Building Community in an Online Course: A Phenomenological Study
Kimberly McMurtry – Sponsor: Dr. Steven R. Terrell

What’s the Question?
How do instructors build community in an online course?

Why Should You Care?
Enrollment in online courses in American higher education has increased incrementally during the last decade, but students are struggling to succeed; retention in online courses in American higher education is lower than in face-to-face courses (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012).

Current research reflects the importance of the interactive engagement of students and instructors as a key factor in student satisfaction and learning in online courses (Van Tassel & Schmitz, 2013). Phenomenological studies of online instructors have demonstrated that instructors developing relationships with students is a hallmark of successful online pedagogy (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013). Online instructors have affirmed the need to develop an interactive learning community (Edwards, 2012). Current literature thus supports the importance of developing community but reflects a void in phenomenological studies of the essence of community development; we agree it’s important, but how do we do it?

The results of the study will be helpful to first-time online faculty as well as to online faculty who seek to improve their online pedagogy, which in turn will hopefully yield more effective learning, higher student satisfaction, and lower attrition in online education. The strategies will also be helpful to instructional technology trainers in developing curriculum to guide online instructors.

What’s My Strategy?

Purpose
The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand and describe online instructors’ lived experience of developing online learning communities in their courses for experienced online instructors who teach at Averett University. At this stage in the research, “online learning community” will be generally defined as a socially constructed online environment wherein engagement in learning is enhanced by interaction among students and instructor.

Methodology
I chose the phenomenological approach because I wanted to understand the ways in which instructors develop community in online courses, since the experience of building community is most apparent to those living it (Dukes, 1984). Examining the phenomenon of developing community via the shared experiences of several online instructors will illuminate the strategies used (Creswell, 2013).

Participants
I obtained permission for my research from Averett University’s Human Research Committee. Participants were recruited via email to the faculty from the Vice President of Academics using a criterion sampling strategy; criteria included experience teaching fully online courses for at least three years at any institution and self-identification as instructors who try to build community in their online courses (Creswell, 2013). Five participants were recruited, which falls within the three-to-ten range recommended by Dukes (1984). All participants were provided an explanation of the research and assurance of anonymity, and all signed a consent form to participate in the study and to allow the researcher to visit one of their courses, noting the participants’ freedom to withdraw at any time.

Data Collection
Data collection includes a pre-interview written reflection on the meaning of online learning community, a semi-structured interview, examination of course syllabi, and observations of completed or nearly completed online courses in the learning management system.

Where Do I Go from Here?
I am currently collecting data. Planned data analysis will involve coding the data and reducing the codes to a manageable number of themes. The themes will reveal the primary ways in which online instructors develop learning communities in their online courses. I will manage my role, potential bias, and influence during analysis by presenting my findings to the participants for their review to establish credibility; thus, member checking will be my primary validation strategy (Creswell, 2013). My report will be a detailed description of the essence of building an online learning community according to the themes that emerged, including verbatim examples from the participants.

References