, and so she says, well this is what I'm thinking what do you think? I want it to be uploaded this way and then people can comment on it and then we can have a discussion on it. So, I felt like the feedback was, I was able to ask questions and she would ask to get the... everyone was able to say, this is what we think needs to, or can we do it this way? And then the problem was solved. So it wasn't just my way or the highway.

I knew that there was someone listening and I knew that there were other people in the class – even though we didn't meet in a traditional classroom style we could give our opinions through our assignments and know that they mattered. You felt like your opinion mattered.

Participant 8 stated that being recognized and acknowledged by their personal names made her feel important and valued as part of the class: “Good. It makes me feel like you're an important part of the class and that he's interested and engaged enough to recognize” individuals by their names.

***Sub-Theme 1: Receiving constant motivation and encouragement.*** The first sub-theme identified with the valued feeling theme was the instructors' constant motivation and encouragement to their students. This sub-theme received ten occurrences. Participant 3 stated that the experience was positive as she would always receive encouragement and again, positive feedback from her instructor:

I think it was very positive. It was always we can do this, we can get through this, we can work it out. I got very down several times during this last semester and just being very



positive in kept me going... When you feel less down you can get back in gear and you can get it done, you know?

Participant 3 furthered that the instructor provided the students with the proper support to achieve and excel in the course that they are taking:

She made me feel like it was serious and I need to get my work done and I need to be on time but that I was smart enough and I could do it that I just need to bear down and get through it.

Participant 4 shared that the instructor would provide the needed comments and remarks to help her work better and improve as a student: “The feeling that I had over the whole course is that she appropriately gave constructive criticism and feedback that I needed in order to improve.” Participant 6 shared that her instructor made efforts in uniting the class as well as encouraging them to do well. The setting then became comfortable to work and accomplish the planned activities and work projects:

Oh, it definitely felt like it was a class as a whole. Not just myself but other students in the class. She definitely made sure that we felt like all of us were in this together. It was never a solo person waiting trying to get through. Well, in comments that she would make about video discussions that we would upload, you know she would make a comment on, hey I liked how you did this. Well, I have a problem myself trying to make that my video discussions are able to be heard because I’m not so tech savvy, so she would kind of make me feel a little more comfortable... well it was good *but* I couldn’t hear... *but* you did really good. It kept it comfortable for me so I could laugh at that I’m not so good at technology.

Participant 8 gave an example where the instructor would comment and leave feedback on their work and would encourage them to do well in order to successfully and effectively complete the course or program:

He would comment on how much of the course we completed so far and how great of a job everyone was doing and to keep studying really hard and we're a third of the way through and then we're half of the way through and then we two thirds of the way through. So he was very encouraging and positive throughout the entire course and would acknowledge how much material there actually was to get through and to provide positive feedback and we're getting through it and keep up the good work and that sort of thing.

He referred to, when he was sending out an email to the whole group, he would always have a greeting at the type and would refer to the group as clinical microbiologists which was really nice that he was I guess referencing the students as kind of a professional group of people who actually have a functional knowledge base of the material. So I thought that was really nice and helped to humanize the group and class a little bit and put it in a functional perspective.

Participant 9 simply shared that her instructor was one who kept: "Encouraging us to do more. And she also gave us the opportunity to do more, to further submit things. This encouraged me to learn."

***Sub-Theme 2: Receiving close attention and help.*** The second valued feeling sub-theme was the instructors being able to provide close attention and help to their students. The sub-theme received five occurrences from the responses of the 10 participants. Participant 3 shared that the instructor always made her feel guided and supported. The instructor also made her feel

that the personal interaction allowed her to see that the instructor cared for her and wanted to see her improve as a student:

You're not in it alone, it's we're going to do this together and I'm going to help you. Like she knew me. She knows my name. She knows who I am. Even though I've never laid eyes on her before she knows exactly who I am.

I think that giving that feeling that she knows who I am, if we could have done that before I was having issues, it would have been nice to feel that she knew me before I needed extra help.

For me I'm not an emailer and I like the personal interaction... I liked her... because she'd take points off, explain why, but then give me the opportunity to fix that. I really like that. Much more interactive with her. There was going back and forth. It wasn't just, here do the assignment and I may not even read it. She cares about the time you're putting in and your work.

Participant 4 gave an example wherein whenever there are assignments, the instructor would offer her help to the students:

I guess when I was struggling with one of the assignments she asked me what do you think or what would be the best way to do this or what would be the best way that I can help you do this? So trying to find those solutions to the problems.

Participant 6 stated that in a virtual classroom environment, she has always wondered if the instructor personally knew her or if an actual person was really present on the other end. However, she never doubted the ability and genuineness of the instructor as her instructor would always encourage and guide her in accomplishing her goals in class:

Well, I truly would have wondered if she even knew who I was. But all along through this with that personal connection of knowing that there was an actual person there. It always felt like there was someone there to help answer questions or give that little boost of encouragement, I know you can do it kind of thing that really does make a difference and make you want to keep on the path of getting this accomplished.

Participant 9 explained that the close interaction made it personal and even observed that the instructor was making an effort to help and engage with her more: “It made it more personal. It made it so that you could tell she was reading your articles. You could tell she was trying to engage you more.”

Finally, Participant 10 observed that the instructor has always tried to reach out and help her. She even remembered the instructor stating that she “wanted to help the students:”

I feel that communication – whenever I had a question or comment I was able to get it across and get a response from that instructor. Also I noticed there was an effort on the instructor to say, she mentioned several times that she wanted to help the students.

It feels more of a team effort rather than, more than just the person the teacher as a dictator.

***Sub-Theme 3: Faculty contact.*** The third sub-theme of the valued feeling theme was the instructors contacting the students personally to help them. The sub-theme received just two occurrences as did sub-theme 4 (sense of accomplishment). Regarding faculty contact, participant 3 shared that her instructor would personally contact and reach her if she was not doing well in class. She described her instructor as “persistent” in seeing her improve and do better: “She would contact me if she felt I wasn’t doing well. She was willing to work with me. She would always contact me. If she didn’t get a reply she would call me. Very persistent in

helping me. I felt important.” Participant 8 added that in one class, her instructor would even e-mail once a week to check on her progress as well as get updates:

I’m thinking of my microbiology class. He would send out an email about once a week just checking in and seeing how things were going, providing updates. Just sending us out check-ins and seeing how things are progressing.

***Sub-Theme 4: Feeling a sense of accomplishment.*** The final sub-theme was the students feeling accomplished based on the feedback received. The sub-theme received two occurrences.

She made me feel accomplished. She just had good feedback for me. I felt like I improved because of her feedback. I felt like I, that it was something worthwhile that I was doing. So I’ve been thinking of the older adult’s class. And just our big project at the end, well throughout, that we did with the older adults that it was something worthwhile and she was good at praising the specific things that I had accomplished with him.

Participant 5 overall shared that receiving such comments felt amazing: “Yes, in the feedback she would make comments, like that’s really amazing and if she felt that was amazing then I thought it was amazing.”

**Theme 3: Effective feedback.** The third advantageous theme that emerged was the participants' experience of effective feedback from instructors. This theme had a total of 15 occurrences. Given effective feedback meant the feedback was timely, had an element of noticeable concern from the instructor, and was personalized.

***Sub-Theme 1: Timely feedback.*** The first sub-theme that emerged was the positive experience of the participants in receiving timely feedback from their instructors. This was shared by 8 of the 10 participants. Participant 2 again shared another positive attribute of her

instructor when she would take the effort to provide feedback and responses on time: “I think she was focused on my learning, yes. Probably an example would just be that she gave feedback on time.” Participant 3 detailed that her instructor made it a point that he or she would reply to assignments within 24 hours: “Timely – I’ve never waited for a response on my assignments from her for over 24 hours, ever. That I recall.” Participant 4 explained that her instructor was timely as well. She shared that whenever she would post questions, the instructor would answer quickly and in a professional manner. Furthermore, all assignments and other questions were returned on time:

So when I place questions before she was quick to answer them in a professional way as well as respecting my view as well and my question to the assignment. Timely meaning getting the assignments graded on time, the responses back to questions on time.

Participant 6 even added that her instructor would usually reply within half an hour to questions about her assignments. She explained that from experience, there was never once a delay in response or feedback:

Yes. Every time I sent out an email, I would get a reply within half an hour. There was never a delay in response. I felt like I could ask questions on my assignments because I knew I would get answers to them.

Participant 8 stated that her instructor was timely throughout the course of the program. She shared that the assignments, quizzes, and tests were returned quickly and e-mail responses were received within 24 hours:

Yes, definitely. He would almost always, I mean within 48 hours he would have the grades put out and assignments graded and returned and quiz and tests grades up very, very quickly. So yes and then with questions and responding to questions he responded

very quickly, so within 24 hours and usually less than that and usually within the same afternoon.

Participant 9 also shared that her instructor would reply within the same business day as well as would answer queries about assignments immediately: “She would answer emails the same day. If you would text her or anything she would answer immediately. Sometimes in the same business day. She would always give feedback right away.”

***Sub-Theme 2: Noticeable concern from the instructor.*** The third sub-theme that emerged was the feeling of concern from the instructor. The sub-theme received four occurrences. Participant 5 stated that given that the interaction was done online, the concern and sincerity from the instructor was always felt: “It’s just when she did the online interaction she had a way of making me feel... it wasn’t just a cold conversation. I can’t think specifically of what she said, but it was work.” Participant 8 echoed that the instructor tried to make an effort to reach out to them and was very approachable at all times:

He was very open and friendly and voiced plenty of times to please ask questions and let him know and he would reach out weekly and check in and see how things are going. So that is very approachable.

Participant 10 also shared that whenever she spoke with her instructor she felt that the instructor was actually and genuinely listening to her concerns; this made the overall experience very positive:

Something that I admired with that instructor was that whenever I talked to her it seemed like I wasn’t another student, it felt like she was really listening.

I remember doing a quiz and not doing very well at it and the instructor reached out and expressed concern about it and it just seemed like even though there were other

students who probably didn't do as well either, it seemed like she cared that I could get another chance or do something else or do extra points to get a better grade.

***Sub-theme 3: Receiving personalized attention.*** The second sub-theme was receiving personalized attention. The sub-theme received three occurrences from the responses of the 10 participants. Participant 2 stated that the comments on her assignments were personalized and did not feel like just general remarks that a teacher would give his or her. Participant 2 described the feedback as deep and real comments:

She was very good at giving key feedback on assignments. I felt it was very personal feedback and it wasn't just general, this was good this wasn't kind of thing. It was deeper than that. More specific... I think honest feedback includes positives and negatives. So, I think it made it a little bit more real to hear both and that it wasn't just praise.

Participant 5 stated that with the good and personalized feedback from the instructor, good interaction was established between them. He was happy given that the feedback allowed them to connect better and encouraged him to work harder on this course:

I just had a lot of good feedback and I felt it was individual feedback. If I had a question I got an appropriate, timely response and, I got, most of it is from assignments that I gave you know those little pointers that they give on those for feedback and I just got emails and it was a good interaction – it wasn't full-fledged by any point – but it gave me some of what I needed and when there was a correction to be made it was clear, so I was happy with it.

Participant 9 expressed that her instructor was also: “Very good at giving personalized feedback on our posts and assignments and asking us to do more.”



**Theme 4: Good-natured humor.** The fourth advantageous theme was good-natured humor to lighten the learning setting. The theme received five occurrences, from the interviews of the 10 participants. Participant 1 answered that “laughing should make the environment or setting better.” She added that if laughter or some funny moments were experienced in the program then the instructor would have been viewed more approachable:

Yes, because laughing makes everyone feel better, number one. Number two I think humor makes people seem more approachable. Like you know, this is someone I can laugh... we can have a giggle over this, this miserable whatever, this stupid test or whatever.

Participant 2 echoed that laughter is needed within this kind of program setting as it would bring the class together and lighten the mood. However, she also highlighted that laughter should fit and be in accordance to the topic and situation:

I think there’s something that, something in laughter that kind of brings people together, lightens the mood, especially since the subject that we’re talking about that’s a little more serious if there’s an appropriate way to bring humor in to that then you know it lightens the mood.

Participant 4 added that humor could ease tense situations. Furthermore, humor should also allow the expression of feelings better allowing students to learn better and acquire more knowledge and information:

Yes. I think humor when used the right way can really put some people at ease. And they can let down their guard a little bit in order to express further, to learn more, be more open to certain learning and information.

Participant 5 explained that humor should depend on the circumstances or situations:

I don't know if it would have been helpful. It would have probably depended on certain circumstances, but as it was I don't know if there was a situation where it would have been helpful.

Lastly, Participant 7 highlighted that there should be a balance between humor and professionalism. For the instructors, Participant 7 believed that they should possess specific characteristics that would allow their students to easily approach them given the setting of their program:

I think yes because I think going to school is a serious thing and you need to take it seriously to I kind of appreciate that because me myself in my career, you need to be professional. But at the same time you still need to have a personality to make you more approachable and sometimes when you approached her she would make you feel bad if you had something negative to say about the course or anything of that nature so she was difficult to contact because you didn't know how she was going to react to you.

### **Disadvantageous Theme**

There was only one Disadvantageous theme identified during the data analysis. The theme indicates participants felt there was no personal approach in the engagement. Overall, this theme had seven occurrences that could be further broken down into four sub-themes: (1) lacking genuineness; (2) deficit in communication; (3) lacking openness; and (4) scarcity of instructor time.

***Sub-Theme 1: Absent genuineness.*** The most frequent sub-theme identified was that of lacking genuineness in the instructor-student interaction. This sub-theme received two occurrences. Participant 1 shared an experience where she tried to connect and start a conversation with the instructor but was left with no response. The participant was hesitant to

know more and build a connection with the instructor but failed to do so as she felt that the other party was not as interested:

And I did mention that in this class. When she first posted a video I was like hey, you know, that was something I really liked in the last class. I'm really glad we're doing that. But that was it. There was no response to me. I think honestly for me the one thing would have been a phone call. Like hey, if you want to actually talk to me, Skype with me, talk on the telephone because I do think that online classes—there is somewhat of a miscommunication just because it's all written vs. you know you don't get body language or whatever.

Meanwhile, Participant 4 was seeking for an increased human connection where the instructor made an effort in knowing more about his or her students. She added that the personal communication could just be done occasionally but should result into better experiences for the students:

I guess just the more human connection, meaning getting to know me just a little bit better to know strengths and weaknesses or when you have effective communication when you're able to pull up things like I know you were struggling with this before, how are you now? That constructive feedback and reassessing throughout the entire course instead of just moving forward... It doesn't have to be all of the time, but every once in a while, just to... I think it helps to encourage that personal touch. Even sometimes if you become too professional you lose some of that softer side or that softer touch smiling more, it goes to that customer service because that smile and eye contact goes a long way and that communication verbal and nonverbal would be the only thing. I think it's difficult. I think with seminar days it helps a ton because then you get to know them, see

them and their expressions and when you're online you get to interpret it a little differently because when you're strictly online you can sometimes interpret things personally instead of they may not have meant that... if you're offended by something it may not be something that they even meant to have been perceived that way. Does that make sense?

***Sub-Theme 2: Deficient in communication.*** The second disadvantageous sub-theme established was the feeling that there was no personal approach in the communication between the students and instructors. The sub-theme received two occurrences. Participant 1 also believed that the instructor had no personal approach in terms of engaging with the program. She could not remember an instance where the instructor addressed her by name. Participant 1 stated that she has always wanted to go beyond the feeling of “just being a name on the screen”:

Well, I think that's definitely not a personal approach, but I think most of the times when she's communicated it's been addressing the entire class or in quizzes or in homework responses and then it was just an answer key. I'm trying to remember if there was... there's been a couple of personal emails. I could be wrong, she could have used my name but I don't recall her using my name. I think if there was a little, even if a general idea you know, “so and so” you know. When asked if this would have made a difference, this participant said. I think it would have made a difference. Maybe the personalization. Like the first assignment in her classes was to introduce yourself – tell us about yourself. And then there would be a response to it you know, I do this too or that kind of thing. I realize that when you've got a bunch of students and you're on the other end of the computer that that's probably hard, but my experience with other online classes with other instructors has not been that way. Like there's always been something whether it's a

personal email or whatever to make me feel like I was more than just a name on the computer screen.

Participant 7 stated that the instructor mostly sent broad and general e-mails to the class and would take some time to respond to personal e-mails which reduced or affected her experience of the program:

I wouldn't say she didn't seem to care about what we were doing. She seemed open in her broader emails towards the whole class in general. But if you tried to personally contact her it was an extended period of time for her to email you back or to answer a question or to be more willing to work with you on anything. I think she tried to be positive, she tried to be nicer for lack of a better word than just harsh and just saying this is the way that it is. She was hard to read. In her videos she was very nice and pleasant and happy, but when you tried to get a hold of her she was very to the point and direct and kind of closed off.

Another participant felt that when there was no communication, she, the participant, felt like she was "just a name on the screen." Furthermore, when a participant asked for help it would take weeks for her email to be answered. This left the participant feeling like she was teaching herself and hoping that she was doing it right.

**Sub-Theme 3: Lacking openness.** The third sub-theme demonstrating a lack of instructor personal approach that emerged was the experience of lacking the openness to feedback. This sub-theme received two occurrences. Participant 1 shared a negative example where a quiz had confusing or unclear instructions, she then e-mailed and inquired about this. The instructor then took the comment or question wrongly and this incident started Participant 1's negative experience and impression of her instructor:

I emailed her about a quiz. I took a quiz and she sent me the key and gave me the instructions and her key – the instructions for the key – were very confusing. So I emailed her back and I said “it sounds like you’re saying this, but in the very next question it says the opposite and I’m confused” and what I got – and maybe this is my personal reflection on it – but what I got from her subsequent email was “well you should just listen”. She was very mad that I confronted her. And that was like okay, great I just blew it I shouldn’t have said anything. But I needed to say something because I’m learning, I’m paying to learn and it didn’t make sense. But I felt like it blew up.

***Sub-Theme 4: Scarcity of instructor time.*** The final sub-theme that emerged from the disadvantageous theme was lacking the value of time from the instructor. This sub-theme received one occurrence. One participant found that her instructor lacked the value of time. Participant 7 identified that under the lack of real communication, one main aspect that she experienced was the instructor’s lack of willingness to give value to the time of her students. She shared that the instructor would usually take weeks to reply or respond to an e-mail, which was not helpful to the students as they would inquire or ask about the lessons or other instructions about the program or assignment:

She wasn’t quick to respond, sometimes it would take her a couple of weeks to email me back on something so it was difficult for me to do some things or try to figure out what I was supposed to do and with me not taking the class prior. If I had taken it in high school or something it probably would have helped me, but where it was my first time, I was going to teach myself this and hopefully I’m doing it right.

## **Engagement and Customer Service Principles**

The research questions for this study were: What are the lived experiences of online students as they engage with online faculty? How do their experiences reflect customer service principles? Meyer's (2014) and Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garner, Raffo, and Woodard's (2011) online interpersonal engagement principles integrated with Inghilleri & Solomon's (2010) and Kinni's (2011) customer service principles were used as the foundation of the semi-structured interview questions that participants were asked (Appendix A).

After the data was analyzed a thematic analysis yielded significant themes and sub-themes, both advantageous and disadvantageous. By partnering the themes and sub-themes with the questions, it can be ascertained which theme included either an engagement or customer service principle or both. Looking at the occurrences of the themes illustrated how important the engagement or customer service principle was to the participant. Table 6 represents the advantageous themes and sub-themes and whether they could be classified as engagement or customer service principles. Table 7 represents the disadvantageous theme and sub-themes and whether they could be classified as engagement or customer service principles.

Table 6

*Advantageous Themes, Sub-themes, Occurrences, and Principles*

Advantageous Theme	Sub-Theme	Occurrences	Customer Service or Engagement Principle
Personalized Professionalism	Instructors as role models	7	Customer service
	Supported personal and professional growth	4	Engagement
	Feeling respected	11	Both
Valued Feeling	Sense of accomplishment	2	Engagement
	Faculty Contact	2	Engagement
	Close attention and help	5	Customer service
	Constant motivation and encouragement	10	Engagement
Effective Feedback	Timely	8	Customer Service
	Personalized	3	Engagement
	Noticeable concern from instructor	4	Both
Good Natured Humor		5	Engagement

Table 7

*Disadvantageous Themes, Sub-themes, Occurrences, and Principles*

Disadvantageous Theme	Sub-Theme	Occurrences	Customer Service or Engagement Principle
Lack of instructor personal approach	Absent genuineness	2	Both
	Deficient in communication	2	Both
	Lacking openness	2	Both
	Scarcity of instructor time	1	Engagement



## Summary

The thematic analysis allowed the formation of the patterns and themes of the participants' experiences on their online engagement with the faculty and whether engagement included customer service principles and the impact on students' sense of engagement.

From the interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interviews with the participants, themes and sub-themes were discovered, all addressing and discussing the varying experiences and perceptions of the students on their interpersonal engagement. Overall, four advantageous themes and 10 advantageous sub-themes emerged from the lived experiences of the student participants. The advantageous themes were: 1) valued feeling; 2) effective feedback; 3) personalized professionalism; and 4) good-natured humor.

The most important sub-theme was feeling respected. This sub-theme received 11 occurrences out of the 10 participants. Participants stated that they felt respected when the instructor respected what the participant said, the feeling of the participant as a human being, and the participant experience as a professional nurse. The second most important of the sub-themes was that of constant motivation and encouragement. This sub-theme received 10 occurrences out of the 10 participants interviewed. The importance of this sub-theme was shown when participants stated encouragement was shown through positive feedback, advocating for the student to do well to be successful, and encouraging them to learn.

Additionally one disadvantageous theme with four disadvantageous subthemes appeared. The disadvantageous theme was a lack of instructor personal approach. The disadvantageous sub-themes were: 1) genuineness was absent; 2) deficient in communication; 3) scarcity of instructor time; and 4) lacking openness. The four sub-themes received a total of six occurrences out of the 10 participants interviewed. Even though there were so few occurrences, the theme

and sub-themes are worth mentioning as participants felt that a lack of genuineness in the instructor-student interaction left the participant without a way to build a connection with the instructor.

Another participant felt that when there was no communication, she, the participant, felt like she was “just a name on the screen.” Furthermore, when a participant asked for help it would take weeks for her email to be answered. This left the participant feeling like she was teaching herself and hoping that she was doing it right.

Chapter Five of this study will discuss the findings or themes in relation to the literature as well as the limitations, recommendations, implications, and conclusions of the study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

This chapter presents an interpretation of the findings of this study, implications of the findings, recommendations for action, and the subsequent recommendations for future research. A summary of the study is presented followed by specific results. These are discussed and interpreted in the context of the initial study objective, which was to discover and understand how the students feel when instructors teaching online are either engaged or not engaged, and if enhancing the concept of engagement with the principles of customer service increases students' feelings of being respected and enables them to be more positive about their learning experience.

The research questions for this study were: What are the lived experiences of online students as they engage with online faculty? How do their experiences reflect customer service principles? Meyer's (2014) and Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garner, Raffo, and Woodard's (2011) online interpersonal engagement principles combined with Inghilleri & Solomon's (2010) and Kinni's (2011) customer service principles were used as the foundation of the semi-structured interview questions that participants were asked.

Data collection was conducted in-person or by phone through semi-structured interviews directed by an interview script. Probing questions were asked based on answers to gain further understanding of the responses. The findings of the study are based on the responses to the research questions. The purpose of the interviews was to identify teacher and student perceptions of interpersonal engagement with faculty to determine whether engagement reflected customer service principles and the impact on students' experience.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to understand and interpret findings. The study involved 10 Associate Degree nurses who were in the RN to Bachelor of

Science (BS) nursing programs. The data was analyzed using NVivo11 by QSR to discover the most emergent themes or patterns in the transcripts. Two sets of themes emerged: interpersonal experiences that were perceived by the student as advantageous to engaging the student and those perceived as disadvantageous.

### **Key Findings**

The research question asks about the lived experience of student's interpersonal engagement with their online faculty. Their responses were analyzed through the lens of both interpersonal engagement and customer service principles.

Data analysis showed four advantageous themes: personalized professionalism, valued feeling, effective feedback, and good-natured humor. The themes were then broken down into 10 sub-themes: constant motivation and encouragement; close attention and help; faculty contact; and a sense of accomplishment from their instructors; feeling respected; instructors as role models; and supported personal and professional growth; timely and personalized feedback and noticeable concern from the instructor; and good-natured humor.

Overall, the advantageous themes suggest that participants felt that they were receiving constant motivation and support from their instructors to excel in the course that they were taking. The majority of the students agreed that their instructors made an effort of uniting the class and encouraging them to do well in their studies. The setting then became comfortable to work and accomplish the planned activities and work projects.

One disadvantageous theme was discovered. This theme was the lack of instructor personal approach, which included the sub-themes of absent genuineness, deficient in communication, scarcity of instructor time, and lacking openness. Overall the disadvantageous theme indicates that students experienced a lack of personal approach in the engagement

between instructor and participant. By comparison, the disadvantageous theme was the least frequently expressed experience of the participants.

Of the 61 occurrences of sub-themes that were identified as advantageous, the majority of the sub-themes (26) identify specifically with the concepts of engagement as shown in Table 6. Those sub-themes include supported personal growth, constant motivation and encouragement, faculty contact, a sense of accomplishment, and personalized feedback. The 20 occurrences that can be categorized as customer service principles based on the literature included timely feedback, instructors as role models, and close attention and help. Fifteen of the 61 occurrences could not be identified as either because principles of engagement and customer service both address feeling respected and a noticeable concern from the instructor (or service provider).

Of the seven occurrences of the disadvantageous sub-theme representing lack of instructor personal approach, only one occurrence—scarcity of instructor time—was interpreted as engagement, while the remaining six occurrences—absent genuineness, deficient in communication, and lacking openness—were attributed to both customer service and engagement principles.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

For this study, a step-by-step process was used to connect the interpersonal engagement and customer service principles to the themes and sub-themes. First, Meyer's (2014) and Brinthaupt et al.'s (2011) online interpersonal engagement principles integrated with Inghilleri and Solomon's (2010) and Kinni's (2011) customer service principles were utilized as the foundation of the semi-structured interview questions.

Themes and sub-themes were obtained from the answers to the interview questions. Finally, by pairing the themes and sub-themes to the literature of Meyer (2014), Brinthaupt et al

(2011), Kinni (2011), and Inghilleri and Solomon (2010), it could be ascertained which theme included either an engagement principle, customer service principle, or both. Looking at the occurrences of the themes, it could be determined how many times participants mentioned the theme; thus, the importance of the theme.

Therefore, through the students' lived experiences, the research question was answered as it is apparent that the engagement principles were integrated with customer service principles. If the themes followed customer service principles then the answer to the research question was yes, online interpersonal engagement is integrated with customer service; however, if the greatest number of the themes and sub-themes followed engagement principles, then the participant did not feel that customer service principles were necessary.

As there were 26 engagement and 20 customer service themes, there were six more occurrences of the engagement themes and sub-themes. Six more occurrences is not enough to say that customer service principles were not integrated with engagement principles; therefore the answer to the research question is yes, participants felt that online interpersonal engagement is integrated with customer service and that students feel more engaged when interpersonal engagement includes customer service.

This finding supports several scholars' views. Paramount is Raisman (2002) who believed that customer service principles used in academia would make the student feel successful, important, welcomed, and respected. Additionally, Raisman (2002) stated that customer service in academia is treating students as if they counted, it is treating a student with courtesy, and it is valuing the student as an individual. Raisman (2002) stated that the student's dreams could be made real by attending college. Soisson (2013) stated that customer service is simply treating the student as if their college experience matters. Lastly, Martinez, Smith, and

Humphreys (2013) stated that the foundational principles underling higher education is to fulfill the needs of those who attend the college for service; thus, customer service concepts apply to higher education and are critical to student success.

There are a few who question the use of customer service in higher education (Raisman, 2002; Soisson, 2013; Martinez, Smith & Humphreys, 2013; Nowik, 2013). Of those who question this use, some are uncertain of the language of customer and service or client; thus, hesitant to associate language with for-profit organizations (Martinez, Smith & Humphreys, 2013). Some believe that customer service would mean, “The customer is always right,” consequently, the student might expect grades they don’t deserve (Raisman, 2002). Accordingly, academic integrity may be compromised (Soisson, 2013) because the job of the faculty is to please the student above all else. A few may believe that education is not a product intended for consumption (Nowik, 2012).

Contrary to what some may believe, this study shows that the principles defined by business as customer service do make a difference to the student and their feeling of engagement and success. In fact, the principles of customer service enhance the process of higher education. Nowik (2012) stated that by using customer service principles within the teacher and student dynamic, there is an opportunity for faculty to influence the students’ perception that they are “cared for by an institution that is responsive to their needs” (p. 4).

Even though the term *customer service* may be objectionable, some say *contentious* (Nowik, 2012), many of the customer service principles faculty can use are simply intuitive support approaches. For example, respect and courtesy, and being responsive to the students needs show a commitment to learning community as a whole with a collaborative commitment to the student.

The identified customer service principles used in this study are not simply online interpersonal engagement principles with a different name. Engagement principles and customer service principles were individually underpinned with existing literature and then examined separately. Those principles used as customer service, although similar to engagement principles, are dissimilar and warrant instructor consideration when interacting with online students.

### **Implications**

Thirty-two percent of college students are taking an online course (Dixson, 2015). Dixson (2015) stated that teacher and student engagement is essential to the success of the student. As teacher and student engagement becomes increasingly important in the success of the online student, different ways to enhance online engagement also exponentially increases.

The importance of enhancing teacher and student engagement cannot be overstated. For this reason, a way to enhance online interpersonal engagement is through customer service principles. These principles are defined in organizational culture as anticipating the needs of customers and then recognizing and responding to these needs (Solomon, 2010).

In this study, the participants' stories were very compelling and strongly showed that by enhancing teacher and student engagement with those principles used in customer service, such as caring, warmth, sincerity, and respect, the students felt they could be successful. They were excited about their classes, they felt special, they felt respected, and they felt like they mattered. Many times the participants said they felt significant, but most important, the participants felt like they had an advocate willing to help them and they felt they "could do it." In this way they were successful and happy with their experiences, which only improved their learning.



Raisman (2002) stated that faculty should put themselves in the student's position and ask themselves if there is an increase in the perceived educational value and quality when there is an increase in teacher and student interaction. It is clear from the participants in this study that there is an increase in educational value and quality with an increase in teacher and student interaction. However, that interaction has to include more than just engagement principles such as those found in the literature by Meyer (2014) and Brinthaupt, Fisher, Garner, Raffo, and Woodard (2011), it also has to include those business principles of customer service identified by Inghilleri & Solomon (2010) and Kinni (2011).

This results of this research study validated Soisson's (2013) belief that stated the customer service concepts of respect and courtesy could be incorporated in teacher and student engagement. These results also validated Raisman's seminal work (2002) where academic customer service links business principles to academia demonstrating that the quality of an educational experience is viewed by the student by how well the educator has assumed a major stake in the lives of the students (p. 2). In this study participants saw the instructor as a role model, making the student feel special by adding a human touch that showed the student that they are respected. Equally as important, participants felt that they were treated with respect, which can be accomplished if the instructor assumes a stakeholder position in the students' lives.

This study has the potential to transform the student experience of engagement by supporting the idea that by going above and beyond the traditional method of interpersonal engagement in online education and using customer service principles, faculty can enhance the student's educational experience from one that could have been less successful to one in which the student felt important, respected, and successful. Knowing the impact customer service principles may have on student learning can transform faculty beliefs about student engagement

and their role in teaching and learning. In fact, Soisson (2013) stated that colleges are starting to explore the value of placing a priority on providing good academic customer service.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Understanding the effects of customer service in higher education advantages any college that wishes to stay competitive. Soisson (2012) stated that the best organizations will be ineffective if the focus on students as customers is lost. The college where the study took place is relatively new as a provider of coursework in the online educational setting. It is recommended that the college leadership use the study results to inform faculty of the importance of engagement and how interpersonal engagement in online education can lead to student satisfaction and success. Further it is recommended that every online faculty member reflect on their personal teaching pedagogy and how they can add to or change online teaching practice.

The results of this study will be disseminated to the College of Nursing Dean, College Provost and, most importantly, to the online faculty in the RN to BS program. This study contributes to understanding the full extent of consequences of interpersonal online engagement. However, the participants' stories are compelling and findings suggest that customer service principles must be added to faculties practice as online instructors.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study drew from a small sample of students in a small college. As such, this study may not be representative of a larger population and it may be difficult to generalize the findings. However, according to Vagle (2014) the sample size is dependent on what makes sense and this study used 10 participants. That said, a recommendation for future studies would be to increase the sample size. In this way, the researchers will be able to obtain more feedback, thereby, important experiences might not be missed and transferability could be more likely.

A challenge in this study was that the position of researcher at the college might have influenced the results obtained. Although the researcher used bracketing to reduce research bias, it is not completely possible to totally suspend judgment when working with the data. It is almost impossible to have pure bracketing without interfering with the interpretation of data. When looking at future studies, the principle researcher may want to conduct the study at another institution other than the institution the researcher is employed.

A noteworthy future study would be to turn the focus of the research onto the student and their role in creating an empowered, more engaged environment. This learning experience would be about how the student is engaged and how the instructor felt. Students have a significant and crucial role to play as well. By flipping the question, the research could examine how instructors felt when a student was engaged. Did the instructor feel successful, and did the student use the customer service principles of respect, professionalism, and valued feeling?

Another thought-provoking future study would be using the same engagement and customer service principles in other areas of education such as traditional seat-time students, high school students, and graduate students. Areas to examine would be: engagement and customer service principles and are they the same or different in the context of high school, seat time, or graduate level teaching; is engagement defined differently online than in seat time classes and what affect does this have on the student, and; is customer service a principle that can be applied in a high school setting?

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to understand what students feel when engaged with their teacher and to determine whether interpersonal engagement includes customer service principles and if so, what impact that has on the students' sense of engagement? This researcher believed

that if teacher and student engagement were enhanced with customer service principles then the quality of teacher and student engagement would be improved and the success of the student would profoundly increase.

The central research questions for this study were: What are the lived experiences of online students as they engage with online faculty? How do their experiences reflect customer service principles? The problem identified was that if students feel they have been treated apathetically, without respect for their needs, and without feeling engaged, anxiety and hopelessness take over their learning experience and they will start to question their college choices (Leibow, 2010).

The conceptual framework of this study bridged online interpersonal engagement, customer service in business, customer service in higher education, customer service and online interpersonal engagement, and the lived experiences of the students, and then showed how engagement and customer service principles would lead to a transformational change. This framework was underpinned with Moore's transactional distance theory. The literature review examined articles that detail interpersonal engagement, customer service principles and the theoretical framework of the survey.

The setting in this study was a small private, comprehensive liberal arts college. The participants were Associate Degree nurses who were in the RN to BS online program. Ten students, one male and nine females, participated in the study. The participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview in which they were asked questions about their experiences with instructors who were engaged with them in the online environment. The interviews were recorded and then analyzed using NVivo11 by QSR.

The analysis offered four advantageous themes consolidating 14 sub-themes: valued feeling with constant motivation and encouragement; close attention and help; faculty contact; and a sense of accomplishment; effective feedback with timely personalized; and noticeable concern from the instructor; personalized professionalism with a feeling of respect; supported personal and professional growth; and instructors as role models and; good natured humor. Further the analysis showed one disadvantageous theme, lack of instructor personal approach, with four sub-themes: absent genuineness; deficient in communication; scarcity of instructor time; and lacking openness.

A significant, overarching theme was that of respect. Respect is both an engagement principle as well as a customer service principle. This research study positively showed that the participants believed respect is more important than assignment feedback, a valued feeling, or humor. These findings have important consequences for the success of the student and will have significant application in online teaching and learning.

While there are still many questions left unanswered in this study, students expressed their beliefs about the importance of both interpersonal engagement and customer service principles. A key finding is that online interpersonal engagement that reflects customer service principles lends itself to a student's sense of being respected.

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## Appendix A

### Semi-structured Interview Script

A Phenomenological Study on Teacher and Student Interpersonal Engagement to Determine Whether Engagement Includes Customer Service Principles and the Impact on Students' Sense of Engagement

**Study Note:** This is a semi-structured interview script questionnaire. Therefore, after the questions have been asked and the answer received, the researcher will probe for answers about the general response. Some examples of probing are included below with the questions and may include:

- “What difference did or would \_\_\_\_\_ have made?”
  - “Can you describe why you believe \_\_\_\_\_?”
  - “How did \_\_\_\_\_ make you feel?”
  - “You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_, tell me more.”
  - “You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_, please describe that experience.”
  - “Can you please give an example?”
  - “If yes, how so?”

**Introduction to participant:** Before we start, may I have your permission to record this interview?

Throughout this interview, if you have been enrolled in more than one online course, please refer to one course when answering the questions. Also please refer to a course in which I was not the instructor.

- Prior to this interview, you reported said that you felt your online teacher was engaged with you as a learner. For this study we are defining interpersonal teacher and student engagement between teacher and student as effective interaction that creates a respectful learning environment. My set of questions is about customer service principles, whether you experienced those principles when engaged with your teacher, and how you felt about this interaction. With this definition in mind, overall, do you feel the instructors in your online program or programs were engaged with you? Please just think of one course and not several.
- Can you give some examples of ways the instructor engaged or did not engage with you?

#### Questions about Engagement and Customer Service:

- Do you feel the instructor in your course used caring words such as “we” instead of “you” and “I” and “our class” instead of “my” class?”

Possible probes: If yes, what difference did this make? Please give an example. If no, what difference would this have made or would it have? Do you feel using caring words are important?

- Did your instructor call you by name when addressing you?

Possible probes: If yes, how did this make you feel? Do, you feel calling you by name added a human touch to interactions? If no, would this have made a difference in how you felt?

- What other things could the instructor have done or did they do that you would consider added a human touch to your interaction with them?

Possible probes: What do you think that would have added? Why do you think that \_\_\_\_\_ adds a human touch?

- Do you feel your instructor's attitude was positive, negative, or neutral?

Possible probes: What did they do to make you feel that way? How did that affect your interpersonal interaction with the instructor? If you felt their attitude was negative, what could they have done to replace negativity with a positive attitude? How would that have changed your feelings?

- When and how did the instructor in your class use humor?

Possible probes: Can you give an example? If they had used humor how do you think that would have affected the interaction between you and your instructor?

- Overall, how did the instructor in your class make you feel?

Possible probes: What did they do to make you feel that way? How do you think that impacted your interaction with your instructor? What could they have done to make you feel special?

- Do you feel your instructor addressed your preferred learning style?

Possible probes: If yes, how did they address your learning style? What could they have done more of? What type of learning styles did they incorporate? How did they incorporate those? If no, what learning style would you have wanted them to incorporate? How could they have incorporated it?

- Do you feel that your instructor asked for your input to solve problems?

Possible probes: If yes, how did they elicit the input? How did this make you feel? If no, how could they have included your input?

- Do you feel the instructor in your class was a role model?

Possible probes: If yes, what types of behaviors did they model well? If no what types of behaviors did they not model well?

- Do you feel the instructor in your online program admitted when she/he was wrong?

Possible probes: Can you provide an example? Can you provide an example of where they could have and didn't? Do you feel this impacted your relationship with your instructor?

- Do you feel the instructor in your online program used personal examples where appropriate?

Possible probes: If yes, please give an example. What difference did this make? If no, what difference would it have made? Did they encourage you to provide personal examples?

- Do you feel the instructor in your class reset your expectations if your expectations couldn't be met?

Possible probes: If yes, how? Was this successful? If no, what could they have done differently?

- Do you feel the instructor in your class gave you honest feedback?

Possible probes: If yes, how do you feel this affected your interactions with your instructor? If no, how would this have affected your interactions with your instructor?

- Do you feel the instructor in your class gave you clear feedback?

Possible probes: If yes, how did that affect your learning? If no, how would this have affected your learning?

- Overall, do you feel the instructor was respectful?  
Can you give an example of ways the instructor was or was not respectful? How did this affect your experience?

- Do you feel the instructor in your class was timely?

Possible probes: If yes, please give an example. What difference did being timely make? If no, please explain why you feel that way. How did the instructor not being timely make you feel?

- Do you feel the instructor in your class treated you with decency?

Possible probes: If yes, please describe the experience? If not, how do you feel that impacted your interactions with the instructor? Can you name an instance where they did not treat you with decency?

- Do you feel the instructor in your class valued your ideas?

Possible probes: Can you give an example? How did this affect your experience?

Did your instructor give you feedback on your ideas? How did this affect your experience? Were you more open to participate with other ideas?

- Do you feel the instructor in your class was approachable?

Possible probes: Can you give an example? How did this affect your experience?

**Questions Related to the Theory Underpinning the Study:**

- Overall, did you feel what did your instructors do to help you feel valued? On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being not feeling very valued and 10 being feeling highly valued, how would you rate how much you felt the instructor valued you? Can you give examples of things they did that would have you assign that rating?
- Overall, did you feel your teachers were focused on your learning? Can you give an example? How did this affect your experience?
- Overall, how did you feel about the interaction between you and your teachers? Can you explain why you feel this way??



## **Appendix B**

### **UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**

Phenomenological Study on Teacher and Student Interpersonal Engagement Integrated with Customer Service Principles in Online Higher Education

Consent adapted from University of New England's (2016) consent for participation in research.

Principal Investigator: Juanita Takeno DNP MSN, Director of RN to BS Westminster College, Salt Lake City, UT, Advisor: Marilyn Newell PhD University of New England, Biddeford, ME

#### **Introduction**

Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision

You are encouraged to ask questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

#### **Why is this study being done?**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of students when faculty and student online engagement has been integrated with customer service principles.

#### **Who will be in this study?**

You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are currently enrolled in one or more online classes and you reported that you feel you and your instructor have interacted during the course.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

This study involves you participating in a semi-structured interview that will be audiotaped.

You will be allowed to answer the questions in the way you want to answer about teacher and student engagement or interaction. These interviews will then be transcribed and used in a qualitative analysis.

Following the analysis of your interview, you will be contacted and at that time you will have the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview and, if you wish, ask that changes be made to more accurately reflect your responses.

#### **What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

The risks associated with this study are minimal. The only anticipated risk could be a feeling of anxiety talking with a researcher about your experiences.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

You, yourself, will not receive any direct benefit for your participation. Any benefits from this study will be in the implementation and improvement of future interactions between students and faculty in online higher education.

**What will it cost me?**

There will be no cost to you for participating in this study.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Confidentiality in this study has been assured by removing all identifying characteristics from the transcripts and by storing the data received in a secure location.

Any data that could identify a participant will not be used and all data will be destroyed following this study. A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least six months after the project is complete before it is destroyed.

The Institutional Review Board at Westminster College as well as at The University of New England may review the research records.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with Westminster College or your standing as a student. You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, with no consequences.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

The researcher conducting this study is Juanita Takeno. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at (801) 832-2156 or by email at [Jtakeno@westminstercollege.edu](mailto:Jtakeno@westminstercollege.edu)

If you choose to participate in this research and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Marilyn Newell, Ph.D. Lead Advisor at (207) 345-3100 or [mnewell@une.edu](mailto:mnewell@une.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

**Participant's Statement**

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to voluntarily participate in this study.

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Participant's signature or  
Legally authorized representative

Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

**Researcher's Statement**

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name