The Experience of Teachers in Distributed Learning Environments: Implications for Teaching Practice

By

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Abstract

This qualitative study used a narrative inquiry approach to conduct in-depth interviews of eight distributed learning educators who designed and offered online English courses in British Columbia during the 2011/12 school year. There were three research questions: (1) How do teachers describe their professional experiences of teaching in a full time online environment? (2) What are the enablers and inhibitors for online teacher development? (3) Do teachers feel their teaching practice has changed over their career as online educators?

Findings were examined through the lens of Korthagen’s (2004) Onion Model. Six themes that comprised this model, provided a framework for data analysis and insight into the process by which teachers made sense of their lived experience. The findings revealed that online educators valued their online experience because it removed the constraints of a regular classroom. They expressed frustration with some aspects of the current model of online education in BC because it prevented them from engaging in synchronous, highly connective learning projects with their students. Recognition of the fact that online educators work in a different milieu with a different set of environmental pressures is necessary to ensure the success of distributed learning in BC.

Keywords: distributed learning, core reflective practice, online teaching and learning, asynchronous DL models, e-learning
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CHAPTER ONE – STUDY BACKGROUND

Introduction

My foray into the world of distance education began in 2005 when I moved from the traditional high school classroom environment to a full-time online teaching position at a distributed learning school in Victoria, British Columbia (BC). The distributed learning school offered full-time online courses, which were developed according to current BC curriculum standards to students in grades 9-12. This change in my career resulted in a huge personal and professional learning curve. While I had seven years of experience as a classroom teacher, when I moved into a full-time, online teaching position I had to learn how to teach online and enable learning without having face-to-face (f2f) involvement with my students. This meant that I had to learn new technologies related to curriculum delivery, new methods of teaching the content, assessing the students’ understanding of the concepts studied, and creating presence in a ‘classroom’ without physical space. In retrospect, I feel that this experience has made me a better teacher. I have learned to focus on creating lessons that, once created, remain part of an online course curriculum, rather than creating lessons to deliver the next day. I have also learned to embrace change, as technological advances and pedagogical insights have enabled me to learn how to use and implement the latest software program, computer hardware; as well as new Internet communication tools.

When I began my graduate studies I had the chance to explore, in depth, theories of teaching and learning as they related to technology. Throughout my studies I have had a chance to examine my practical experience. This reflection has lead me realize that, in my search for ways to enhance student/teacher interactions within a distributed learning milieu, I have made many changes to my professional practice. This has lead me to question and to become curious about how other online teachers feel about and understand their role as teachers in distributed
learning environments and how much their experience teaching online has changed their personal perspectives on teaching and learning and their roles in the teaching and learning processes.

Although the topic of online teacher development has seen increased attention in terms of its implications for teacher training, my review of academic literature revealed that there was little exploration of the change experienced by online teaching professionals over time. Whitesel (2009) concluded her dissertation on the lived experience of online teachers in post-secondary education by stating:

> **Online programs are ubiquitous now, and the workforce for these programs consists mainly of contingent faculty, technically trained online to use various technologies and interfaces in the service of manipulating a prepared set of instructions and activities. These classes are designed to push students through certain kinds of learning with no interference from the teacher. I continue to be called by wanting to understand the experiences of these contingent teachers as they teach on the margins of mainstream education using technology** [emphasis added].

One question that comes to mind is: In what way do their experiences inform and transform their teaching identities? (Whitesel, 2009, p. 252)

Whitesel’s ‘calling’ echoed my own. Through the use of semi-structured interviews I explored the experience of BC teachers whose teaching practice was defined as taking place in full-time distributed learning environments. I collected stories of the ways in which teaching and learning changed in a distributed learning environment. I identified key areas for teacher development, uncovered the catalysts of this development and explored the ways in which the experience of teaching online transformed teachers’ perceptions of their practices.
Central Research Questions and Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to collect the experience of online English teachers of grades nine through twelve with five to ten years of experience who practiced in BC. In response to purposeful questions, their stories of their online teaching experience, provided insight into online teacher development. A second objective was to identify teacher perceptions regarding the real and perceived differences between online and classroom teaching practices. My research focused on:

1.) How do teachers describe their professional experiences of teaching in a full time online environment?
2.) What are the enablers and inhibitors for online teacher development?
3.) Do teachers feel their teaching practice has changed over their career as online educators? If so, how and why?

Significance of Study

Online teaching is an emerging field in British Columbia (BC), yet post secondary institutions, distributed learning (DL) schools who employ online teachers, and unions who protect the rights of teachers in BC are still struggling to find ways to meaningfully prepare teachers to work in this emerging environment. My research project highlighted the essence of the online teacher experience. By identifying some of the common catalysts for the personal and professional development experienced by online teachers, the research project focused on understanding the ways in which online teachers addressed critical issues in education through their online teaching practice. It also provided insight to the following questions: how can we best motivate and encourage students at a distance and in an asynchronous environment; and, how might we use lessons learned by examining online teachers’ experiences with adopting and
refining online teaching practices to train classroom teachers and pre-service teachers in DL teaching techniques? It served to highlight administrative concerns regarding leadership of a staff of online teachers and facilitation of their development as purveyors of education in a technology-mediated environment.

Summary

DL is a field of study that is gaining rapid popularity as educational institutions try to address the increasing student and parent demand for online courses as well as the resulting increased requirement for well-trained online instructors. In recent years this demand has increased exponentially, due, in large part, to the huge popularity of online study. According to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL), one million American students, kindergarten through high school, are taking online courses; iNACOL predicts that the number of students enrolled in online courses will continue to increase 30% each year (Mehta as cited in Smith, 2009). Across the 49th parallel the Canada Council on Learning’s (2009) The State of e-learning in Canada report suggests that education is adopting a “broadened paradigm [which] will involve the full integration of learning technologies into education and training” (p.5). Statements made by these organizational bodies and much recent literature make it more and more apparent that “21st century students need knowledge, skills, and dispositions that can only be learned in an online environment” (Smith, 2009, p.1).

This trend is occurring in post secondary studies as well. A study by the American Associated for Community Colleges found that 24% of all students were taking at least one fully online course in 2007 (Lokken & Womer as cited in Lee & McLoughlin, 2011, p. 24). North American post secondary institutions have increased their complement of fully online courses by 20% each year since 2002 (Allen &Seaman as cited in Lee & McLoughlin, 2011, p.24). The
increased attention paid to DL as a medium for offering instruction means that we must focus on development of online instructors who are prepared for the demands of teaching using a medium that is considerably different than the traditional classroom.
CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In order to establish a context for this research, I felt it prudent to outline some of the terms and contexts relevant to my study and to review literature related to teaching practice, teacher development and online teaching. It is also important to note that research into K-12 distributed learning was quite scant. Much of the literature base on which this study drew focused on studies conducted in the field of post-secondary online teaching and learning.

Definition of Terms and Contexts

There are a number of terms related to online teaching and learning. Appendix D contains a full glossary of the terms used in this paper.

Geographic context

Public Education in Canada

Public education is provided free to all students who meet various age and residency requirements. These requirements are set by each province as public education is the jurisdiction of each province. Under the Constitution Act (1867), all provincial governing bodies adopted the three central values associated with public education: equal access for all students, uniformity of educational resources, and cultural pluralism. Differences between provinces have resulted in the development of different programs and policies in achieving this goal (Sola, 2004). Because of the varied approaches to public education in Canada, it is important to set a context for this study by examining public education in BC as well as distributed learning in BC.

Public Education in BC

The British Columbia Ministry of Education oversees all public schools in British Columbia. All public schools in BC must operate by the rules set out in the School Act (British
This piece of legislation provides the regulatory and legal framework for education in BC.

In addition to this, any school district wishing to operate a distributed learning school must have its school board sign a Distributed Learning Agreement (British Columbia, 2006), which outlines the specific requirements of distributed learning program delivery. These are based on a set of Distributed Learning Standards (British Columbia, 2010), which, when followed, ensure that all distributed learning programs offer high quality, highly compliant (to Ministry standards) instruction (Gauthier, 2009).

**Governance of Education in BC**

The B.C. Ministry of Education is responsible for public schools in British Columbia. The province’s public schools operate in one of 59 districts, all of which are overseen by a community-elected board of education. Each district’s board of education is allocated funding and is responsible for setting and maintaining budgets based on this funding. Funding is allocated to each district on a per student full-time equivalent (FTE) basis (see Appendix D for definition), based on their projected enrollment for the upcoming school year. This funding formula applies distributed learning schools as well. Each district’s school board functions as the “public’s voice in education” (BCSTA, 2011). Boards of education appoint educators (including superintendents, principals, vice-principals and teachers), and perform other specific duties as outlined the BC School Act (British Columbia, 1996). Each district’s superintendent is responsible for the day-to-day management of the district, while school-based administrators are responsible for the day-to-day administration of a school.

Distributed Learning (DL) schools operate under the same regulations as other schools in the province; however, they also must comply with the rules set out by a governing body named
the E-learning Unit. This branch of Ministry of Education has evolved from the Correspondence Branch to the Distributed Learning Unit to its present title (Gauthier, 2009). The branch’s various names provide an insight into BC distance education’s journey from print-based correspondence education to online distributed learning; the names also represent significant pedagogical shifts, which have occurred in tandem with advancements in technology (Gauthier, 2009). I will discuss this evolution in detail in the next section.

**Educational Context**

**History of Distributed Learning in BC**

**From correspondence school to distance learning.** BC’s first public education correspondence courses were first offered in 1919, when John Kyle, Organizer of the Technical Education Branch of the Education Department (now the Ministry of Education), provided notebooks and textbooks to 86 elementary school-aged children living in isolated areas in BC in an effort to “bring a note of pleasure and profit to their otherwise lonely lives” (Dunae, 1992, p.73). Kyle’s actions made British Columbia the first province to offer public education by correspondence. A high school correspondence program was developed 10 years later under the auspices of the High School Correspondence Branch. This secondary school program, once more the first of its kind in Canada, offered students in remote areas, as well as those in schools with limited choice of programs, access to a BC public education (Dunae, 1992).

As the province’s education system developed, improved school facilities and district-level education programs began to change the demographic of the correspondence student. Students in remotes areas were now closer to a local neighbourhood school, thus the need for full-program public school correspondence education lessened. In 1968 the mandate of the Correspondence Education Branch was to recognize the “continuous nature of learning and to
facilitate it by reducing emphasis on its segmentation" (Gibson as cited by LearnNow BC, 2010). This statement reflects distance education’s current role as not only supplementary education, but also education that spans a lifetime. Since 1968 K-12 correspondence education has been offered in BC under the auspices of the Open Learning Institute (1979) and, later, the Open Learning Agency (1988).

In 1980, the term “correspondence school” was replaced with the term “distance education”. This change in terminology reflected the advent of video and telecommunications-based course material and the fact that teachers and students were communicating with each other through means other than print course materials. In the early 1990s the Internet became a more widely accepted vehicle for the provision of distance education because its affordances were seen to lessen the transactional distance between students and their teachers. By 1995 the Ministry of Education created a new policy for distance education, which transferred the responsibility for students wishing to pursue distance education courses from the Ministry of Education, who previously had administered the correspondence schooling experience, to individual school districts, who assumed this responsibility. In 1995 nine schools offered distance education. Course materials used in distance education were provided by Open School, a division of the Open Learning Agency, which created K-12 courses and resources under contract for the Ministry of Education (LearnNow, 2010).

**From distance education to distributed electronic learning.** In 1998 the Ministry of Education approved up 18 “pilot schools” to offer distance education (DE) courses or programs; however, it did so cautiously by imposing enrollment caps for each school district. In order to test the efficacy of technology in providing enhanced distance learning experience to students, the ministry ran distributed electronic learning (DEL) pilots at all 18 schools with DE programs.
The ministry capped the number of students who could enroll in DEL pilot programs at 2200 students. One feature of the pilot was to allow the nine original DE schools to enroll students continuously (throughout the year). This allowed the nine schools to enroll students after September 30th (the cutoff date for funding for all schools). Under the continuous entry model, schools were funded using a hurdle system. The hurdle system was a funding model whereby the provincial government paid a portion of the $750 per course to a school as a student reached certain benchmarks for course completion (LearnNow BC, 2010).

In 2002, the Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act, known as Bill 28 (British Columbia, 2002), removed the enrollment cap for distance learning and changed the funding structure for DE so that the Ministry provided districts with the same amount of funding for distance education students who enrolled by the September 30th as it did other students in the district. Under this act, students in Grades 10 - 12 were funded at 0.1250 full time equivalent (FTE) for each eligible four-credit course in which they enrolled (British Columbia, 2002). School districts around the province began to discuss the possibility and the feasibility of developing DEL programs. Much of this interest had to do with the new funding rules as much as it had to do with the widely held perception that DEL programs were less costly to run (Sola, 2004)

**From DEL to DL.** In 2006, the British Columbia legislative assembly passed the Education (Learning Enhancement) Statutes Amendment Act, Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006), which made significant amendments to the School Act (British Columbia, 1996). This legislative bill had repercussions for public education in BC. First, the term “distance learning” was replaced by “distributed learning” (DL), to reflect the changes that occurred as courses shifted from paper-based correspondence courses, to those offered online or by video technology.
Second, and most important to DL, the amendments allowed students on the graduation program in grades 10 to 12 to enroll in courses offered by more than one distributed learning program at the same time; however they were not permitted to enroll in the same course in two different schools. Not only was this bill important in terms of defining DL but it also allowed DL unprecedented access to every student in BC by stating that students could attend public school in BC on a course-by-course basis. After Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006), choosing courses (and schools) that would define one’s high school education became somewhat like ordering “a la carte”. Students (or their parents) had considerable freedom to choose where and when they pursued their high school education. The changed policy and funding environment gave DL an opportunity to grow in BC. Public schools were now no longer required to offer a one-size-fits-all student experience. Schools were able to offer students the chance to take courses in-school and online (which met the provincial requirements for graduation) if they chose to (LearnNow, 2010).

**DL Funding**

Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006) also brought in changes to policies regarding the funding of DL in BC. Students in Grades 10 - 12 were still funded at 0.1250 FTE for each eligible four-credit course in which they enrolled; however, the act allowed for “multiple enrollment data collections” in order to allow DL schools to enroll students throughout the school year (British Columbia, 2010). The ministry’s rationale for this policy change was that it allowed DL schools the ability to better support the ministry’s mandate to allow a more flexible, personalized school program for BC students. In addition to allowing DL schools to collect funding for students throughout the school year, the act stated that funding would be given to schools based on the number of students who were considered active in their online courses. Under the Active Policy
(British Columbia, 2011) students were considered “active”, thus eligible for funding, once the student’s school file contained items that met the following criteria:

- Completion of one, substantive assignment (representing a minimum of five percent of the course’s learning activities), dated and marked, and tied to the learning outcomes of the course claimed.

- A clear course plan for each subject listed on the signed student course selection form. This plan was required to link to learning outcomes, performance standards, required resources and assessment strategies.

- One example of dated instruction-related communication between the teacher and student directly linked to the learning outcomes of each eligible course claim.

- A course selection form listing eligible courses that met graduation requirements, reviewed annually and were signed and dated by the student and/or parent.

While Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006) and the subsequent policy changes have enabled DL schools to increase the number of grade 10-12 student enrollments and the frequency of claiming for course-based funding, increased onus has been placed on the schools to ensure that they are meeting the funding criteria. The focus on ensuring that a school has met the funding requirements has resulted in DL schools making many procedural changes with regard to new student registration.

Since 2006 the shift towards unique, student-chosen education programs has provided DL with an opportunity to emerge as a major force in education. Today, LearnNow BC (www.learnnowbc.ca), the province’s DL education portal, offers students the opportunity to choose from 2500 different courses, offered through 57 online schools (LearnNow, 2011). In
2008 roughly 5% of the province’s student population was enrolled in one or more online courses (British Columbia, 2008).

Premier’s Technology Council Report

In December 2010, the Premier’s Technology Council (PTC) released a publication titled “A Vision for 21st Century Education” (PTC, 2010). This 51-page document provided the Ministry of Education with a variety of perspectives from which to understand educational reform. The PTC’s vision of a 21st century K-12 education system was rooted in an educational approach referred to as “personalized learning” (PTC, 2010, p. 2). The report defined personalized learning as learning that “provides students the skills they need to participate in a knowledge-based society, while also allowing them to explore an educational path that is best suited to their interests, their capabilities and their chosen future” (PTC, 2010, p. 2). Some of the main tenets of personalized learning were: learning of skills not content, discovery learning, project or problem-based learning, and formative assessment (PTC, 2010, p. 2). The report referred to education as “flexible”, “personalized”, “blended” and “open access” (PTC, 2010, p. 3). The document was a clear indication that the provincial government of British Columbia was aware of the changing needs of learners in this new era.

Many DL schools, especially those that offered full-time online programs asynchronous enrollment models, were already offering personalized learning. However, in order to bring personalized learning to the distributed learning environment, online teachers also were required to reflect on their practice and on whether to adopt new skills or technologies in order to better deliver this new approach to teaching and learning. Whether this trend in education has affected teacher practice, and whether it has been responsible for teachers’ adoption of certain technologies over others has yet to be determined.
BC Education Plan

Another important facet of the current context in which this research study takes place is a recent educational reform proposed by the BC Ministry of Education. The plan for this suggested reform contains elements that will have repercussions for DL in BC.

In the fall of 2011 the BC Ministry of Education released a document titled The BC Education Plan (British Columbia, 2011). The impetus for this plan was the belief that the current education system was not adequately preparing BC students for the 21st century. The plan provided an overview of means by which the current government would convert the current educational system into a system that would be more responsive to student needs and to the demands of the world in which students would live and work after they graduate from high school. The plan was based on a simple principle: “every learner will realize [his or her] full potential and contribute to the well-being of our province” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.5). It had five elements, each of which was articulated and followed by a set of “action steps” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.5). These elements were (a) personalized learning for every student, (b) quality teaching and learning, (c) flexibility and choice, (d) high standards, and (e) learning empowered through technology.

Personalized learning for every student. This element of the plan discussed student-centred learning where students would be encouraged to play an active role in “designing their education” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.5). Action steps for this element included re-designing curriculum to reflect core competencies, defining the attributes of an “educated citizen” and identifying how that would be “articulated throughout the education program” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.5).
Quality teaching and learning. This element of the plan proposed to better support teachers as they adjusted their role to match what students need “moment by moment”. The plan referred to the development of a new system to “regulate” the teaching profession (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.5). Action steps for this element included government-organized professional development days, partnering with universities to ensure new teachers were prepared to support student learning, and providing teachers with regular performance evaluations.

Flexibility and choice. This facet of the plan proposed to allow flexibility in terms of “how, where and when student learning [may] take place” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.6). Action steps for this element included changes to the school calendar, and increased parent and student choice as to which school their child attends; as well it proposed expansion of the school credentialing system to acknowledge “learning that takes place outside of the classroom” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.6). This part of the plan would certainly recognize alternate means of achieving curriculum outcomes, such as those arrived at through independent schools and DL school programs.

High standards. The discussion under this heading focused on “student performance with respect to provincial standards” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.6). The action steps included “relevant and robust” standards to which graduates would be held accountable, provincial assessment programs that would focus on “key competencies and critical skills and knowledge” and “effective intervention strategies and supports” to help teachers identify students who were struggling.

Learning empowered by technology. The last element of the 2011 BC Education plan encouraged the use of technology to prepare students “to thrive in an increasingly digital world” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.7). Action steps included increasing student access to digital tools
that support face-to-face and distributed learning, and improving the province’s student information system to help teachers “plan a more personalized learning experience with students and their parents” (BC Education Plan, 2011, p.7).

The plan proposed significant changes to BC’s current education system; however it provided no precise idea of when and how these changes could or would take place. In addition to the publication of a multi-page PDF document, the Ministry of Education had also created a web portal (http://www.bcedplan.ca/welcome.php) where students, their families and teachers could further discuss the plan and its implications. As of April 2012, there was a 17-question discussion board (http://engage.bcedplan.ca/) rich with comments from students, parents, teachers and Ministry-appointed discussion moderators. The large number of comments under each discussion heading (comment volume ranges from 87-230 comments per question), indicated the importance of this conversation to its main stakeholders.

Teacher Education in BC

In order to better understand the findings of this study it was important to provide background on pre-service teacher education programs in BC. I have also provided some information on teacher qualification and some of the governing and regulatory bodies in BC education.

Pre-service teacher training in BC. Individuals wishing to become BC-certified teachers most often attend one of a variety of pre-service teacher education programs offered through university. There are currently nine pre-service teacher education programs recommended by British Columbia College of Teachers. They are: Vancouver Island University (VIU), Simon Fraser University (SFU), Trinity Western University (TWU), Thompson Rivers University (TRU), University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), University of British Columbia
(UBC), University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), University of Victoria (UVic), and University of British Columbia- Okanagan (UBCO) (BCCT, 2011). These programs offer students three different streams for arriving at teacher certification. They are as follows:

1. Bachelor of Education - This program is a 4-year undergraduate degree with special focus on general issues related to education (philosophy of education, history of education, sociological approaches to education) psychology of learning, psychology of adolescents (secondary program), classroom management and subject-specific teaching methods courses and two teaching practicums (one of two weeks and one that is 16 weeks in length).

2. Post-degree Program (PDP)- most of the nine institutions in BC offer a PDP which can be completed after any 4-year undergraduate degree. The PDP is a usually a 1-year program that is comprised of a combination of practicum experiences and coursework focused on exploring educational ideas and their application to classroom practice.

3. Bachelor of Education – second degree – Students who already hold an undergraduate degree may complete their pre-service training as part of a second Bachelor’s degree. Upon completion this work, students will graduate with a B.Ed in addition to gaining their professional teaching certification. The extra course credits required to earn a B.Ed second degree are anywhere from 48 (SFU, 2011) to 62 credits (UBC, 2011).

Regardless of the program in which a prospective teacher enrolled, he or she would most likely encounter courses related to subjects such as history of education, education psychology, and philosophy of education. Interestingly enough, of the three largest pre-service teacher education programs in BC (UBC, SFU, and UVIC), only one university- the University of Victoria- required its students to take course work related to distributed learning. The course was
described in the UVIC calendar as follows: “ICT course - Provides students with a foundation for using common information and communication technologies (ICT) and integrating those technologies within an educational context” (University of Victoria, 2011). While pre-service teachers may explore issues related to online education under the umbrella of other courses in the programs, it is surprising that only one of the three largest pre-service teacher education programs in BC dedicated a course to studying issues pertinent to online teaching and learning.

Levine’s (2006) report on teacher education in the United States concluded “Many students seem to be graduating from teacher education programs without the skills and knowledge they need to be effective teacher. More than three out of five (62%) report that schools of education do not prepare their graduate to cope with the realities of today’s classrooms” (Levine, 2006, p.4). In a world of education in which distributed learning is the medium of choice for a growing number of post-secondary students and an increasing number of high school students, pre-service teacher education programs may need to consider adapting their programs to reflect this emerging trend in education. Levine (2006) claimed that the major reason teacher education programs were slow to recognize current challenges in schools and classroom was that the experiences of teaching faculty were often “not recent or long enough” which resulted in a program curriculum that was based more on theoretical approaches to teaching and “insufficient integration between course work and field work” (Levine, 2006, p.4).

Before a teacher is able to teach in BC, he or she must first belong to the province’s teachers’ union; as well, he or she must be certified by the province’s teacher regulatory body.

**British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF).** In order to practice in BC, all BC public school teachers were required to belong to the BCTF, the province’s teachers’ union. This organization advocates for teachers and students and lobbies the government to address
educational issues. In addition to belonging to the provincial union, teachers must also belong to their local union. Each district’s union lobbies its board to address educational issues specific to their local jurisdiction. The BCTF was particularly interested in the topic of distributed learning for two reasons: first, there was no contract language, specific to DL teachers, that defined their working conditions; and second, DL, through its continuous enrollment model, potential for personalized learning and capacity for large class sizes, would certainly effect the traditional school system (BCTF, 2006).

**British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT).** In addition to belonging to the BCTF, a teacher had to be certified by the BCCT, a teacher-governed regulatory body for all teachers in BC. Established in 1987, the BCCT was a professional organization that was responsible through the BC Teaching Profession Act (TPA) (British Columbia, 1996) for setting and maintaining standards for teaching practice in BC. In articulating the purpose of these standards BCCT stated “standards are a profession’s way of communicating to its members and the public the description of the work of professionals – what they know, what they are able to do, and how they comport themselves as they serve the public” (BCCT, 2011, Standards, par. 2). Any teacher of grades K-12 in BC was required hold a valid BC College of Teachers Certificate. This certificate could be obtained through the BCCT after an applicant met the following criteria:

- a BC grade 12 diploma or its equivalent;
- a degree or its equivalent;
- at least four years of post-secondary study;
- completion of an acceptable teacher education program;
- familiarity with the Canadian education system;
- English proficiency, or, in the case of those who teach in French, French proficiency;
• recent teaching experience; and,
• a fit and moral character to work with children. (BCCT, 2011, Becoming, par. 6)

Under section 43 of the TPA (1996), the college was also responsible to report to the Minister of Education and to the public on the competence of its members (BCCT, 2011, Competence, par. 1).

Dissention in the BCCT. In October, 2010, the BC Ministry of Education released a fact finder report that outlined an ongoing dispute between BCCT council members which resulted in 11 of the 20-panel membership requesting that the Minister of Education “take extraordinary action” to address issues related to the governance of the BCCT council (Avison, 2010). The primary concern expressed by the letter was that the BCTF had undue influence due to liaisons between the BCTF and BCTF-endorsed council members, which prevented the college from properly carrying out its mandate (to regulate teacher conduct). The report detailed a months-long external review of the BCCT and revealed crises (both within and without council membership) that required resolution if the BCCT was to continue to be an effective regulatory body of teacher conduct in BC. Avison’s (2010) report contained a recommendation that the BC College of Teachers be re-configured; or, replaced by a new organization that could have many of the same functions as the BCCT. He concluded his report by observing that the failure of the BCCT to “commit to a common purpose and focus on professional excellence, currency and competence” indicated that teachers could not be a self-regulating profession (Avison, 2010, p. 34). He closed his report with by recommending the government take immediate action to remedy the situation.

Dissolution of the BCCT. On November 14, 2011, Bill 12, the Teachers Act (British Columbia, 2011), was introduced and passed in the British Columbia legislature. Bill 12 (British
Columbia, 2011) repealed the Teaching Profession Act (British Columbia, 1996) and created a new structure for guiding teachers in BC. This included the dissolution of the British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT) and its replacement with the new British Columbia Teachers’ Council (Council). The council’s main objectives were to “establish standards for the education of applicants for certificates of qualification and to establish standards for the conduct and competence of applicants for certificates of qualification and certification” (British Columbia Public School Employers Association, 2011).

**Structure.** The newly-established council was overseen by a ministry-appointed commissioner. After Bill 12 (2011) was passed school districts no longer reported issues related to the conduct or competency of teacher to the BCCT. Instead all matters related to teacher conduct were deferred to the commissioner. The council consisted of 15 voting members and one non-voting member. The voting members included three BCTF teachers, five teachers elected by teachers on a regional basis and seven members based on numbers from the following partner groups: the BC School Trustees Association, the BC Superintendent’s Association, the BC Principals’ and Vice-principal’s Association, the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, the First Nations Education Steering Committee, the Federation of Independent School Associations, and the Associated of British Columbia Deans of Education. The council’s role was to set standards for teachers in areas such as “certification, conduct and competence” (British Columbia, 2011). The council also had the authority to approve teacher education programs for certification purposes, which was a former duty of the BCCT.

Another important part of the structure of the new teacher-regulating body was the establishment of a Disciplinary and Professional Conduct Board. This board was a subset of the
council that heard complaints against teachers. It consisted of nine council members, four of whom could be BCTF members. The board was overseen by the commissioner.

**Certification.** After the passing of Bill 12 (British Columbia, 2011) all administrative activities, including issuing teaching certificates and maintaining employer and discipline registries and providing administrative support to the council and the discipline board, were taken on by the Ministry of Education. The position of Director of Certification was created to deal with matters regarding certification. As of January 6, 2012, all teacher certification processes fell under the jurisdiction of the BC Ministry of Education.

The intent of Bill 12 was to “restore a greater balance to disciplinary processes for the [teaching] profession” (BCPSEA, 2011, p.1). To this end, council members were required to take an oath of office (British Columbia, Oath, 2011). In addition to this, council members had a responsibility to “put the public interest ahead of the interest of any other group with which they are affiliated” (BCPSEA, p.3). It remains to be seen if the creation of new regulatory bodies whose panel members were drawn from various education stakeholder groups, and the transfer teacher regulation and teacher certification from the BCCT to the Ministry of Education has achieved the ministry’s stated goal. Bill 12 (British Columbia, 2011) signaled a transition of teacher regulatory and certificatory power from a more teacher-controlled body, to a more government-controlled body.

**Teacher Development**

In order to fully understand how teacher development might be discussed in terms of online teaching, it was pertinent to examine literature relating to teaching development as it related to all teachers. There was much literature on the topic of teacher development (teacher growth). While this topic has been explored often, many of the studies on teacher development
focused on pre-service teaching and on the experience of teachers in their first seven years of practice (Mok, 2005). This study focused on teachers with five or more years’ experience in the online classroom, to better understand teacher development in an online setting.

**Theoretical frameworks for teacher development.** The many opinions theorists have on teacher development (and its close relationship to teacher training) may be categorized into one of three main theoretical approaches: the technicist approach (Samaras, 2000; Smith 2001), which views teacher development as the mastering of concrete and observable criteria; the humanist approach (Iannone & Carline, 1971; Joyce, 1975) which considers the personal aspect of teaching to be crucial and views personal and professional development as integral parts of the teaching whole; and the sociocultural approach (Vygotsky, 1986; Lempert-Shepel, 1995; Golombek & Johnson, 2004), which sees teacher development as situated in learning and dependent on the development of a three-way conversation between a teacher’s prior experiences as a learner and assumptions about teaching and learning, teaching pedagogy and his/her own experiences in the field (Warford, 2011). The theoretical lens through which one views one’s development may influence the ways in which one’s development occurs.

**Stages of teacher development.** Much of the literature defines teacher development in terms of stages.

**Fuller’s teacher concerns model.** Fuller’s (1969) three-stage model of teacher development was created on the premise that teachers encounter different concerns at different points in their careers. This model views teacher development as a linear process that is directly related to a teacher’s years of experience in the field. The three stages and the concerns that shape teacher development in them are as follows:
1. Phase one: Preteaching. This phase comprises the time between student teaching experience and a teacher’s first actual job. Teachers in this phase experience “anticipation or apprehension” regarding teaching and seem to be in a period of “non-concern” with the specifics of teaching (Fuller, 1969, p. 219).

2. Phase two: Early teaching. During this phase teachers are overtly concerned with issues related to classroom management and instruction, but are more covertly concerned with issues related to their adequacy in the classroom and the answer to the question “what is the hidden agenda?” of colleagues and administrators (Fuller, 1969, p. 220).

3. Phase three: Late teaching. Teachers in this phase seem to focus their concerns on the well being of their pupils. Issues related to student success are most prevalent during this phase. (Fuller, 1969)

Fuller’s model has been expanded, redefined and re-sequenced over the years. Adams (1982) further defined and elaborated on Fuller’s three-concern construct by noting teacher development as being dependent on a teacher’s solution of concerns about adult perceptions, instruction, discipline, students’ academic success and the school environment. Others (Ghaiith and Shaaban, 1999; Adams, 1982; Pigge and Marso, 1997) have found the sequence of Fuller’s concern stages to be different in different studies, and sometimes, as in the case of student discipline and motivation, to be present at all times in a teacher’s development (Adams, 1982).

Christensen’s (1983) stage model. Christensen (1983) also relied on a stage model to describe the development of teachers’ careers over time. She saw teachers as “continuously evolving individuals possessed of powerful needs for autonomy competence, stability and self-knowledge; guided by a uniquely adult approach to learning and blessed with great resourcefulness” (Christensen, 1983, p. 3). From this description followed her three-stage teacher
development model which drew heavily on the large body of teacher development research to inform her findings. Christensen viewed teacher development as fitting into one of three stages:

1. Stage one: Induction and the early years – beginning teachers exhibit different concerns than they did in pre-service training. As they struggle to find balance between their ideals and their new reality. Professional concerns include keeping records, lesson planning and maintaining control in the classroom. Other concerns include winning the respect and admiration of administrators and colleagues and that of their pupils. This stage is marked by anxiety and uncertainty and an exponential learning curve as teachers adjust to their new reality.

2. Stage two: The middle years – this stage ranges from the fourth to twentieth year of a teacher’s career and “reflects partial resolution of the beginning teacher’s uncertainty and trepidation” (Christensen, 1983, p. 5). Teachers in this stage of their careers know what they are doing and are willing and able to test their perceptions of education and of themselves as teachers.

3. Stage three: The later years – it is noted that the information regarding teachers in this stage is contradictory. Many teachers who have been in the field for twenty or more years express dissatisfaction and discouragement with their careers, while others express feelings of confidence, security and satisfaction. (Christensen, 1983)

Limitations of stage comparison models. While stage models of teacher development offered a clear view of teacher development over time, it is important to note that there were some limitations to viewing teaching practice as linear in its development. Mok (2005) noted “many stage or cycle theorists treat life stages as successive, linear hierarchical and progressive”
(Mok, 2005, p. 56). It is assumed that higher stages are more advanced lower stages. Yet linear progression through each stage is not a guarantee and may not occur the same way for each individual. Mok (2002) listed sense of self, life changes and ecological situations as responsible for differing rates and methods of development experienced by teachers (Mok, 2002). In stage comparison models transition from one stage to another is an assumed certainty, but in reality, transitions may be “random, unorganized, non-integrated responses to situational stimuli” (Mok, 2005, p. 56). Levinson (1986) saw life development as non-hierarchical and non-continuous. He maintained that development is not synonymous with growth. Life development might be as much about “growing up” as it is about “growing down” (Levinson, 1986, p. 10). As teacher development is closely tied to life development one might view it through the same lens as that provided by Levinson. This would mean that while teacher stage development was used to frame some of the findings in this study, it was used with the understanding that development is not always progressive, nor is it linear. Teaching development, like life development is a phenomenon that evades categorization.

An alternate model for teacher development. Meijer, Korthagen, and Vasalos (2009) proposed a core reflection approach to teacher development based on the premise that teaching practice is more effective and fulfilling if it is connected with a person’s core values and beliefs. Using Korthagen’s (2004) onion model as a means of graphically expressing the notion that behaviour represents a connection between the ‘inside’ (one’s core beliefs) and the ‘outside’ (the environment in which one finds oneself), Meijer et al. (2009) posited that by reflecting on one’s practice, one can create harmonious alignment between the onion layers.
Their model for teacher development was based on the view that teacher development takes place each time an individual experiences “deep learning” (Meijer et al., 2009, p. 298). They drew on U-theory (Scharmer, 2007; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers, 2004) to explain the process of deep learning that occurs when a teacher arrives at an original and appropriate response to the demands of a teaching situation (Meijer et al., 2009).
Figure 2. U-theory’s conception of deep learning. From “Supporting presence in teacher education: The connection between the personal and professional aspects of teaching” by P. Meijer et al, 2009, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, p. 298.

Figure 2 shows the downward movement experienced by a learner when he or she is confronted with a certain teaching situation that may require a unique reaction or solution. Meijer et al. (2009) posited that deep learning takes place as one moves from the external situation inward, or down the U. They suggested deep learning cannot occur without presence, which is placed at the bottom of the U diagram. Presence is defined as a full awareness of the here and now (Meijer et al., 2009). Reflection, or the ability to see and draw on one’s personal strengths, allows one to be properly present and to engage in the meaningful thought that comprises deep learning experiences. Meijer et al. viewed the use of positive psychology techniques (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) as integral for allowing this learning to occur. A central idea in positive psychology is that individuals can “use their own personal qualities to optimally act in the world so that their actions are both effective and personally fulfilling” (Meijer et al., 2009, p. 299). This approach encourages the development of an individual’s set of “core qualities” (creativity, courage, perseverance, kindness and fairness) (Ofman, 2000). The core reflection approach combined the essence of U-theory, the process of learning through achieving presence, and
positive psychology create a model for teacher development, “not only aims at incorporating the self and its strengths into teaching, but also at an optimal matching with the demands of the specific situation” (Meijer et al, 2009, p. 299).

Using this approach, Meijer et al (2009) discovered there were six stages through which individuals may progress as part of their development. The stages include chaos and a fixation on problems; deepened awareness: confusion and fears; reflection at the identity layer and confrontation with an existential tension; discovering presence and deconstructing core beliefs; deepening presence; and, towards autonomy in core reflection and maintaining presence (Meijer et al., p. 307). While Meijer et al (2009) used a stage model to portray teacher development, progression through each stage was as dependent on the passage of time (temporal), as it was on the gaining of new understanding/insight (cognitive).

**Online Teaching**

In recent years online teaching has become more widely practiced. It was relevant to explore literature related to online teachers, models of online learning and the standardization of online teaching practice.

**Demographics.** Many of those who are drawn to online teaching are experienced classroom teachers. A recent US study found that 56% of online teachers have reporting six to 15 years of teaching experience while 24% reported 16 or more years of teaching experience (Dawley, 2010). In BC it is estimated that there are 300 DL teachers (BCTF, 2006). A study by the BCTF (2006) revealed that 16% of online teachers have 16-20 years experience, while 33% of these teachers have 21-30 years of experience. Experience with students in a face-to-face setting is a definite asset in any teaching situation; however, online teaching is very different from teaching in a conventional classroom (Abbot, 2005; Wong et al., 2006) and requires
understanding, not only of technologies related to the delivery of online courses, but also pedagogy pertaining to online teaching and learning. Anderson (2011) saw the relationship between the two influences of online teaching practice (technologic and pedagogic) as “being intertwined in a dance: the technology sets the beat and creates the music, while the pedagogy defines the moves” (Anderson, 2011, p. 81).

**Models of online teaching.** In order to understand online teaching practice it is important to review recent literature on online teaching and learning.

**Anderson’s (2008) E-Learning Model.** Anderson (2008) argued that online learning is a subset of learning in general. He postulated that online learning, like any learning, must take place in an environment that is learner-centred, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered and community-centered. The Internet allows for the creation of learning environments that contain all four elements. While online learning can present challenges in terms of achieving transparency and immediacy in student/teacher interactions, it can also present incredible opportunities (Anderson, 2008). Advances in social networking tools and web-based communication technologies and “near-ubiquitous access to quantities of content that are many orders of magnitude larger than that provided in any other medium” (Anderson, 2008, p.66) now make it easier for students to engage in community-centred, knowledge-centred learning. In fact, Web-based technologies enable almost all forms of interaction.

Anderson’s (2008) model of e-learning (fig. 3) provided a graphic representation of the interactions between teachers and students in any of the many modes of online learning.
After determining the type of learning required for a given topic, teachers may plan for the right mix of student, teacher and content interaction in order for students to achieve and demonstrate mastery of subject matter. According to this model of online learning there are two main modes of online learning: collaborative, community of inquiry models and independent learning.
models. In the first mode students interact with each other through computer conferencing, chats or virtual worlds. These modes of instruction are often temporally restrictive, as the teacher/student interaction is usually synchronous (see Appendix D on p. 134 for definition) and not as cost effective; however, the environments created by this type of instruction are rich, interactive, allow for deep learning and are in line with constructivist pedagogy. They, do, however require presence of both the teacher and the learner. This is often a difficult thing to achieve in distributed learning environments. The second mode of learning (represented by the right side of figure 3) shows the tools and interactions represented by independent learning. This type of learning is often self-paced which means that a teacher will be dealing with students on an individual basis rather than as a group. This mode of learning allows for temporal freedom, which Anderson (2008) noted was the major motivation for an individual’s decision to enroll in a DL course. One of the pitfalls of this mode of learning, however, is its tendency to be isolating. Anderson (2008) noted that “sufficient levels of deep and meaningful learning can be developed as long as one [emphasis added] of the three forms of interaction (student-teacher; students-student; student-content) is at very high levels” (Anderson, 2008, p.66). Teachers may use models, such as the one presented by Anderson (2008), to help them make decisions regarding the development and implementation of their online courses.

**Technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK).** Another well-known model used in the development of online teaching and learning resources was Mishra and Koehler’s (2006) TPACK model. This model built on Shulman’s (1986) work, which posited that teacher training programs should not present content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical knowledge (PK) as two separate areas of mastery. He proposed that teaching teachers how to teach meant teaching them skills relevant to their content fields. The term he coined for the intersect between
the two types of mastery was pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1986). Shulman’s (1986) work had a great influence on contemporary pre-teacher training initiatives.

Mishra and Koehler (2006) added technological knowledge (TK) to Shulman’s (1986) model. They noted that the use of technology in education focused more on the ‘how-to’ of technology (how to build a spreadsheet, how to use a word processing program, how to build a web-site) rather than on the use of technology in a pedagogically sound way, given the content to be mastered (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). In order for educators to use technology effectively in their practice, they needed knowledge of all three areas of mastery (technological, content and pedagogical). Mishra and Koehler (2006) named the intersect between the three areas of mastery ‘technological pedagogical content knowledge’ (TPACK). Mishra and Koehler’s model provided a holistic approach to teacher training that related technology to pedagogical theories and knowledge of the content that educators would teach.

Their model worked especially well when applied to online teaching and learning initiatives. It provided online teachers the opportunity to give due consideration to all three areas of teaching mastery (especially with regard to how all three intersect and what that intersect may look like for their them in their practice) when they were planning and developing their online courses (Mishra & Koehler, 2009).

Though online learning was an emerging field in education it was clear that educators who chose to engage in online teaching needed to think deeply about matters related to teaching and learning in this new medium.

**Online teaching standards.** As education moves toward online modes of delivery and theories regarding online learning coalesce, increased focus has been placed on the practices associated with teaching online. Provincial, national, and international governing bodies in
education have issued standards in order to regulate the quality of online instruction (iNACOL, 2008; CCL, 2009; British Columbia, 2010). Individual institutions rely on these standards as a means of creating and maintaining quality online programs. Prospective and current online teachers are encouraged to use these standards as benchmarks for their own success in the online classroom and administrators may use these standards as part of formal online teacher evaluations.

**Tools used in distributed learning.** Online teachers make use of various technologies in order to design and deliver instruction in a distributed learning environment. All of the research participants offered their online courses through the medium of a learning management system (LMS). Learning management systems refer to the software used to deliver and manage instruction. LMS software may be proprietary (a product provided by a software company) or open source (a product provided freely and without copyright/usage restrictions on the Internet).

All LMSs, regardless of whether they are open source or proprietary, are comprised of similar elements that facilitate teaching and learning in a distributed learning environment. Table 2 (Appendix E) lists tools common to LMSs.

At times teachers may use technologies outside the environment of a LMS in order to aid their facilitation of the online teaching and learning experience. Table 3 (Appendix F) provides a list of the technologies research participants mentioned using in order to facilitate online teaching and learning.

**Summary**

It is clear that DL is a topic of great interest in the field of education. It is an emerging trend; one that is growing in the rich and well-researched field of K-12 education. Literature on the topic of teacher development portrays teachers as beings in a constant state of development.
This development may occur temporally or cognitively or both and whether or not it can be considered linear is a subject of debate in the literature. The rich body of information on teacher development has provided me with a lens through which to view the stories of online teachers’ experience in the field of online teaching and learning.

There is a dearth of information on the topic of online teacher development. Though there is much discussion of online teaching standards and there is a growing field of study related to models of online teaching and learning, the stories of teachers who work in an online milieu are largely absent from the literature addressing topics related to online education.
CHAPTER THREE- RESEARCH PROCESS AND METHODS

Research Methods Selection

Since the primary goal of this research was to elicit the lived experiences of online teachers’ professional practices, I employed a qualitative approach to the study design and execution. Maxwell (2009) stated that the key, when choosing an approach to qualitative research design, is the “compatibility of your reasons for ‘going qualitative’ with your other goals, your research questions and the actual activities involved in doing a qualitative study” (Maxwell, 2009, p.220). One of the major goals of this research study was to better understand the ways in which online teaching practice changed over time. The research questions focused on identifying key factors relating to teacher growth and the resulting change in practice. The section on research design outline research activities that aligned well with a qualitative approach. This research sought to “understand processes, experiences and meanings people assign to things” (Kalof et al, 2008, p.79); therefore it was in direct alignment with a qualitative research approach. According to Creswel (2007) qualitative research:

- takes place in a natural setting - in qualitative research data is collected in the field as opposed to conducting research in a lab (contrived situation);
- uses the researcher as key instrument - qualitative researchers tend to collect data themselves through interviews, documents and observation;
- employs multiple forms of data - qualitative researchers often rely on multiple sources of data rather than on a single data source; and,
- uses inductive data analysis - theories, themes and categories are emerge from observations made through data analysis. (Creswel, 2007)
The identification of the experience of online teacher growth and change was charted through a qualitative approach to research methods.

**Research Paradigms**

Maxwell (2009) cautioned that good research design includes consideration of the research paradigm(s) in which one’s work is situated (Maxwell, 2009). Before deciding on a research methodology I reviewed a number of research designs including phenomenological approaches to research methodology and narrative inquiry-based approaches. Each research method was evaluated for its effectiveness in proposing a method for research and supporting the research direction.

**Phenomenological research.** A phenomenological study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a common phenomenon (Creswel, 2007, p. 57). Van Manen (1990) defined phenomenological research as “a deep questioning” of a certain aspect of the human existence that is grounded in the context of the researcher’s “particular individual, social, historical life circumstances” (1990, p. 31). Phenomenological methodology seemed to provide the blueprint for research that would examine, establish and present common themes in online teacher growth. Patton (as cited in Merriam, 2009) defined phenomenological research as research that was based on “the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience” (p.25). A phenomenological approach could be used based on the premise that there was an essence to the experience of online teacher growth and development that can be expressed as a result of this study; however, in order to present the stories of online teachers, I decided to adopt a different approach.

**Social Constructivism.** After careful review of the literature related to research methodology, I situated my research in social constructivist theory. In the social constructivist
world view “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2007, p. 20) by developing subjective meanings of their experiences. Often these meanings are formed through interactions with others. The identification of online teacher growth as it related to teaching practice was best accomplished through the lens of social constructivism.

**Narrative inquiry.**

“Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives” (Heil-brun, 1988, p. 37, *Writing a Woman's Life*)

The above quotation served as the epigraph for Connelly and Clandinin’s (1990) explication of the use of narrative inquiry in educational research. It also served as confirmation of my desire to function as a story collector through my research. Narrative inquiry is, simply put, inquiry *using* narrative. However, there are many different ways in which this definition can be realized in research. Anderson (2009) noted “there are many disagreements about what narrative inquiry constitutes” (Anderson, 2009, p. 28). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) viewed narrative inquiry as an analysis of narrative, whereas others viewed this type of research as the collection and analysis of the life stories of individuals (Clandinin and Murphy, 2007). Anderson’s own research involved the use of a meta-narrative inquiry method whereby he studied individuals’ “stories about storytelling” (Anderson, 2009, p.28).

This study fell more the latter definition of narrative inquiry. My primary method of inquiry was to collect teachers’ stories of their experiences as online teachers through the use of interviews. Narrative inquiry begins with the premise that individuals live “storied lives” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.2) and tell stories of those lives. The job of a narrative researcher is to “describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of
experience” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Kramp (2004) posited that “stories preserve our memories, prompt our reflections, connect us with our past and present, and assist us to envision our future (Kramp, 2004, p. 107). The examination of educators’ stories about the present context of online teaching, helps us to reflect on our vision for the future of online education. Muirhead (2000) noted that it is important to give voice to teachers who work in online education. The newness of both online teaching methods and practices makes reflection and re-visioning two essential activities that can be supported through methods associated with narrative inquiry. In telling stories, we often make sense of our actions. We are prompted to reflect. Narrative fills the space between “what happened” and “what it means” (Didion as cited in Kramp, 2004). Through narrative inquiry the story of online teacher development was able to emerge and coalesce.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) pointed out the coalescence of any inquiry using narrative was two-fold. The process of narrative inquiry requires active involvement and collaboration between researcher and research participant. They noted that it is impossible for the researcher to act as a mere scribe; to silence his/her own narrative voice. Instead they stated that narrative inquiry is the construction of a “collaborative story” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 12) that emerges from the joint stories of the research participants’ lived experiences and those of the researcher. This two-part, collaborative approach to inquiry prevented me from having to “still my theoretical voice” and allowed me to take on the role of “storyliver” in a way that helped build an understanding the experience of online teaching which honoured my role as an educator as well (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.14). By listening to participant stories of their experience of teaching and learning online, I hoped to capture the story of what it meant to “educate and be educated” online (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.12).
Method Selection

In summary, I used basic interpretive qualitative research methodology with a narrative inquiry-based approach to collect and analyze data. My data collection procedures and research design are outlined in the next section.

Research Design

Maxwell (2009) identified four main components of qualitative methods that involve design decisions: the research relationship, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. I used these four components to provide a tentative plan for this research study; this section uses the four components as headings under which follow discussions of the study’s design.

Research Relationship

Maxwell (2009) noted the relationships with people in a research study can be complex and changeable and that these relationships may affect the researcher as ‘research instrument’ as well as the research design (Maxwell, 2009). Bearing this in mind, it was important for me to typify the relationship I expected to have with my research subjects. As this research was, in some cases, conducted in situ and dealt with teachers’ perceptions of their own practice, I needed to establish a relationship with research participants that invited open discussion and disclosure. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) cautioned that creating an atmosphere of trust is essential to eliciting good stories. Through trust “the storytelling urge, so much a part of the best parts of our social life, finds expression” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p.12). It was important, early in the data collection process, to create a relaxed, comfortable atmosphere where research participants felt comfortable relaying the story of their growth. By identifying myself as a fellow online teacher, curious to know if the development I experienced in my online teaching practice was
shared by others, I invited a level confidence conducive to the collection of authentic, reflective narratives of individuals’ professional growth.

**Sampling**

When making decisions about sampling it was important to consider four of the five ‘W’s: where, when, who and what (Maxwell, 2009). I used purposeful sampling to create the research study sample. Purposeful sampling provided me the opportunity to select research participants for their “typicality and relative homogeneity” which allowed for a more focused study of the phenomenon of online teacher development (Maxwell, 2009).

In 2011 there were 53 online schools in BC. Approximately 300 teachers worked in online education in BC. There were many differences between schools regarding the construction, implementation and administration of their online programs. In order to ensure that my study focused on the experience of online teachers, rather than on the infrastructure of various online programs, I decided to approach teachers at four online schools in BC that shared similar structure in terms of their organization, procedures and technical infrastructure. I interviewed teachers with five or more years experience in the field of online education who taught English or Humanities-based courses at the high school level. Because my central research questions sought to gather answers to questions about online teaching practice over time, it was essential that the teachers interviewed as part of this study had at least five years of online teaching experience.

**Data Collection**

**Responsive interviewing.** I used responsive interviewing as the main mode of data collection. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), in the responsive interview model questioning styles “reflect the personality of the researcher, adapt to the varying relationships between
researcher and conversational partner, and change as the purpose of the interview evolves” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 15). The responsive interviewing model relies heavily on interpretive constructivist philosophy chiefly “that how people view an event and the meaning that they attribute to it is what is important” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 28), which was the same philosophy on which this study’s research methodology rested. This approach to interviewing allowed flexibility in terms of developing and conducting interviews, which allowed me to explore unplanned directions in online teacher interviews.

The interview. As suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2005) the research participants were contacted by phone or Skype in order to establish a relationship and to schedule an interview. The first interview protocol appears in Appendix A of this paper. Four in-person interviews were recorded using a digital recording device. The remaining interviews were conducted at a distance using Skype video conferencing. An inexpensive digital audio recording tool was used to record all interviews.

When possible the interviews took place in a face-to-face setting; however, due to budget and time constraints, half of the interviews were conducted using Skype audio/video conferencing. Since all teachers in this study taught in a technology-mediated environment, teachers were comfortable with communication using this technology.

In keeping with the tenets of responsive interviewing, my interview questions were not always posed exactly as written on the scripts, nor, at times, was the proposed structure kept to when the interview took another direction. When devising guiding questions Kramp (2004) noted that particular prompts provide a frame that allows the narrator great personal freedom and choice. Questions that invite the interviewee to “think about” and “tell about” invite narratives that are rich in context and “thick description” which is critical to the process of narrative inquiry.
(Kramp, 2004). According to Kramp (2004) “the more that the process is focused on the participant and the power of each to construct the narrative, the greater the understanding derived from the telling” (Kramp, 2004, p. 114). In order to harness the power of personal narrative, the questions were created in a style that emulated this type of inquiry. Schissel (2011) also noted the importance of giving the interviewee “the chance to expound (to unload)” (Schissel, 2011, personal communication); with that in mind, the interviews were concluded with an open-ended question. See Appendix A for the complete interview guide.

Upon completion of each interview, the digital recording device was used to record the researcher’s impressions about the visit and to expand on any of the observations made during the interview. By recording impressions while they were fresh it was less possible to ‘mis-remember’ impressions or observations. All subjects were required to sign a consent form, which disclosed all of the interview goals and the expectations for participating/withdrawing from the study. When conducting my interviews, subjects were reminded of the goals of the study, the risks associated with participating, and the manner in which data would be collected, stored and used. The subject’s verbal agreement to participate in the study was also sought.

Member check. Research participants were sent a copy of the initial interview transcripts and asked to review them. At this time research participants were asked whether or not their views were correctly represented. They were asked if they had anything else to add or wished to have expunged. While it was hoped that the initial interview sparked new reflection, no participants provided additional comments, save supportive comments referring to the successful completion of this research project.

Bracketing interview. Kramp (2004) suggested the use of a “bracketing interview” (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio as cited in Kramp, 2004) as a means of bringing forward a
researcher’s prejudices. Bracketing interviews take place before interviewing begins and involve the interviewing of the researcher herself using the prompts she plans to use in the research study. Undergoing this process helped tease out hidden biases. Kramp noted “it is only with this awareness that we can truly be open to what are our own experiences” (Kramp, 2004, p. 115). By participating a bracketing interview before participant interviews began, I was able to properly ‘calibrate’ myself, the “human instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.192).

**Audio research journal.** A collection of audio notes recorded after each interview and throughout the data collection process formed the research journal. This audio journal became a useful collection of details of all of the events and, my own impressions, that occurred during the research process. The thoughts recorded after each interview or observation, helped to organize the data, and, when listened to en masse, pointed to recurring themes in the data.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was inductive. That is, the data collected in this study was examined with the hope of ‘making sense’ of the data collected through the course of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Miles and Huberman (1994) noted that in qualitative research most analysis is done with words. The words “can be organized to permit the researcher to contrast, compare, analyze and bestow patterns upon them” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 7). Since my data was in story form, my data analysis comprised an “analysis of narrative” (Kramp, 2004, p. 120). The analysis characterized in this approach moves from teachers’ stories to shared themes or themes common to all (Kramp, 2004). All recorded interviews were transcribed via paid service. Once the transcripts were returned, the transcripts were checked against the interview recordings to ensure that they were accurate. At this time the audio file and transcripts were analyzed in order to elicit common themes in the data. I then separated the themes into organizational and theoretical
categories. Organizational categories included “broad subjects or issues that are established prior to interviews” (Maxwell, 2009, p. 237). Organizational categories that arose from the first reading/listening of interview transcripts were: technology, communication, connection, policy, students, teaching philosophy. As I proceeded further in my analysis, I began to see connections between the data and the theoretical categories proposed in Korthagen’s (2004) onion model which illustrated the levels encountered when an individual engages in core reflection practice.

At this point my analysis process was similar to the “data analysis spiral” (Creswell, 2007, p. 142) described by Creswell (2007) whereby analysis takes a circuitous rather than linear route. As my analysis progressed I was able to determine sub-categories within the theoretical categories proposed in Korthagen’s (2004) model. The categories were sorted into patterns based on my three over-arching research questions.

Qualitative data analysis software (HyperRESEARCH 3.03) was used in order to expedite the analysis of the data collected in participant interviews. This software allowed for searches of common words, key phrases or terms, which helped with the collecting of data within the larger themes, then the smaller sub-categories. The use of this tool also helped confirm hunches relating to possible themes in the data. Visual mind maps and charting were used to help collect thoughts and impressions related to the data. These were integral to understanding the relationship between the data, the themes and the research questions. During this time, there was a large portion of time spent “living with the data” (Muirhead, 2000, p. 47). This phrase refers to the review and reflection of the data that occurs inside one’s head as one intuits the possible connections between the collected conversations. This process relied on time for the percolation of one’s ideas. Through this process the large body of information represented by the transcripts became distilled in an almost “zen-like” (Muirhead, 2012, personal
communication) manner, creating impressions, which could then be tested out using the qualitative data analysis software. Contrary to the algorithmic and provable precision of qualitative data analysis software “living with the data” is mucky, deep and entirely reliant on one’s ability to surrender to the power of one’s own mind to see emerging patterns and themes. This process was important in terms of achieving an understanding of the lived experience of the eight teachers interviewed as part of this study.

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited to the information provided by eight online teachers with five or more years of online teaching experience employed at four K-12 distributed learning schools in BC who were involved in the facilitation of secondary (grades 10-12) English courses during the 2011/2012 school year.

**Limitations**

One of the most obvious limitations of this study is the political context in which it took place. During the 2011/12 school year teachers in the province of BC were working without a current collective agreement and found themselves in the midst of ongoing and largely unproductive contract negotiations between the BCTF and the British Columbia Public School Employers’ Association (BCPSEA). On September 6, 2011, after the BCPSEA and the BCTF were unable to reach an agreement as to the terms of the new collective agreement, teachers in BC entered Phase One job action (Hughes, 2012). Under the auspices of Phase One job action, teachers were directed to teach, but not engage in administrative tasks, such as the creation of report cards, participation in staff meetings, or engagement in written communication with administrators. The interpretations of what phase one job action constituted were wide in range and varied not only between school districts, but among schools within a district. This was a time
where relationships between a school’s teaching staff and its administration were, at best, tense, and, at worst, fractured. It was also a time where relationships among teaching colleagues were strained as each teacher tried to do his/her best job while working with the nebulous language of the BCTF phase one job action bulletins. Participants’ perspectives of their teaching experience may have been tainted by the nearly school year-long public and drawn-out struggle between the province’s teachers’ union and their employer. Because of this participants’ perspectives of their experience may have been more negative than positive. One school’s teachers chose not to participate in this study due to the fact that they viewed participation in the study as violating the terms of the phase one job action.

Another important limitation is context-based. During the course of my research the provincial government passed two pieces of legislation, the Teachers Act (Bill 12, British Columbia, 2011) and the Education Improvement Act (Bill 22, British Columbia, 2012), which made significant changes to the governance of teachers, and the rights of teachers. These bills and their proposed amendments to existing legislation have altered and will continue to alter the landscape of education in British Columbia. At present the political climate in British Columbia and policies related to education are so unpredictable that it is unclear how much of this study’s context will be relevant in the near future.

Another limitation of this study is in its design. If I had planned to use Korthagen’s (2004) onion model before I designed my questions, I would have designed the interview questions with a view to eliciting data on some of the less articulate-able themes such as teacher identity and teacher mission. The findings in these two sections are scant and prove that this study lacks depth of scope in terms its elucidation of data on teacher identity and mission.

Summary
The data gathered through my research helped reveal the experience of online teachers who have taught in the field of online education in BC for a period of five years or more. Teachers were asked to describe their professional experiences teaching in a full time online environment, outline potential enablers and inhibitors for their development, and reflect on changes to their teaching practice over their career as online educators. The crux of teaching praxis is self-reflection. This research served as a repository for such reflection; it is an archive of the emergence of online teaching in BC and it provided important clues as to how best to approach the next ten years of teaching and learning in online environments.
CHAPTER FOUR – RESEARCH STUDY FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of the participants and the representation of online teachers in this study. It discusses major themes that emerged through the analysis of the data collected through participant interviews.

Research Participants and Representation

Those who comprised the target group for this study were high school English teachers with five or more years of experience in full-time online teaching and learning environments. In order to ensure that the study was not focused on differences in technological infrastructure, I chose to interview teachers who were using a similar learning management system (LMS) and whose schools employed a continuous enrollment (definition in Appendix D) student registration model. There were six schools in the latter category. Of the six schools, teachers in four of the schools responded positively to the invitations sent. Overall, nine of the teachers who indicated a willingness to be interviewed met the participant sample requirements. Of the nine teachers who agreed to an interview eight were interviewed. The ninth interviewee was not able to schedule an appointment due to other commitments. The interviews were conducted over a two-month period: December, 2011 and January, 2012.

Of the eight teachers interviewed two were male and six were female. All of the teachers interviewed were over 30 years of age. All participants interviewed were currently employed as online teachers in a full-time online learning environment. All of the participants were BC certified teachers who taught in one of four DL schools in BC.

Pseudonyms were used in this study to identify individual research participants. The following table summarizes the names and descriptors of the participants.
Table 1

Participant Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>DL¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanis</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Describes participants’ years of experience teaching in a DL environment.

Participants

Each teacher interviewed shared his or her own unique perspective of the experience of online teaching and learning. In order to “anchor” (Muirhead, 2000, p. 53) the reader’s understanding of each participant’s perspective of online teaching and learning, I have included brief descriptions of the study participants.

Tim. Tim’s interview took place in an empty classroom in the basement of the DL school at which he worked. His usual workspace was located across the hall in a room with three other teachers. His carrel was packed full of books and papers, and, of course, a desk-top computer. Tim was late middle-age, but his shoulder-length grey hair provided the only indication of this. Nothing about Tim was old. He exuded a positive energy that was also evident in his comments about online teaching and learning. Tim’s professional experience was varied and vast. As the
interview progressed I learned that he was originally from Saskatchewan, where he worked in agriculture as a heavy-duty mechanic. After pursuing a Masters Degree in History at the University of Alberta and conducting research for a non-profit organization, Tim returned to Simon Fraser University (SFU) where he completed his teacher education training. As our conversation turned to education, I learned that Tim had been involved with facilitating the use of technology in the classroom since the early 1990s. His stories about online learning centred around his passion for technology, his drive to embrace approaches to teaching and learning and his hope for the future of education in BC. Tim was a mid-career teacher whose large amount of teaching experience was matched by his energy and enthusiasm.

Susan. Susan’s shortly cropped, fire-engine red hair indicated that, while she may have had 37 years of teaching experience, she was not ready for the slow fade into retirement. In fact, Susan’s insights into online education proved just the opposite. After ensuring that I had a cup of tea, she guided me to her tiny, sparsely decorated office for the interview. Susan, a New Zealander by birth, began her teaching career in Auckland. Her career spanned decades and continents- she taught in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Susan’s insights into teaching and learning were the product of years spent as a practicing teacher. She was witty, sharp, and down-to-earth and her answers to the interview questions conveyed many deep-seated convictions about teaching and learning. Often, Susan used stories in order to make her points. She was a passionate advocate for online teaching and learning and it was inspiring to capture the story of her experiences teaching in an online environment.

Alan. I met Alan in-person and interviewed him at his workspace. His DL school’s offices were housed within the bowels of a regular high school and located at the end of a long, shabbily-kept hallway. All of the school’s windows were barred, which gave the place a
desperate air. Alan’s workspace consisted of a desk at the back of one of the high school’s testing rooms. In order to give the impression of privacy, the desk was flanked by movable fabric partitions, reminiscent of “veal fattening pens” (Coupland, 1991, p. 20). Despite his surroundings, Alan was enthusiastic about teaching and very willing to participate in the interview. Before becoming a teacher Alan worked for BC Hydro as a web-designer. This work, coupled with a lifelong interest in technology, made the technology aspect of online teaching less challenging. He was passionate about his students and throughout the interview he referred to the relationships he built with his students as the driving force behind their success.

**Tanis.** Tanis, the youngest participant interviewed, was four months pregnant at the time of the interview. She worked at the same school as Alan, though her office space was a bit different. The area of the school in which she worked was an atrium-like space, with high-set skylights and six individual work carrels. The area that surrounded Tanis’s workspace was decorated with pictures of family and friends. Tanis was quiet-spoken, but firm in her convictions. She was a relatively new teacher who moved from Ontario to BC five years ago. After graduating from university, Tanis, spent one year working in an Ontario middle school before moving to Vancouver and taking a temporary position as an online teacher. This position eventually became a permanent position. As the interview came to an end Tanis confessed she was unsure about whether she’d return to online teaching after her maternity leave.

**Emily.** My interview with Emily took place via Skype video-conferencing. As a working mother, Emily commented that she enjoyed the flexibility of online teaching. As a full-time online teacher Emily was able to stay home if her child was sick, and was often able to work from home on such days. Emily had been an online teacher for as long as she had been a teacher. She had no classroom experience. Emily’s first few years of teaching were spent teaching online
in her school’s elementary program. This experience shaped her perceptions of online teaching and learning. During our interview she commented on changes she would like to make to her school’s secondary English program based on her perception that the DL model used in the elementary program fostered greater interactivity between classmates. She was in the process of re-visioning her online classes using a cohort-based DL model (Appendix D) that would provide opportunities for group study.

Rebecca. I interviewed Rebecca via Skype video-conferencing. The deep red walls of Rebecca’s home-based basement office provided the backdrop for our conversation. Her short, blunt-cut bob was neatly styled, which suggested to me that she was both pragmatic and organized. As we spoke my hunches were confirmed. Rebecca was a mother of three who worked on contract for a DL school. Her contract required that she work a set number of hours per week, covering the DL school’s remedial English classes. This arrangement was necessary because Rebecca had little seniority in her district. Though she had been a practicing teacher since 2004, much of her practice was unrecognized by the school district in which she taught due to the fact that Rebecca’s previous teaching experience had not been based in her current district. She taught in London for one year; and, upon her return to Canada, she taught in a Vancouver private school. As well, Rebecca’s eight-year practice was interrupted by three pregnancies. Though Rebecca expressed a desire to have a more permanent teaching job, she enjoyed the freedom of working on contract. Rebecca did not have any obligations to hold office hours at her school. She kept regularly scheduled online office hours at night, and marked student assignments, sporadically, throughout the day.

Charlotte. Charlotte’s interview was conducted via telephone and without video. As a result I had no physical referents to use when describing her. Charlotte decided to become a
teacher when she became pregnant with her first child. After completing her teacher training, Charlotte began work as a teacher on call (TOC) (see definition in Appendix D) at a DL school. As a TOC she marked online student work at peak times of the school year. Her work as a TOC turned into a part-time contract and grew to a full-time online teaching position. Charlotte came to online teaching quite serendipitously and it appeared that this career path was one on which she intended to remain.

Kate. Kate’s interview was conducted by via telephone and without video; however her personality was so big, that I was left with the impression that the two of us just sat down to chat in a local café. Kate was outspoken and opinionated on almost every aspect of teaching and learning. Her teaching career began in 1998; the story of how Kate came to teaching was a story that involved a desire to be a doctor confounded by a low-grade in a core course required for pre-med, which resulted in her final capitulation to the many nudges from every person in her life to become a teacher. In 2001 Kate began her online teaching career, quite by chance, when, fresh from her first maternity leave, she applied for, and was the successful candidate in, a posting for an online teaching position. Kate had interesting perceptions about online teaching and learning due to her experience of online teaching and learning before Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006) and online teaching and learning after Bill 33 (2006). At the time of this interview Kate was very dis-enchanted with online teaching and learning. She was working part-time at as a full-time online teacher at a DL school and part-time in a classroom setting at a regular high school. According to Kate the draw of the classroom had won out over the demands of the online teaching and learning environment.

Each of the research study participants offered a unique perspective of his or her online teaching and learning experience that was an amalgamation of past and present life experience,
and his or her teaching practice. These brief descriptions of the individuals who participated in the research are intended to provide richness to their collective voice as presented in this and subsequent chapters.

**Emerging Themes**

I began my research with three main questions relating to the experience of online teachers: how do teachers describe their professional experiences of teaching in a full time online environment; what are the enablers and inhibitors for online teacher development; and, do teachers feel their teaching practice has changed over their career as online educators? While analyzing the data I noticed that my analysis closely corresponded to the onion model suggested by Korthagen (2004). When answering the three research questions the teachers all worked through the same process, which was congruent with the process presented in the onion model. Their answers to the questions prompted reflection on their practice, first from a discussion of their practice in terms of their environment and their behaviour, then to a discussion of their practice in terms of their core beliefs and values. This reflection followed a pattern best described using the metaphor of an onion, if one thinks of the deepening (heightened) reflection as a journey from the outer peel of the onion (external behaviour) to its deep and tightly-whorled core (internal motivation). Using this model to frame the findings helps to understand the overarching context of this project.

Through examining the data set using the lens of the core reflection approach (Meijer et al., 2009, Korthagen, 2004), I related the online teaching experience as described by the study participants in terms of the six facets of the onion model. In short, the data collected fell into one of six inter-connected themes: environment, behaviour, competencies, beliefs, identity and mission. Within each theme, I named two to three sub-themes, which helped me to group the
analyzed information around a common, larger theme. I will report my findings later in this section, using each of the six themes listed as the primary organizing structure for my data sharing.

Figure 4 (below) demonstrates the six major themes and their sub themes in the shape of an onion with concentric circles moving inward toward the centre. Each major theme contains sub-themes written in lighter text. There are no directional indicators on the figure in order to suggest a non-linear relationship between each major theme. The circles vary in size from large to small, which suggests a hierarchical relationship between the themes. The decrease in theme circle circumference suggests an increase in an individual’s depth of reflection.
The first theme is the environment in which the study participants found themselves. For the purpose of this study, the environment is defined as the milieu in which teachers’ practice takes place. All participants were involved in full-time online teaching activities. The findings in this section describe the environment and its influence on the teachers’ development.

Figure 4. The onion model adapted for qualitative data analysis. Reprinted from *Teaching and Teacher Education: an International Journal of Research and Studies*, 27/2, F. Korthagen, “In search of the essence of a good teacher: towards a more holistic approach in teacher education”, p. 299, Copyright (2004), with permission from Elsevier.
The second theme comprises the behaviour of study participants. The findings report on what online teachers did as part of their everyday practice. They relate the procedures and tools upon which teachers relied in order to complete their work and reveal the ways in which online teachers understood their behaviour.

The third theme explores the competencies of the study participants. In this section I examine the skills common to full-time online teachers.

The fourth theme relates to study participants’ beliefs about their online teaching practice. The findings explore some of the participants’ philosophies related to learning and teaching, participants’ observations of their students and the beliefs they held as a result of these observations.

The fifth theme concerns identity. Study findings report the reasons why study participants chose teaching as a profession and online teaching as a particular facet of their career. Also explored are the roles that teachers perceived themselves as having in full-time online teaching practice.

The sixth theme discussed is study participants’ mission. The findings in this section explore participants’ reflections on their practice in terms of a larger whole (their profession or education in general).

By using the onion model as a framework through which to analyze the data, I extrapolated the core reflection approach to consider the connection between a specific group of teachers’ ‘inside’ (core beliefs about teaching and learning online) worlds and ‘outside’ worlds (the environment in which online teachers found themselves).
Chapter five includes a reflection on the congruence (or lack thereof) between these two worlds; as well, it will provide an interpretation of the findings in terms of the research questions and a discussion of the interrelation of themes within the model.

Chapter six draws conclusions related to the research questions, data analysis and discussion. Chapter six also includes suggestions for possible directions of further research and future online teacher development initiatives.

Figure 5. The environment.

**The environment.** The first major theme discussed is the environment as it was perceived by research participants. The environment is defined as the milieu in which teachers’ practice takes place. The graphic representation of this theme is different from the other themes. This is because the environment in which a teacher practices provides the backdrop for all action and reflection (all subsequent levels of the onion model) that ensues. The environment’s primacy (in terms of its influence on all levels of the model) is represented by the diameter of its circle.
and its lack of shading. It is larger than the other circles and it is uncoloured; this demonstrates
the environment’s omnipresence.

All participants in this study were involved in full-time online teaching activities. This theme includes the model of online learning employed by the schools in which these teachers practiced, the political and administrative pressures that shaped the working conditions of the teachers interviewed and a view of the demands made on their time. The sub-themes that comprise this area are: online models, ministry and school-level policy, students, teacher workload.

**Online models.** All of the study participants interviewed worked at schools that employed a full-time, online distributed learning (DL) model. In this mode of teaching and learning the entire teaching practice takes place through the medium of a distributed learning environment made possible through a learning management system (LMS) (see Appendix D for definition). While students may meet with their teacher in-person, it is not necessary for them to do so in order to complete their course successfully. All course materials and assignments are available online.

In addition to working in full-time online DL environments all participants worked at schools that employed a staggered-entry, continuous enrollment model (both terms defined in Appendix D). This enrollment model can be understood as students who may enroll in any course at any time throughout the school year (and in some cases, during the summer). This model allows for students to have flexibility when enrolling in high school-level courses. Tim noted that students were grateful for the ability to set their own pace and their own timeline. Tim’s comment about pace is important because it points out one of benefits of using a staggered entry, continuous enrollment model: students may complete course work at a rate that best suits
their skills and their needs. Alan reported that students can “seek out the new knowledge, the
new opportunities and the new courses and control when, where and how they complete them”.
However, participants also noted that the staggered entry model came with many challenges for
online teachers. Tim noted that while the staggered entry model allowed for more student
enrolment in his courses, he found that many students weren’t successful in completing the
courses. He felt this was because students often lacked the discipline to set and maintain their
own schedule. Many of the participants also reported that collaboration and group work was
difficult to manage in an asynchronous environment where finding a group students who were at
similar points in the course was “near-miraculous”. To elaborate on her frustrations with
facilitating group work Kate contrasted the current enrollment model with the cohort-based
enrollment model DL schools used at the beginning of her online teaching career:

> When I first started teaching in 2002, I had 200 English 12 students from all of
> BC, and I had that, you know, I had that magic connection. They were always all online,
> and I could always find 20, 30 students, then we could dive in to Elluminate, and we could
do a little session on, you know, this particular poem or how to write this particular style. I
really enjoyed that.

Kate, and others, remarked that they are rarely able to successfully facilitate group instruction
due to the fact that the staggered entry model does not allow for homogeneity in terms of
students’ progress in a course. They felt it was challenging to engage students from a distance
when individual students’ progress through a given course is so disparate. It was interesting to
note that teachers’ reported feelings of distance between or separation from their students were
unrelated to a student’s geographical separation from the instructor or his or her peers. Their
concerns revolved around the ways in which staggered-entry, continuous enrollment models created distance in terms of the lack of homogeneity in terms of student progress in a course.

Ministry, district, and school-level policy. Participants reported that some of influences on their environment came as a result of policies relating to the delivery of online education. Specifically, they referred to policies implemented by the provincial government and by the administration at their own schools. Teachers cited the current funding model for DL in BC as a pressure that shaped the way their schools develop online programs, which affected their online teaching practice. The current funding model implemented by the Ministry of Education in BC required that, in order for a school to receive course-based funding for a student, the student must complete 5% of an online course (British Columbia, 2011). This material must be recorded on a student’s file as proof that the DL school has complied with the funding claim guidelines. The teachers reported that they developed ‘first assignments’ in order to ensure that funding requirements were met.

First assignments were defined as separate assignments that fulfilled the ministry requirement that a student must complete work worth a minimum of 5% of a course’s total assessment before a school funding claims funding for that student. First assignments were completed before students gained access to the course. These assignments were archived on students’ files. Through the use of first assignments schools could ensure that they were in compliance with the ministry requirements. These assignments also functioned as a mechanism for weeding out the less motivated students since, until the first assignment was completed, a prospective student was not given access to the complete online course, nor was he or she considered a fully enrolled student. When asked about her online teaching practice, Rebecca remarked that she spent an inordinate amount of time developing and grading first assignments.
Kate noted that in online education acquiring adequate funding for students is “always bottom line”. Unlike neighbourhood schools where staffing was completed in the spring prior to the next school year, staffing in DL schools was reported as a transparent and ongoing process which was negotiated in direct relation to continuously fluctuating student enrollment. This reported staffing protocol created the situations in which four out of the eight teachers interviews found themselves: they were hired by a re-active rather then pro-active process which meant that their preparation for the job was scant, or non-existent.

Making reference to the Ministry of Education’s recently released document *BC’s Education Plan* (British Columbia, 2011) Tim stated, “while the government promotes a 21st Century learning plan, they don’t fund it, they don’t support it, as far as really changing the funding model for districts to change how they deliver [education]”. As well, three out of eight participants noted that their school district took a portion of their school’s budget to help fund other projects in the district. One teacher remarked that DL schools (her school in particular) are viewed as “cash cows” for their district.

Some of the teachers interviewed reported a recent plateau in the number of students enrolling in online courses, which they claimed resulted in a loss of teaching staff (in BC staffing is dependent on student enrollment numbers). Kate remarked: “The school is probably going to shrink again this year because there’s not enough money, and how that ultimately is just going to mean it becomes more and more difficult for people to work here successfully”. To Kate, working successfully in DL, meant being able to successfully balance the work that comprised her teaching assignment against the time given to her for the completion of that work. If her school lost more teachers, while it maintained a stable student body, the loss of teaching staff would entail more work for the remaining teaching staff.
It is clear that in public education, policies related to funding had sweeping effects on online teachers’ environments. The teaching environment formed a large part of online teachers’ reported experience. The findings under this theme also reveal that environmental pressures were both inhibitors and enablers of online teacher development.

**Students.** Since teachers deal directly with students on a daily basis, it was important to note their observations about this important sub-group. For the most part participants described their online students as “motivated”, “ambitious”, and “aware of the choice they have in their education”. Alan noted that after Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006), there was a changed student demographic in his online classroom:

Most of the students that I had when I first started here were entirely online students, they were entirely looking to get their schooling outside of the mainstream. In about 2006, 2007, everything changed with the [per block] funding. Students could mix and match, courses, taking some online and some in a regular classroom. That significantly changed the landscape and we had a lot more students who didn’t like their classroom teacher and so thought, ‘I’ll do it online, it’ll be easier.’ They weren’t the same motivated, ambitious students we taught before; they were looking for a little bit of an easier route, they were looking for an alternative teaching style.

Alan claimed that since 2006 he taught an increasing number of students from outside the district. While he referred to an initial spike in student enrollment following Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006) and its subsequent DL policy changes, he noted that enrollment in his high school English courses had plateaued in the last two years. Recently he saw students “making better and more informed choices about what’s the best learning environment for them”.
Participants also mentioned that the online environment was not conducive to success for some students. Tanis reported “hand holding” a number of students, who came to her English course with the perception that online courses were easier. She mentioned that it was always very difficult when less mature students were confronted with the realization that in order succeed in an online, self-paced course, they had to be very self-sufficient. Kate related her constant battle to de-bunk the myth that online learning was easy. She saw in her students a “cynicism about education in general”. To illustrate this she provided an anecdote:

We were talking about paradox in one of my classes this week, and I was getting them to self-define it; or to figure out examples in their own self that are paradoxical. Some of them used a lot of cliché stuff, but a recurrent theme was, “I want a million dollars. I want to be rich and famous, but I don’t want to have to do a damn thing to get there”.

Susan commented that students of the type portrayed by Kate’s anecdote are less likely to meet with success in an online classroom; especially her online classroom “where the students were called on to generate most of the content” through her use of constructivist approaches to teaching and learning.

Teachers in the study reported that their students, also a crucial part of the environment that comprised their online teaching practice, fell into two categories: those who were motivated and able to advocate for themselves and those who were still content to be “passive receptacles”. Rebecca commented that online courses allowed ambitious students “to put more on their plate because they are able to”, while less ambitious students were able to use online courses to open a “back door” to a missed opportunity. She provided the example of a student who failed a course at a neighbourhood school, then chose to take the same course online course as a “last resort” to completing a high school graduation program.
Alan observed that, since the introduction of Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006), many adult students joined the ranks of school-aged students pursuing online education. Under Bill 33 (British Columbia, 2006) adults students taking BC high school courses were funded using the same funding rules as those used for school-aged students (British Columbia, 2006). These students, like their school-aged counterparts, were seeking their high-school diploma, however, as Alan noted, they brought with them a different set of circumstances than the ones with which most K-12 teachers have had to contend. Alan described this type of student with great empathy:

Adult students are students of really challenging lives, challenging histories, unfortunate situations. And I’m always impressed with the students’ desire to better themselves, to get an education, to get their high school diploma, to improve their communication skills. The desires that they have in order to improve their lot in life is kind of what has really helped me connect and put in that extra little bit for them. In his practice Alan, like the other online teachers interviewed, taught a range of ages of students.

Teachers also reported the flawed logic in the expectation that students who grow up with technology know how to use it. Susan phrased this perception best:

One of the things that you realize very quickly in the online environment is that these teens have far less computer skills than we—we call them digital natives. Well, they are natives on this [points to smartphone]. That’s about all. [Impersonates student] Can you copy this? How do I copy? How do I unzip this? How do I zip a file? And they don’t know how to find the answer to that.

Tim remarked that students understand how to play with technology, but they don’t understand “how to utilize technology for a learning environment”. He saw the divide between digital natives and digital immigrants as “overblown” and concluded his commentary by stating “when
something new comes along you still have to teach kids to use it for their own benefit”.

Susan observed: “students know far more about their world that I ever did. However, their ability to
analyze the world that they are in is weak. I think there is the depth and the breadth”.

Tim and Susan’s perceptions of their students were important in terms of the implications
for teaching practice. Online teachers need to adjust their practice to account for the fact that
while students have a certain amount of technological literacy, but they still need to develop
skills that will enable them to leverage technology to synthesize and analyze information. Tim
and Susan point to an important shift in the role of educators in the 21st century. To them,
teaching with technology was not just about teaching students how to use a technology, instead,
it was about facilitating their use of technology for the creation and use of information.

The teachers interviewed perceived online students as a demographic that has fluctuated
greatly since the beginning of their online teaching experience. Participants reported that much
of the change in student demographic came from funding policy changes that made distributed
learning more accessible students. Participants reported that the shift in demographic has resulted
in a shift in their practice. They perceived their students as technologically savvy, but requiring
the development of skills related to synthesizing and analyzing information. Teachers’
perceptions of their students helped to provide a context in which to examine the other themes
explored later on in this project.

Teacher workload. All teachers interviewed as part of this study taught their own online
courses. Their practice included: monitoring and facilitating student progress, assessing students,
and developing courses in accordance with DL and Ministry of Education standards. Participants
made use of various technologies in order to connect with students to offer feedback, help or
encouragement. Most teachers were involved in some sort of ongoing curriculum development
for their online courses. Teachers reported developing courses from the ground up as well as “evergreening” (making updates to existing courses) as part of their regular practice. Teachers felt that course development, while more demanding of their time was an activity preferable to evergreening as it entailed the creation of an entirely new course, which teachers reported as an inherently more creative activity than making changes to an established course. All teachers noted they had large class sizes, which ranged in size from 100 to 400 students per course. Most of the participants interviewed taught 200 or more students. Participants noted that their work in monitoring student progress and assessing student work took precedence over activities such as course development. Kate noted that due to her large class sizes “time isn’t there any more; the leisure of enjoying building courses and making connections”. She saw her role as an online teacher as increasingly clerical in nature and claimed “your worth as an employee is determined by the numbers in your dropbox” (see Appendix D for definition). Tanis remarked: “We’re constantly trying to provide great programs and, great courses. But yet we’re struggling just to get through day to day with our marking and our interaction with students”. Alan noted in order to support his students he made himself available in the evenings and on weekends. Time and the lack of it was a constant theme in all of the interviews. When asked what he would like to do that he couldn’t, Alan answered, “For me it’s not so much what I’d like to have, it’s moreso I’d like to have the time to do those things and to actually develop them”.

Not all participants had the same perspective of their online teaching assignment. Susan and Tim both mentioned that online teaching gave them more time to develop programs specific to individual students. Tim reported that he had more time to work one-on-one with students who came to him for assistance with a concept or an assignment. Kate also acknowledged that at the beginning of her online teaching career she was given time within her teaching assignment to
develop courses. Overall, participants reported that their workload had increased since the start of their online teaching career.

The environment that comprised the backdrop against which the participants’ online teaching experience took place is an important part of understanding the influences on their practice. The sub-themes examined under this theme provided important information about online teachers’ experience and revealed enablers and inhibitors for their online teaching practice.

**Figure 6. Behaviour.**

**Behaviour.** This major theme reports on participants’ behaviour, or the things they perceived themselves as “doing” in their teaching practice. According to Korthagen’s (2004) onion model, this level of reflection is based on the question “What do I do?” (Korthagen, 2004). This level of the onion model represents the beginning of the journey to core reflective practice. When answering the interview questions, participants often referred to what they do as part of
their teaching practice; or, the things they perceived as integral to their teaching practice. The findings reported under this theme refer to participants’ teaching practice. Two sub-themes that arose out of the findings were: making connections and providing assessment.

**Making connections.** Participants remarked on the importance of connection-making in their online teaching practice. Using qualitative data analysis software to search for the occurrence of key words or phrases, I was able to determine that teachers used the word “connections” a total 42 times when describing their practice. This word was used in phrases such as “magic connection”, “meaningful connection”, “immediate connection”, “connection building”, and “communication connection”. The consistent use of this word served as an indicator that making connections is a behaviour that was perceived as integral to the online teaching experience.

The connection-making to which participants referred fell into one of three categories: making connections with students, fostering connections between students (and the world), and making connections with other teachers. I will discuss the findings regarding each form of connection below.
Making connections with students. One of the main ways in which participants reported making connections was through their communication with students. Alan viewed his communication with students as the axis around which his teaching practice revolved. He noted “my day is centred around emailing, connecting with students, it’s doing things like video blogs or audio demonstrations and going through the coursework with students”. Teachers cited many different ways of making connections with their students. Susan, Tim and Jen used the messaging system provided with their schools’ learning management system (LMS). LMSs are often designed with internal messaging systems, which allow their users instantaneous, online text-based communication with each other. One of the benefits of using LMS-based communications systems is that all of the communication between teacher and student is archived in the learning management system, which allows for ubiquitous tracking and monitoring of student/teacher communication. Kate, Charlotte, Emily and Rebecca used email as their primary mode of communicating with their students. The email program they used was managed by their school district and separate from their school’s LMS.

Participants viewed making connections with students as a means of breaking down pre-conceived notions of online learning and online teachers. Kate noted “anything, any little point of contact. It always makes a huge difference. And then there’s that conversation, and they realize that I’m approachable. And that’s not big fancy technology. That’s old school”. To Kate, making contact with her students meant increased student engagement, which she viewed as integral to student success. Tim reported that some students are almost apologetic in their first communications with him because they believe that online study means working completely independent of a teacher. He saw connection-making as important in terms of de-bunking students’ preconceived notions of online study, which was important in terms of letting students
know that while the pace and progress they make are independent of other students, teacher support was present and accessible to them.

Tanis also remarked that it was important to her to make an early and personal connection to her students so that they knew the “person behind the screen”. Tanis’s comment reveals one of the struggles common to online communication. It has been noted that 90% of communication is lost when one communicates online (Brooks, 2011). Whether or not this statistic is entirely true, one cannot refute that fact that the audio and visual cues one uses in face-to-face communication are removed from text-based communication, which can make inter-personal online communication can seem wooden, if one does not go to great lengths to populate one’s prose with an intensely personal touch. Tanis used connection-making as a way to counter this fact. She used her early communications with students to help them understand that there was a real person on the other side of all online teacher-student communication. Kate saw her communication with students as one of the reasons for their successful completion of the course. Kate’s belief that the connections formed between her and her students resulted in their overall success are congruent with current literature on online community building (Anderson, 2008, Schwier, 2009). Reel noted “It is the powerful human connections that drive [students’] learning” (2011). When asked how her teaching practice has changed since she began teaching online, Charlotte remarked: “What I didn’t really get I think when I first started teaching was how important that is to keep that communication open and respond to every little thing that gets sent your way so they know [you’re] there”. Charlotte’s comment revealed, that similar to other participants, she learned the establishment of deep and personal connections her students was integral to her teaching practice.
The teachers interviewed employed many different means of fostering teacher-student connections both at the beginning of their courses and throughout their courses including: introductory videos, Skype audio/video-enabled conversations, emailed course welcome letters that invited a response, video blogs, and the creation of opportunities to converse about a student’s performance on an assignment either by phone, Skype or email (see Appendix F for a description of online tools used for communicating with students). Alan’s thoughts conclude this section on teacher-student connections:

In order to get students through online you need to be a person and you need to be available and you need to be encouraging and you need to have high expectations…. It means a commitment to helping them develop; and it’s not just about meeting a need for a test, say the provincial exam, but more meeting the needs of the rest of their life. How are they going to be able to make better decisions? How are they going to be able to interpret and analyze and summarize decisions in their life, looking forward, planning ahead?

The interview transcripts for all teacher interviews revealed the participants’ deep sense of fulfillment in forming and maintaining strong connections with the online students they taught. Participants viewed making early and personal connections with their students as a behaviour central to their online teaching practice.

*Fostering connections between students (and the world).* Participants viewed the fostering of connections between students as a behaviour in which they engaged as online teachers. They also expressed frustration about the difficulty in fostering these connections in courses that used asynchronous learning environments (definition in Appendix D), and a staggered-entry, continuous enrollment model. Kate spoke nostalgically about the connections she made in her online program at the beginning of her teaching career:
When I first started teaching in 2002, I had 200 English 12 students from all over BC, and I had that, you know, I had that magic connection. They were always all online, and I could always find 20, 30 students, then we could dive in to Elluminate [see Appendix F for definition], and we could do a little session on this particular poem or how to write in this particular style.

Kate reported that fostering connections between students, similar to the ones mentioned above was more difficult to manage, given the current model used for student enrollment in DL. This is because students are often working online at different times (asynchronously) and they are often working in different places in the course, depending on when they enrolled in the course. In order to mitigate the loss of cohort-based group work opportunities, participants reported using discussion boards, Twitter, and Elluminate (Appendix F) to allow students the opportunity to work together around less content-driven aspects of a course. For example, in a social studies course, Susan invited her students connect with each other through discussion forums that focused on current events. While the discussion forums allowed for some collaboration she admitted they did not allow students to “wrestle” with ideas related to the course content.

Susan viewed a distributed learning environment as a great “equalizer” of student dynamics. She recounted a time where she used a DL environment to create an online forum through which students could post and comment on their original poetry created a classroom dynamic that wouldn’t have happened in a traditional classroom:

This gr. 12 boy had just fallen in love. He wrote this beautiful poem. Well, it was so funny because the next day when he came into class (after he posted the poem), you should have seen the way the girls looked at him.
In this instance, students’ face-to-face connections were enhanced by the existence of an online component of a face-to-face classroom. Given the current model of distributed learning employed by their schools, participants in this study viewed fostering connections between students as an important, but difficult part of their teaching practice.

A sub-set of this sub-theme is the connections that students are making to the world. Some of the participants in this study remarked on the ways in which their practice enabled students to make connections with the world. Susan recalled a time when a student’s online blog project resulted in a real-world connection that couldn’t have been replicated anywhere but in an online environment. Susan had asked her students to create a blog that captured their thoughts and feelings as they read their chosen novel. She recalled a 30-day hundred or more posts discussions between the girl, who wanted to be a novelist, and the author of the book about which she blogged. This interaction provided the girl with a real-world mentor. Kate also recounted her class’s recent involvement in CanadaWrites’ Valentine’s Day Twitter Contest. She invited her students to create 140-character tweets as entries in the site’s contest. Through this online activity they were able to create material for a real audience.

Fostering connections between students and between students and the world outside their classroom was reported as an important teaching practice for online teachers.

*Making connections with other teachers.* Participants reported making connections with other teachers as important to their practice. They used many means of fostering these connections. Alan, Tanis and Kate used Twitter as a means of connecting with other educators all over the world. Alan noted “there’s a lot of really, really smart people out there that are doing some really great stuff”. Lalonde’s (2012) research study on educators’ use of Twitter points out that the open and public nature of Twitter allows educators increased opportunities for
“collaboration, connections and learning opportunities” (Lalonde, 2012, p. 119). In addition to her use of Twitter, Kate connected with other teachers through blogging. By creating a blog that contained her daily lesson plans she made contact with teachers from around the world who drew on her expertise and sometimes contacted her for permission to use an idea or lesson plan. About this experience Kate remarked, “I like the weirdness of being more connected to the international community of teachers than I am to the community of teachers that I work with”. Clearly the connections made between online teachers and other teaching professionals were an important part of their online teaching practice.

Anderson (2008) noted that “sufficient levels of deep and meaningful learning can be developed as long as one of the three forms of interaction (student-teacher; student-student; student-content) is at very high levels” (Anderson, 2008, p.66). The findings of this study are congruent with Anderson’s supposition. Participants reported that making connections with students, between students, and with other online educators was integral to their teaching practice.

Assessment. Another behaviour that formed participants’ online teaching experience was their assessment of student work. Participants had different perceptions of the importance of this part of their practice. Alan saw marking as “low-level” activity and claimed that while it was important to provide his students with “good, constructive feedback”, assessment was not the main “driver” of his relationship with them. Alan viewed assessment as external to online student/teacher relationship. Kate also held this view of student assessment. She viewed time spent connecting with students, and modifying and personalizing their curriculum as the most important part of her teaching practice. Reflecting on the change in her teaching practice in recent years Kate remarked “I’m not an online teacher anymore. I am a marker and I am a filer of
things”. She, too, saw assessment as necessary, but felt it was less important than the non-grade related contact she had with her students. At the time of her interview Kate was considering a return to classroom teaching because she found the classroom teaching experience more compelling than her online teaching experience which she summarized as “a stack of things I have to file in some electronic folder somewhere”. Her comment revealed her perception that her role as an online teacher was being diminished to the role of ‘marker’ in the face of the current DL model employed by her school. At the time of her interview Kate’s reported recent online teaching experience was oddly reminiscent of the old model of correspondence education where assessment was the main driver of student/teacher interaction/relationship. It was also clear that Kate felt that assessment was not the best means of building relationships with her students.

Rebecca and Charlotte, on the other hand, saw assessment as an opportunity to provide feedback, which they saw as integral to their practice. While reflecting on the change in her practice since she began teaching online, Charlotte remarked, “I’ve had to learn to give really effective feedback, lots of feedback, because that’s pretty much the teaching”. Rebecca’s comments were similar. Emily viewed feedback as important; however she saw written feedback as “limiting” and instead used Adobe Captivate (Appendix F) to create video messages and tutorials in order to engage her students in a more interactive process of giving and receiving feedback. While participants held differing views about the importance of assessment, all participants reported it as a behaviour in which they engage as part of their online teaching practice.

This major theme reported on participants’ behaviour, or the things they perceived themselves as “doing” in their teaching practice. Participants reported their online teaching practice in terms of two important behaviours: making connections and assessment. Teachers
reported that connection building was important in terms of student success, and in terms of adding an element of the personal in the sometimes impersonal world of a distributed learning environment. They saw assessment as a necessary behaviour, but held differing opinions on its value.

**Figure 9. Competencies.**

**Competencies.** This third theme refers to the skills online teachers report themselves as having or having developed in order to effectively teach online. According to Korthagen’s onion model, this level of reflection is based on the question “What am I competent at?” (Korthagen, 2004). The first two themes explored the environment in which teachers’ experience took place and the actions they took within that environment. This level of the onion model represents a reflection on the skills teachers’ see themselves as bringing to the fore as part of their online teaching practice. The sub-themes discussed in this section are: flexibility, effective communicators, technologists, course developers.
Flexibility. Participants made repeated reference the need for flexibility in one’s online teaching practice. The term flexibility was most often used in the context of participants’ reflection on the ways in which they reacted to students and teaching situations in their practice. Tim commented on why flexibility was so integral to his practice:

The classroom environment is lock-step. We want to keep kids at the same pace, and we want them to know all the same things. Then you get in an online environment where you have kids that don’t fit into that; you get such a variety of learning styles and personal situations and, you really have to learn how to be flexible…You need to be able to be adaptive for some and not for others; to provide a sense of flexibility in the sense of what they’re going to do and how they’re going to show their understanding.

When asked what he has learned about online teaching, Alan replied “I’ve really learned that being tough and being hard and being inflexible doesn’t help…You know, I think [when a student makes a mistake] students deserve another chance”. He felt that his ability to be flexible came as a result of his increased ability to empathize with his students.

Participants noted that the development of a more flexible approach came as a result of time spent in an online environment where there was more time to adapt courses to suit individual student’s needs.

Effective communicators. Participants reported the ability to effectively communicate as one of the competencies developed in their online teaching practice. Teachers spoke of effective communication in terms of delivery of assignment instructions as well as in the ways they managed their communications with students. Participants viewed effective communication as integral in an environment where it was often easy to overlook the “person behind the screen” (Turkle, 2011, p. 260). In her email communication with students Tanis reported using a
sensitive and overly effusive approach because she felt it was difficult to tell tone in an email. Charlotte added that effective communication helped her students feel that there is a “real person there”. Tim also noted that he has learned to re-read his emails to students before hitting the ‘send’ button because often something that appears clearly stated to him, may be mis-construed a student reading his email.

Rebecca noted that, when developing instructions for an online assignment, it was imperative to be really clear. She recalled many times early in her online teaching career where she developed an assignment with seemingly clear instructions that caused chaos in her online classroom as each student interpreted the instructions differently. Alan’s experience echoed that of Rebecca’s. He commented that compared with face-to-face teaching practice one has to be more conscious of giving very clear instruction online. In an online classroom, there are no quick checks to see that students understand the task ahead of them. Overall participants reported that effective communication, in terms of daily communication with students and in terms of developing course instruction, was an important competency honed and employed by online teachers.

**Technologists.** It is impossible to teach in an online environment without developing some level of skill with technology. Participants noted that skill with technology was a necessary competency in online teaching and reported various means by which this skill was put into use. Some of the participants began teaching in distributed learning environments with little or no experience with technology. Charlotte recalled her introduction to online teaching and learning as “learning by the seat of my pants”; and Kate, Tanis, and Rebecca reported a “steep learning curve” as they embraced the technology necessary to function in a full-time online environment. Susan, Tim and Alan reported having an “adeptness” with and an interest in technology that pre-
dated their online teaching career. They came to online teaching from tech-rich backgrounds. Despite the manner by which teachers first engaged with online teaching, most reported using technology in order to enhance their communication with students. Teachers reported the use of many different online tools such as Skype, Twitter, LMSs, Elluminate, and other Web 2.0 tools (see Appendix F). Participants also reported ongoing development in terms of their use of new technologies to enhance their practice. Alan commented that in recent months he “exploded” his use of Twitter, while Kate observed that her skill level with “all things technological” had “gone through the roof”. At the time of our interview she was using Twitter as both a professional development tool and a means of connecting her students with a larger audience for their writing. She maintained a blog to which she posted on a regular basis; last year she was invited by her school district to provide technology in-services for classroom teachers. Kate mentioned that the technological competency she gained from her experience as an online teacher had been a “door-opener” for her teaching career.

While technological competency is a skill necessary for online teachers, Kate noted she was experiencing “technology burn-out” due to her constant use of technology at work. Participants also reported that sometimes the allure of using new technology in their online classrooms overshadowed their teaching practice. Kate and Rebecca referred to this as being particularly the case at the onset of their online teaching career when they would develop assignments that were tied more to the use of a new technology than the to the actual curriculum learning goals for the course. Kate jokingly said that the students who enrolled in the first English courses she developed should have been given credit for English as well as Internet technology due to her overzealous “embracing of all technology had to offer”.
Participants also reported that technological competency was necessary in order to properly manage their online courses. Charlotte commented that her school’s technological infrastructure made it necessary for her to be conversant with various different information systems. Students completed their first assignments in one learning management system. Charlotte then reported this information to a school-based student information system, as well as a province-wide student information system. Charlotte managed student grade information her course’s learning management system and then reported this data to the school student information system from which report cards were generated. A certain degree of technological competency was necessary in order for her to complete the administrative duties of teaching such as marking, reporting grades, processing new student registrations, finding and using student demographic information.

**Course development.** All participants reported the ability to create and implement effective online courses (course development) as a skill particular to online teachers. Participants used words like “create”, “adapt”, and “creative” to describe the process of course development. Early in her online teaching career Kate noticed the skill set required of her as an online teacher was quite different than that of a classroom teacher: “My brain had been so focused on classroom management and assessment. And here I was shifting to design and connection”. Susan related a similar experience with moving from the classroom to online. After shifting from classroom teaching to online teaching she noted a “rekindled enthusiasm” for learning due to what she felt was an escape from the “time constraints and classroom management constraints” of a regular classroom. Tim noted that course development has enabled him to focus on the pedagogy behind the learning. Susan also mentioned that through online course development she was able to apply the pedagogical ideas she explored in her masters program. Reflecting back on her online
teaching career Kate noted: “Some of the best, “funnest”, days of my life as a teacher have been in a room with computers designing a course and that doesn’t sound like what you imagine when you think about teaching”.

In order to be an effective online course developer, teachers must have a strong understanding of the course content and how best to meet curricular needs, coupled with a strong understanding of pedagogy and how it may be leveraged to foster student learning in an online environment. Kate noted that, increasingly, in an attempt to capture the attention of a teenage audience, she felt a pressure to be “spectacular”. She elaborated on this by explaining that a current trend in online course development was to create multiple means of explaining a particular piece of course content. Courses often contained text-based and video instruction alongside splashy graphics as schools competed for student enrollment, and, teachers, for student attention. Despite the challenge to create exciting, new content all teachers interviewed felt course development was an aspect of their career that enabled them to hone their craft as teachers and explore pedagogy in a deep and rewarding manner.

Once a course was built, teachers maintained it through a process called “evergreening”. Evergreening is defined as the process by which an online course is altered in small ways in order to improve the student learning experience. Alan, Tanis and others commented that they were involved in constant evergreening of their courses in order to include new content, alter assignments or implement new approaches to teaching and learning. Course development was viewed by all participants as an exciting and rewarding part of their job. At the time of their interviews Tim and Susan were developing a course in partnership with a neighbourhood school in their district which would allow students to attend class online and in-person. This sort of course structure is called blended learning. As well, Susan and Tim were in the process of
developing a repository of stand-alone lessons (learning objects) as part of a province-wide initiative that will be shared across DL schools in BC. Emily mentioned her school’s recent initiative to create secondary English courses that would use an intake model similar to that of semester-based schools. Emily’s proposed course would be developed so that groups of students would move through the course as a cohort.

Despite all of this activity, six of the eight participants interviewed reported that their time for course development was disappearing as class sizes and teacher responsibilities (with respect to course administration) grow.

![Beliefs](figure9.png)

**Beliefs.** The fourth major theme focuses on pinpointing the ethos that informs study participants’ online teaching practice. According to Korthagen’s onion model, this level of reflection is based on the question “What do I believe?” (Korthagen, 2004). This level of the onion model represents heightened reflection on one’s practice. This part of the findings was
elicited through my observation of the interviewee and consideration of their responses to the interview questions in terms of the way in which they revealed deep-seated and often unarticulated beliefs about their teaching practice. The findings that emerged from the data can be grouped into the following one sub-theme: beliefs about teaching and learning, beliefs about students, beliefs about technology. It is important to note that participants’ beliefs are subjective and represent their perception of their lived experience. Often beliefs are reflections cast through the prism of an individual’s experience, opinions and emotional state.

It is also important to note that some teachers expressed very clear beliefs about their practice and philosophies around which they built their practice, while others focused more on the themes that comprised the outer layers of the onion model; they had less to say on matters related this theme and the ones that follow. I will elaborate on possible reasons for this in chapter five.

*Teaching and learning.* Participants shared many insights regarding their core beliefs about teaching and learning. Susan, a veteran teacher, had very firm opinions on teaching and learning. She believes that there are three major decisions made in education that have very little to do with education:

1) The decision to group students in cohorts of 30 or more. Susan elaborated on this: “That is an economic decision, not pedagogical. And as soon as kids do poorly, what do we do? We give them a tutor. We do one-on-one because we know one-on-one is big. But we make that decision for money”.

2) The decision to move all students in a cohort through course material at the same time (a school year). Susan commented: “We say to our kids, if you haven’t got it by the end of June, you either fail or just take your low mark. We make time the constant and mastery the variable.
That’s a huge, organizational decision. It is, pedagogically [speaking], unsound to make everybody finish everything at the same time”.

3) The decision to group students according to their age. She elaborated: “This has two problems: one is that fact that every 14-year-old is not on the same page for every subject; and, two, it creates a false socialization. We tout a high school as a place where students learn to be citizens of our society, and that is crap”.

Susan believed that the current education system is the product of administrative, economic and organizational decisions. She believed the current system should be re-structured to reflect sound educational practice. Susan believed online education provided a medium in which to make new decisions regarding how best to educate students because it eliminated many of the pressures that have shaped the current educational system. For example, in an online course students may be in groups of any size, they may begin a course and finish a course on their own schedule; and, they may find themselves in classes with a varied student demographic. She also believed that teachers needed to shift their role from information disseminators to “question askers”. Instead of dispensing information about a given topic, a teacher should students “how to learn”. She defined sound educational practice in terms of the tenets of constructivist theories of learning that stemmed from the work of theorists such as Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1964), and Bruner (1966), in which learning is construed as an active practice. This view of knowledge acquisition requires learners to become constructors of information rather than receptacles of it. The constructivist paradigm views knowledge acquisition as the morphing of a learner’s prior knowledge and experience with new information which allows him or her to arrive at subjective understandings and representations of his or her world. The ethos behind Susan’s practice was the belief that distributed learning environments, if used
constructively and “constructivist-ly”, could help students become involved in creating, synthesizing and analyzing information. She saw the main purpose of her online teaching practice as making possible student-centric learning; which, in turn, allowed her to feel that she was “catering to individuals’ passions and needs”.

Tim’s beliefs about teaching and learning were similar to Susan’s. When he was a student teacher, his supervisor turned Tim’s “traditionalist”, “teacher as sage” approach on its head through his use of a very constructivist approach:

In my practicum I was placed in a classroom that was anything but conventional. My sponsor teacher absolutely broke all the rules when it came to delivery designs, content available, and it really challenged my whole idea about education. Right from that very, very early stage I began to take a look at what really is this thing called learning and how do we actually pursue it?

This experience sparked Tim’s interest in what he called “divergent learning”, and enabled him to move past more traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Similar to Susan, Tim’s ethos was built on the premise that the information was already “available at one’s fingertips” and a teacher’s main mandate was to focus on teaching students the skills they required to grapple with that content.

Alan’s beliefs centred on the importance of building strong feelings of trust with his students. He saw the relationship forged with students as paramount to developing a strong foundation from which to determine “where they are and where they want to go and then how can I help them get there”. His beliefs echoed Schwier’s (2009) supposition that “much of the learning that takes place in online environments is actually embedded in the connections among people” (Schwier, 2009, p. 3080). Alan’s teaching practice was informed by his belief that
recognizing and empathizing with students “on the other side of the screen” would provide the best support for their success.

Kate believed that learning experiences were more meaningful when a focused, sincere connection occurred between students, the material and their teacher. Her many negative remarks about the change in distributed learning from when she began teaching in 2001 to the present revealed that, while in the past, opportunities for focused, sincere online connections abounded, she did not believe DL was providing those opportunities anymore. She remarked that she was “anti-laptop” and reported that she found online approaches to teaching and learning were turning her students into “tech junkies” who had “too much stimulation” and little ability to “create calm focus”. Kate’s malaise about the direction online teaching and learning was taking is supported by Nicholas Carr (2011). His book, *The Shallows*, examined the ways in which individuals’ over-reliance on technology was affecting the human experience in terms of brain development and the development of/sustaining of culture. Carr (2011) posited that a “new kind of self”, a “pancake person” is emerging due to the “pressure of information overload and the technology of the ‘instantly available’” (Carr, p. 196). Kate’s experience provided an ominous corroboration of Carr’s (2011) statement.

Kate reported her best online teaching experience was when she taught a cohort of students online English in a synchronous distributed learning environment. In a synchronous online learning environment both teacher and students work together online at pre-arranged times. This experience is what Kate believed was missing from her present practice as an online teacher. She reported the lack of opportunities for meaningful engagement with students as a reason for returning to teaching in a regular classroom next year.
Beliefs about students. Participants held many beliefs about the students they teach. Kate believed that students had changed a lot since the beginning of her teaching career. She compared her students to the image of teens represented in the grunge rock band Nirvana’s 1992 hit song “Smells Like Teen Spirit”. The chorus of that song leads with the line “Here we are now/entertain us…” (Cobain, Novoselic and Grohl, 1991). Kate commented:

I feel like that’s what I face online and in-person. I feel like systemically we are creating—we’re helping to create kids that are like that. They want to sit back and they want to watch TV instead of aggressively digging in and finding their own way online.

Tanis believed that students were not taking as much ownership over their education as in the past.

Alan, however, believed his students had changed for the better. He considered them “more active in, involved in, and aware of” their education. Tim, Susan and Rebecca didn’t believe that students had changed. Tim noted:

I think we still deal with the same thing: kids who want to get through, they want to rush about, they want it right now, they tend to be lazy and they tend to be overachievers and all those things are still the same.

He believed that society, not students, had changed and that a teacher’s responsibility was to give students the skills necessary to function in their world. Participants believed their students had shorter attention spans than students in the past. Tim observed this change as “identifiable”; participants mentioned the need for short “bursts” of instruction, text, or video content in order to keep students’ attention. Kate reported technology as a reason for this and said that her use of technology in the classroom was turning her “students, even the ones who know how to create calm focus, into ADHD kids”. Susan described today’s student:
So, at 10 o’clock at night you’ve got your 15-year-old girl who’s typing her English essay here and she’s got her iPod in here, and she’s also got an instant message [program] and she’s watching a DVD too. So, she’s doing all that, and then she goes to school where she’s made to turn off her laptop and her phone. There is a difference in the way that they receive and disseminate knowledge and understanding [emphasis added].

Turkle’s (2011) research concurred with Susan’s and Kate’s perception of their students. According to Turkle (2011) the generation of youth described by participants in this study is the first generation “going through adolescence knowing that … all the awkward gestures of their youth are being frozen in a computer’s memory” (Turkle, 2011, p. 259). Participants noted students were connected: almost too much so. Similarly Turkle’s (2011) adolescent research participants reported sleeping with their smartphones; they were so attached to technology that it became a “phantom limb” (Turkle, 2011, p. 17). Turkle (2011) noted “these young people are the first to grow up with an expectation of continuous connection” (Turkle, 2011, p.17). Participants reported that their students “stalked”, “crept”, and postured online; and, accepted that others their age were doing the same. This generation adhered to the adage “You have zero privacy anyway; now get over it” (McNealy as cited in Turkle, 2011, p. 235), but lacked the self-control to maintain a pristine online presence. According to Turkle (2011) adolescents at the time of this research study led an “archived life”; they knew that the words “delete” and “erase” were metaphorical, and, because of that they “live[d] for the record, for how [they would] be seen” (Turkle, 2011, p.305). Participants reported that their students eschewed the phone, choosing instead to send text messages or post their news on their Facebook wall. When discussing the means by which she connected with students, Susan mentioned to me that the principal of her school purchased a mobile phone so that teaching staff could send text messages to students. At
the time this study took place text messages were the prime currency of communication for teens. Students were reported as hyper-connected, but alienated from each other, due to the dislocation that ensued from being alone together through the medium of technology (Turkle, 2011).

Participants’ beliefs about their students, while entirely subjective, were also supported by current research into adolescent technology use. These beliefs formed an important component of the beliefs that informed their online practice.

**Beliefs about technology.** Since technology provided the medium in which teachers conduct their practice, it was necessary to report on teachers’ beliefs about technology. Some teachers saw technology as necessary to their practice, yet didn’t express any obvious opinions on it. Other participants held very deep-seated beliefs about technology. Kate reported that for her the “hoopla” about technology was “flat and empty”. She stated “I don’t find [technology] a meaningful way to connect, and engagement can sometimes be there for a little while, but it’s [limited] right. It’s hollow”. Her comments represented her beliefs about technology at the time of the interview. They contrasted greatly with her reported beliefs about technology at the onset of her online teaching career when she cited herself as “embracing all technology had to offer”.

On the other hand, Susan and Tim saw technology as a means of fostering change and improvement in education. According to Susan, technology provided an environment for “considered response” and “deep personal connection” that she felt could not be facilitated in a regular classroom. She believed technology could help teachers construct learning situations that would be very difficult to create in the classroom. Susan viewed technology as pivotal in terms of fostering positive educational reform. She also admitted that, while sometimes working with
technology could be challenging, a sound understanding of how technology might be applied in teaching was more important than knowing how to wield it.

Tim viewed technology as a means by which education in BC would change its focus from content acquisition to skill building. He stated “Technology is what will facilitate our return to learning and enable us focus on helping students acquire fundamental skills for communication, analysis and synthesis of information”. However, Tim believed that technology was not able to transform education alone. He remarked, “It is not technology that transforms education, whether it is a learning environment or an instructional environment, it is teachers that do that”. Teachers reported differing beliefs regarding technology. Chapter five examines the ways participants’ beliefs about technology influenced the means by which they engaged with and employed technology in their practice.

This major theme represented participants’ heightened level of reflection on the ethos that informed their online teaching practice. The finding in this section reported on participants’ beliefs. The findings were elicited through my observation of the interviewees and my consideration of their responses to the interview questions. The findings reported on three sub-themes within the major theme. Participants expressed strong beliefs about teaching and learning, their students, technology, all of which helped to provide rich material for answering the study’s three overarching research questions.
Identity. This section discusses the major theme of participants’ professional identity.

For the purpose of this study professional identity refers to a teacher’s reflections on his/her role as a teacher. Korthagen (2004) described professional identity as “an unconscious body of needs, images, feelings, values, role models, previous experiences, and behavioural tendencies” (Korthagen, 2004, p. 85). The findings reported under this major theme, similar to the preceding theme, were the result of mining the data to extricate information that contributed to participants’ teaching personas. Findings were intuited based on my observations of participants and interpretation of the interview transcripts in terms of the sub-text of our conversation. The findings fall under the following sub-themes: role models, past experiences, and self-as-a-teacher.

Role Models. Participants reported different role models as integral to various decisions about their professional lives. Tim recalled his exposure to education was through a very
traditionalist lens. His practicum teacher served an important role in developing his teaching identity by helping him re-frame his view of a teacher as a “sage on the stage” through his use of a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. This role model enabled Tim to re-think his prior assumptions about teaching. Tim also reported less obvious, but very present role models, when he claimed that in his family the career of choice was either teaching or farming.

Rebecca’s role model were family members as well. Both her mum and dad were teachers. She commented that watching their commitment to and love of teaching inspired her to become a teacher. Emily, Charlotte and Rebecca reported being similarly influenced by parents who were teachers. Emily credits a “phenomenal” high school English teacher for inspiring her to pursue an English degree; while a peer support program facilitator with whom Kate worked became the “best mentor of [her] life” and helped facilitate her introduction to the world of education.

Susan’s role models came in many forms. She referred to her first practicum supervisor as pivotal in shaping her belief in differentiated instruction. She British essayist Dorothy Sayers’ (1948) essay titled “Lost Tools of Learning” (Sayers, 1948) as a fundamental influence on her professional identity.

Participants reported many, varied role models as integral to their development of a teaching identity. Family members who were also teachers and mentors encountered during pre-service training factored hugely in the shaping of participants’ professional identity.

Past experiences. Teachers in this study reported varied experiences that shaped their professional identity. Tim’s experiences prior to becoming a teacher, were slightly unconventional. In addition to his unconventional path to teaching, his teaching practice has taken place in both Alberta and BC. His experience in K-12 education always had something to
do with technology and its use in the classroom. Tim’s experiences provided him with a unique perspective on his role in education.

Susan’s rich and varied teaching experiences spanned three decades and two continents. Throughout the interview she drew on stories of past teaching experiences in order to relate a point or elaborate on a statement. In order to explain how from the beginning of her career she viewed individualized instruction as a powerful and effective means of teaching and learning she shared an anecdote about her first teaching practicum in a remedial program. To explain the need for collaboration and connection in an online classroom, she related the story of an English 12 poetry project. To demonstrate the power of students connecting with the world outside the online classroom she referred to a time when a student’s blog was read and responded to by the author about whom she was writing. Susan’s experiences helped her to explain the choices she made as an educator.

Alan reported certain past experiences as pivotal to his identity as a teacher. He recalled an epiphany that resulted in a decision to become a teacher:

I got a job immediately after graduation at BC Hydro doing web development, conference organizations, writing reports, formatting reports, and working with engineers. I was pretty happy there and was in a pretty good job and a good place. But I realized that I wasn’t interacting, I wasn’t connecting, I wasn’t reading and talking.

Alan’s pre-teaching experience helped inform his professional identity. It was his experience of a milieu opposite to his nature that encouraged him to seek teaching as a profession. Throughout his interview, Alan indentified with the role of teacher as a connections-maker, a communicator, an encourager of thought.
Kate’s pre-teaching experiences followed a similar theme. Kate reported initially pursuing a career in medicine. However, while volunteering in a hospital, Kate noticed “At least from my young perspective, that it [being a doctor] was kind of like being an auto mechanic, right. It wasn’t about human beings. It was about ‘What’s inside them? What can I fix?’ And I didn’t really like the vibe that I got there”. This insight, combined with a B minus in an essential course required for pre-med, caused Kate to “abandon total hope” of becoming a doctor. It was in her work for a peer support program where she found a “vibe” she liked and a mentor to guide her. When asked why she became a teacher, Kate related an anecdote from her experience running a peer support program:

[In my position] I would do a lot of volunteer training, volunteer organizing, organizing big events, and then working with the counsellors that train the volunteers. Essentially, it was an education position, and over and over and over again people would say, “You should be a teacher. You should be a teacher.”

Kate’s past experiences helped her to realize her great interpersonal skills, and formed her identity as a teacher.

Emily’s experience as an online teacher at the elementary level helped shape her professional identity because her school’s elementary program employed a cohort-based model of online teaching and learning. This experience helped develop her perception that a DL teacher’s role to facilitate student interaction and collaboration.

Participants’ past experiences formed an important part of their professional identity. Regardless of whether or not their path to teaching was conventional, participants noted experiences and personality traits which helped shape and inform their current teaching identity.
Self-as-teacher. This sub-theme is so named because it reports the qualities linked to a teacher’s personal self that they reported through their stories. These qualities may be qualities others have seen in them (“You are.”), or they may be self-reported qualities (“I am.”). These messages to and about the self also are an important facet of an individual’s professional teaching identity form one’s teaching persona.

Teacher as helper. One of the main reasons participants reported choosing to become teachers was their desire to help others. Emily recalled her decision to become a teacher: “When I was sort of thinking about what to do after high school I wanted to pick a job where I could help people and make a difference”. Kate, too, recalled a similar instance: “I was talking to my grandmother, who’s a teacher, and she said, ‘You wanted to be a doctor because you wanted to help people. If you become a teacher, you can help people too.’ And that got me. And I was like, okay, I’ll go and be a teacher”.

Alan identified himself as an “empathetic”, “influential” and “helpful” person in the lives of his students. In his interview, he used the verb “help” or some conjugation of it 23 times, which demonstrates that he identified the role of teacher as helper.

Teacher as personable. Teachers’ self (and other)- reported interpersonal skills comprised another facet of the teaching self. In this study the term interpersonal is defined as relating to relationships or communication between individuals.

Alan reflected on the reason he chose teaching as a profession:

It was when I was younger, I remember when I’d been backpacking around Europe for about four and a half months, and I had taken my second year off from university. And I had kind of done a little soul searching and thinking about what it is that I’d like to do and
I realized that *I liked to read, I like to talk, I like to share, and I like to connect* [emphasis added]. And so that kind of guided me towards teaching.

The italicized text points to verbs used by participants repeatedly throughout the interviews. The repeated appearance of these words in the interview transcripts indicated that participants often identified themselves as having strong interpersonal skills. Emily mentioned that she chose teaching as a career because she liked to work with others. Before becoming a teacher Kate was often told by her colleagues that she had “great interpersonal skills”. Susan, Rebecca, Tim, Charlotte and Kate worked or volunteered in people-centric jobs before becoming teachers.

*Teacher as illuminator.* Participants also referred to their teaching practice using metaphors relating to light. Both Susan and Tim referred to “seeing the light go on” when students understood a new concept; they cited this role as an integral part of the fulfillment they found in their teaching practice. Susan reported that “seeing the light go on” became a passion, while Tim recalled going into education “for that sense of seeing people get *turned on* to learning” [emphasis added]. Other participants mentioned the wonder of their shared experience of “a-ha!” moments with students in their classes. The desire to help foster learning, to shine a light on new knowledge, was a quality inherent in participants’ teaching self-concepts.

This section discussed the major theme of participants’ professional identity. The findings reported under this major theme, provided information on influences that contributed to participants’ teaching personas. The findings revealed that participants’ role models, as well as experiences that pre-dated their teaching practice, helped shape their teaching identity. Participants were found to value common elements of their personality as relevant to their professional identity.
Mission. The last theme in the data relates to participants’ expressions of mission in relation to their practice. According to Korthagen (2004) the reflection that takes place at the level of mission on the core reflective practice model focuses on “the end to which a teacher wants to do his or her work, or even what he or she sees as his or her personal calling in the world” (Korthagen, 2004, p. 85). This study refers to mission as it related to research participants’ perspectives of their work in terms of the bigger picture of online education. This theme was not as prevalent in some interviews as it was in others (I will discuss possible reasons for this in chapter five), however, it is important to note findings under this theme as it is clear that some research participants’ sense of mission affected their practice and their perspective of their online teaching experience. The findings under this theme can be separated into two sub-themes: teaching and learning, and advocacy.
Teaching and learning. In their interviews, Susan, Tim and Kate viewed the current design of British Columbia’s education system as outdated. Susan and Tim viewed distributed learning as a field of teaching and learning in which educators could experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning in a way that would be ‘scalable’; yet they were both strong in their conviction that teachers were the most important part of this change. When she expressed her view of teachers as change agents, Susan referred to a famous quote by Thomas Edison:

In 1920, Edison said, “The motion picture will change education”. Of course, it never did because the only way education will change is through teachers. Teachers will change education, but the computer won’t…the change has to come from us. We need to move to a more constructive, more student-centred, student creation of content. That’s how education will change is if teachers change.

Susan’s allusion to Edison’s original statement, published in *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (1913), is a rough paraphrase. His original statement follows:

Books will soon be obsolete in the public schools. Scholars will be instructed through the eye. It is possible to teach every branch of human knowledge with the motion picture. Our school system will be completely changed inside of ten years. (Smith, 1913, par. 1)

Her comments, however, captured the spirit of his original declaration and helped establish her point that technology, on its own, would not be enough to bring about a revolution in educational practice.

Tim’s comments followed the same line. He saw that distributed learning was not as much of a catalyst for educational reform as ministry literature on educational reform purported it to be. He felt this was due to the fact that in BC very little had been done to change the way teachers were taught to teach. He had the following to say about teacher preparation programs:
I talk to brand new teachers who come out of their education programs and some of them are more adept with technology than others. But what I’m still surprised at is that the pedagogical framework for teaching our teachers of the future is still based on an industrial model of preparing them. And it’s no wonder that within three to five years of them being in a classroom they abandon any sense of risk taking that they might have had in university and fall into a very controlled environment of a very traditional pedagogical delivery model.

Tim stated that he planned to focus the next ten or fifteen years of his career on building “strong programs, strong delivery, and strong material that will really enhance and support students’ understanding of and ability to communicate about information”. Both Tim and Susan felt a strong sense of mission in terms of helping to facilitate changes to the way teaching and learning occurs in British Columbia.

Kate also reported a sense of mission in relation to teaching and learning; however her convictions were centred around technology and its possible mis-use in education. Her interview read as an indictment of technology and its offerings. She dubbed technology “hollow”, “flat”, “empty” and concluded her interview by stating that her feelings about technology’s lack resulted in her recent decision to return to classroom teaching in the following school year. Kate reported her ongoing efforts to “de-veil” myths about the promise of technology in education and stated that educators need to be aware that distributed learning could turn teachers and students into “tech junkies”. Kate’s expressed concerns about teachers’ and students’ over-reliance on technology echoed Turkle’s (2011) who claimed that as society becomes more reliant on technology “relationships with robots are ramping up; relationships with people are ramping down” (Turkle, 2011, p.19). Kate also mentioned “annoying people” with her line of
conversation both inside her school and through discussions on Twitter. According to Turkle (2011) people like Kate who expressed discontent for the direction in which technology was taking society (in Kate’s case, teaching and learning) were likely to be dismissed (or thought of as “annoying”) because they were “read as growing out of nostalgia or a Luddite impulse or as simply in vain” (Turkle, 2011, p.19). Turkle added that voices of discontent are important to heed because “when we ask what we ‘miss’ we may discover what we care about, what we believe to be worth protecting. We prepare ourselves not necessarily to reject technology but to shape it in ways that honour what we hold dear” (Turkle, 2011, p.19). Kate’s interview revealed her convictions about the importance of human relationships. It also revealed her strong sense of mission with regard to communicating her concerns about the effects of our over-reliance on technology.

**Advocacy.** Tanis and Alan believed that there was a lack of understanding of an online teacher’s job among BC education stakeholders. They both referred to difficulties in communicating with their own administration, their district and their union about the challenges of teaching in a distributed learning environment. Alan and Tanis mentioned working conditions in their physical environment that inhibited their practice. Alan’s workspace was located at the back of his DL school’s testing centre. From one p.m. until the end of his workday, Alan was required to work in silence because he shared this space with students who came to the school to write tests for their online courses. It was not always this way. When Alan first began teaching online he could work from home; his administration had changed their policies and no longer permitted teachers to work offsite. I experienced his work environment firsthand. Halfway through the interview, testing began and the remainder of our interview was held in whispers. Alan questioned the logic of a school policy that required he (and the other teachers at his
school) work onsite, when his home office provided a better work environment than his
workspace at school. Tanis reported challenges with her physical work environment as well. She
related her struggles with poor Internet access at her school and recalled “praying it is a good
Internet day” each day as she drove to work.

Tanis also mentioned great disparity with regard to teachers’ teaching assignments between
teachers at her school and between distributed learning schools in her own district. About her
online teaching experience Tanis stated, “the union doesn’t get us, the administrators don’t really
understand how to manage properly, and the ministry doesn’t either”. In my interview with him,
Alan held up a copy of the *Standards for K-12 Distributed Learning in BC* (British Columbia,
2010). He said that DL standards existed, but there was no support at the school, district or
provincial level, for teachers to implement them. He questioned teachers’ ability to uphold the
standards, while schools continued to use the staggered-entry, continuous enrollment model. He
reported that his goal was to get his union to acknowledge and to better understand online
teachers. “We pay our dues, too,” he commented.

Kate also commented on her administrator’s failure to understand the nature of her work.
She recalled a recent discussion with an administrator about the items of student work she had
marked that day. The implication was that she had not marked enough work during her
workday. In frustration, she remarked, “Yeah, you can look in the dropbox to see how many
dropbox submissions I have. But that’s not who I am. That’s not what I do”. Kate was referring
to the fact that assessing student work was only one of many other tasks she completed in her
online teaching practice. One of the clear missions that emerged from my interview of research
participants, was their desire to make known the experience of online teachers in order to better
the conditions under which online teaching and learning are currently taking place. Tim closed
his interview by stating, “we’re going to continue to struggle in this high-demand area until the government and universities really get their heads wrapped around changing how they preparing teachers for teaching [emphasis added]”. His passion for growing the online teaching profession was echoed by each of the research participants who expressed a strong sense of mission in terms of their online teaching practice.

This findings reported under this major theme, provided information on participants’ reflection on their practice in terms of the bigger picture of teaching and learning in British Columbia. The findings revealed that participants’ mission was related to approaches teaching and learning and advocacy for their practice. Participants’ sense of mission was expressed in terms of their present and future online teaching practice.

Summary

This chapter began with a discussion of the participant group and their division by attributes relating to gender, years of teaching experience and years of online teaching experience. The findings from this group were discussed using the frame of Korthagen’s (2004) onion model. Using that model, I discussed six major themes that emerged during my analysis of the data obtained from the group.

The six major themes that emerged were related to the research participants’ environment, behaviours, competencies, beliefs, identity, and mission. Each of these themes was discussed through an examination of the sub-themes that existed with in them. These sub-themes were used as discussion points within the major theme categories.

The next chapter embarks on a discussion of these findings in relation to the three research questions.
CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a further discussion of the findings in relation to the central research questions. This study’s primary objective was to collect the experience of distributed learning teachers who were responsible for the design and delivery of online English courses for grades 10-12 in British Columbia. In response to purposeful questions, their stories and insights, provided insight into online teacher development. The second objective, was to identify teacher perceptions regarding the real and perceived difference between online and classroom teaching practices. The research focused on:

1.) How do teachers describe their professional experiences of teaching in a full time online environment?
2.) What are the enablers and inhibitors for online teacher development?
3.) Do teachers feel their teaching practice has changed over their career as online educators? If so, how and why?

When answering the three research questions the teachers all worked through the same process, which was congruent with the process presented in Korthagen’s (2004) onion model. The model’s six major themes were used to frame the data analysis and to provide a means of understanding the data. This section will discuss the findings and the model used to present them in terms of the research questions which underpinned my inquiry.

Discussion of the Research Questions and Findings

This research study has been guided by three main questions relating to the experience of online teachers:
1.) How do teachers describe their professional experiences of teaching in a full time online environment? (Experience of online teachers)

2.) What are the enablers and inhibitors for online teacher development? (Enablers and inhibitors for development)

3.) Do teachers feel their teaching practice has changed over their career as online educators? If so, how and why? (Change in online teaching practice)

The data collected answers the three research questions through six major themes identified through data analysis: environment, behaviours, competencies, beliefs, identity, and mission. This chapter will provide a discussion of how the research questions were addressed. It will follow with a reflection on the interrelation of findings within six major themes and the congruence (or lack thereof) between these teachers’ inner (core beliefs about teaching and learning online) and outer (the environment in which online teachers find themselves) worlds. Chapter six will draw conclusions related to the research questions and suggest possible directions for further research and future online teacher development initiatives.

**Research questions discussed.**

*Experience of online teachers.* Teachers described their experiences chiefly by describing their environment. Their rich description of their teaching environment aligned with the first level of core reflective practice outlined by the onion model (Korthagen, 2004). Findings collected under this theme revealed that the multiple environments of which the online teaching experience is comprised played a large role teachers’ reflection on their experience.

*DL models.* Research participants reported the current model for DL student enrollment as a major influence on their present online teaching practice. Participants viewed the staggered-entry, continuous enrollment model employed by their schools as primarily policy-driven and
detrimental to their ability to employ collaborative, synchronous approaches to teaching. Due to the fact that students enrolled in their online courses throughout the school year, teachers described increasingly large class sizes and growing marking loads. They also noted that the province’s teachers’ union had not yet placed parameters on the class size of a distributed learning course, which made discussions about the amount of work that comprised their teaching assignment difficult to conduct. Teachers reported large variation both within and between schools with regard to online course class size; however, the data given to me by participants was circumstantial. Despite this fact, teachers’ stories point to a lack of a clarity with regard to the parameters of an online teacher’s teaching assignment.

Research participants’ descriptions of their recent online teaching experience included their schools’ use of a distance education model that was reminiscent of the DE model used in correspondence education. The model to which participants referred seemed to reflect a model in which assessment was the main mode of interaction between teacher and student. Participants reported little opportunity for interaction between students. They reported the use and development of online course content that was housed in a learning management system and largely static; not unlike the module work that comprised print-based correspondence courses. It appeared, that the current DL model used technology to deliver an educational experience similar to correspondence education. This model did not seem to be maximizing the potential of the online environment nor did it appear to be grounded in current pedagogy or theories related to online teaching and learning.

**DL Policy.** Another environmental factor reported as part of online teachers’ experience was the perception that they needed to be aware of and accountable to BC Ministry of Education policy. They cited recent changes to the School Act (British Columbia, 1996) as responsible for
shifting the nature of their practice. Many believed too much of their practice was dependent on
getting and keeping funding for their schools. Research participants also noted that, due to
changes in education policy, their students ranged in age from 16 to adult, which also had
implications for their practice.

Participants noted that their experience as distributed learning teachers has encouraged
them to be more outspoken about the directions BC educational policy was taking. Because
teachers needed to be more aware of policy documents and policy changes, they reported taking
an increased interest in policies and publications released by the government.

*Time.* Teachers reported their online teaching experience as a point in their teaching
career where they have been able to put their ethos into action. Because online courses are
developed well in advance of when they are offered, teachers perceived that they had increased
opportunity to develop instruction that reflected current theories related to teaching and learning.
Teachers also reported asynchronous communication, such as email, between themselves and
their students gave them time to craft more considered responses to student queries. Teachers
reported that asynchronous distributed learning environments take away the immediacy of more
synchronous approaches to teaching and learning. They reported a great sense of satisfaction in
terms of their experience in development of materials for online instruction and their interaction
with students.

*Behaviours.* Teachers also described their online teaching experience in terms of teaching
“behaviours” integral to their practice. They valued making connections with their students as
the highest priority in their practice. Assessing student work and providing feedback was another
important part of their practice, but four out of the eight participants viewed assessment as less
important than their role as motivator and mentor. Teachers reported developing content for online courses as part of their work.

In summary, teachers described the online teaching experience as both challenging and rewarding. Overall, participants perceived their online teaching experience as moving their teaching practice beyond the constraints of the classroom. The constraints most noted by research participants are those of class size, classroom management, and scheduling. The constraints of a traditional classroom have been replaced with a new set of constraints tied to the online teaching environment. Participants openly reported on the challenges of teaching in distributed learning environments; however their stories should not be interpreted as an indictment of the current DL educational system. The storied shared by this study’s participants should be interpreted in terms of their worth as a mirror in which DL and its stakeholders might view their reflection; these stories may help us re-calibrate our purpose and re-shape distributed learning in British Columbia to better reflect the things we value about teaching and learning.

*Enablers and inhibitors for development.*

*Time as an enabler.* Research participants reported time as a significant factor in both enabling and inhibiting their development. Teachers reported that a distributed learning environment provides time for considered response, both in terms of creation of course material and in terms of contending with students. Teachers also spoke of time as enabling in terms of having time to reflect on their practice. They felt that because of the time put into the content they created, their online course content was based on more considered pedagogy than content they had created in the past for their classrooms. In speaking about their development of learning materials for their online courses participants cited current learning theories and referred to approaches developed with these in mind. Many teachers believed that online teaching made
them better teachers and has given them the time to focus on creating individualized instruction for their students.

*Time as inhibitor.* Teachers also noted that the division of their time, their workload (the amount of work that comprises a teaching assignment), was an inhibitor to their development. Many report not having the time to create new content or fix existing content due to the increased amount of time they must spend on adhering to school-based and ministry-based policies related to student activity, monitoring registration and maintaining funding.

*Current DL model.* Research participants also noted that the staggered-entry, continuous enrollment model, while flexible for students, inhibits teachers’ ability to initiate collaborative, synchronous projects, which they feel are necessary to developing their practice. Anderson (2008) noted that one of the pitfalls of asynchronous approaches to online teaching and learning, such as the one represented by the staggered-entry, continuous enrollment model, is their tendency to be isolating. Synchronous learning experiences require more presence on the part of both teacher and student, however they offer both parties opportunities for deep learning (Anderson, 2008). According to Meijer et al. (2009) the second-to-last stage through which teachers progress as part of their development is one of deepened presence. Participants’ desire to engage in teaching and learning activities that require a heightened sense of presence may function as an indication of their development as teachers. Upon reviewing the interview transcripts with this in mind, I discovered that participants with seven or more years’ teaching experience were amongst those who reported frustration with the lack of opportunities for collaborative and synchronous learning activities in their online classes. The data concurred with Meijer et al.’s (2009) supposition that teachers who experienced greater development sought to bring greater presence to their practice.
Technology as an enabler. In general research participants noted that technology has caught up with the demands of online education. Participants noted that the challenges they faced with regard to technology centred less around technology and more around adopting educational practice which allowed for the use of technology, but did not allow technology to supersede it.

Change in online teaching practice. Most teachers interviewed noted their online teaching practice had changed since they first began teaching in a distributed learning environment. Many noted their entry into online teaching was largely unsupported and a comprised of a “trial by fire”. Most research participants were self-taught; there was no formal training or teacher preparation course for them. As a result teachers’ practice evolved based on their core values. Research participants reported learning to be better communicators; participants reported increased empathy and increased flexibility when dealing with their students. As well, research participants reported embracing a more organized approach to managing their work day.

Research participants perceived changes in provincial education funding were responsible for changes to the nature of their work as online teachers. This, in turn, affected their practice. Some teachers noted changes to per student funding rules resulted in changes to school-level student registration procedures, which resulted in the addition of teaching duties they perceived as clerical in nature. They were uncomfortable with this shift in their work responsibilities as it seemed counter to their teaching identity. Teachers with more online teaching experience noted an increased sense of mission, which allowed them to form opinions of their practice and to act on them.

Relationship between themes. As data analysis progressed, it became evident that there was a large amount of inter-relation between the themes. After adapting Korthagen’s (2004)
onion model to form the organizational framework for this study’s findings, the image of the onion became the visual metaphor that drove the data analysis. An onion is made up of many concentric circles, each one smaller than the other (or larger, depending on the direction one is taking). Metaphorically the onion layers help us understand the distinct layers of each theme. However, while the reflective process evolves in layers, much like an onion, it is difficult to pinpoint where in the reflective process one layer begins, and another ends. The same can be said of the process witnessed during teacher interviews.

When providing their responses to the interview questions, research participants began by first relating details relevant to their environment; or, the most direct part of their experience. Metaphorically speaking, matters relating to the political, fiscal, and physical environment form the outside of the onion. As a participant’s answer (or story) developed, he or she would move further down the model, touching on aspects of behaviour (practice), competencies (skills), and beliefs (opinions). In some cases, research participants’ answers touched on the deepest levels of the model: those of identity (who am I as a teacher?) and mission (what is my role in the bigger picture of education?).

The decision to share findings based on the answers to the questions, rather than reporting out thematically, was arrived at because of the subtle movement between levels of reflection that comprised research participants’ answers. In chapter four, I noted that not all research participants contributed data to the themes related to identity and mission. Upon close reading of the interview transcripts, I noticed that data collected under the themes of identity and mission came from the candidates with the most teaching experience. These findings can be explained in terms of the literature related to teacher development (Christensen, 1983; Fuller, 1969; Meijer et al, 2009; Mok, 2002). It would appear that the
teachers with fewer years’ experience did not process their experience with the same depth of reflection as those with more experience. This may explain the lack of data provided by those candidates for levels of identity and mission.

**Observations.**

Through answering the research questions and examining the relationship between themes in the data a number of observations can be made.

1. The current online teaching environment contains many challenges for online teacher development.
2. Online teachers are frustrated by the limitations of the current model used in K-12 online education and wish for a model that encourages more interaction and collaboration.
3. Distributed learning is a facet of education that needs to be clearly understood by all of its stakeholders.
4. In general, teachers find online teaching to be a rewarding, challenging experience.
5. According to DL teachers the manner by which distributed learning in BC is regulated, funded and offered should be reviewed.
6. Teachers need to be better prepared to teach in distributed learning environments.
7. Educational reform necessitates new approaches to both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs.
8. Reflection is necessary to enhance a teacher’s understanding of his or her online practice and enable further development.

**Recommendations.**

Based on teacher interviews and their lived experiences, the following is recommended:
Engage in meaningful stakeholder discussions about alternate models of distributed learning. Distributed learning is still a relatively new facet of K-12 education. It is important that all stakeholders in online education engage in a meaningful and honest discussion of the limitations and benefits of the current model of distributed learning promoted in BC. Within the British Columbia education environment, government, local school districts, and teachers’ federations need to engage in frank discussions about funding models and means of measuring quality that best support teaching and learning. The teachers’ union needs to acknowledge online educators as a significant part of its membership. It should look for ways to set parameters around workload and training of online teachers in this province. If online education is to succeed, it will need to be recognized as education in its own right.

Re-vision pre-service teacher training programs with a view to education as it will be. No amount of technology will bridge the divide between our current education system and the world our students will live and work in. Universities should closely examine their pre-service teaching education programs to ensure that they are preparing their teachers to teach in a system that may not look or feel the same as the system in which they were educated.

Offer training in online teaching theories, philosophies and practices. This recommendation is a result of the teachers reporting that their first years as online teachers consisted of much trial and error. There now exists such an abundance of good information on theories, philosophies and practices related to online education that teachers should be able to participate in professional development that will help them gain skills and knowledge necessary for those working in the field. Teachers who have exposure to these resources will be better prepared to deal with the demands of an online environment. They may be more effective in their practice earlier on.
Encourage core reflection practice as part of ongoing teacher development. This recommendation is present as a result of insights gained by applying themes related to core reflective practice to the data. A teacher’s professional identity will form as an “unconscious body” if it is not made the topic of purposeful reflection (Korthagen, 2004, p.85). However self-understanding (which one can arrive at through core reflective practice such as that presented in the onion model) will enable teachers to move their practice from the realm of the unconscious to the conscious, enabling their professional development to occur more purposefully.

Summary

The research questions were answered through the emergence of six major themes. These themes were important to this study not only in terms of providing a framework for data analysis, but also in terms of providing insight into the process by which teachers made sense of their lived experience. The findings revealed that online teachers valued their online experience teaching as it provided them with a means of stepping outside the constraints of conventional education. Teachers expressed frustration with some aspects of the current model of online education in BC because it prevented them from engaging in synchronous, highly connective learning projects with their students. They perceived that technology has caught up with their practice, which enables them to facilitate student learning better than ever before. Recognition of the fact that online teachers work in a different milieu with a different set of environmental pressures is necessary to ensure the success of distributed learning in BC.

Recommendations regarding the findings focus on supporting alternate models for funding and management of distributed learning in BC, providing pre-service teacher training that anticipates changes in education in BC, and providing ongoing opportunities for online teacher education and professional growth.
CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSION

Synopsis

This study provided important insight into the experience of a group of eight distributed learning teachers who designed and offered online English courses in British Columbia during the 2011/12 school year. It provided a snapshot of the status of online education at this particular moment in the story of distributed learning in BC. While the scope of this study was not large, the consistency between the stories collected from the online teachers who participated in this study provided information that was relevant to understanding the experience of online teachers with five or more years’ experience who practiced in BC.

The findings in this study revealed teachers’ perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of BC’s current model of online education delivery. It will be increasingly important for online educators, those who administrate online schools and those who develop and implement DL policy in BC to reflect on the current state of distributed learning programs in the K-12 education sector and the current support in place for the preparation of and development of DL teachers. This reflection will enable DL stakeholders to ensure that BC’s mandates for public education are upheld now, and in the future.

When I began this project, I hoped to collect stories of the ways in which teaching and learning change in a distributed learning environment. Through my work I have identified key areas for teacher development and discovered that reflection is a core component in this development. I have been able to use the lens of an established model for teacher development to explore the ways in which the experience of teaching online transformed their perceptions of their practice.
While this study was not action-based, it is my hope that the research participants’ stories reported herein provide rich material from which to draw conclusions about current and future pre-service and in-service online teacher training initiatives.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

While this research does answer questions relating to the experience of online educators in BC, it also raises a number of questions researchers may wish to explore in future studies.

1. Independent online study requires a large amount of learner autonomy and is often isolating for the learner (Anderson, 2008). Is this type of online learning age-appropriate for K-12 learners? Additionally, how successful are BC’s online students in completing their online courses? What are the individual student attributes for success in a full-time online environment?

2. While this study focused on the experience of teachers in an online milieu, how do students enrolled in distributed learning environments in BC describe their experience?

3. Some of the research participants interviewed had no classroom experience, while others years of classroom teaching experience. Is classroom experience a necessary pre-requisite for online teaching practice? Research into this area of online teaching, may help develop further understanding of the skills necessary for online teacher success.

4. This research suggests that participants’ core values were the biggest drivers of their development. Could the core reflective practice model be extrapolated for use in online teacher professional development?

5. To what extent has educational policy in BC shaped distributed learning? Exploring this question would be beneficial in terms of understanding how BC arrived at its current
model of DL delivery and in terms of prescribing new approaches to DL delivery in this province.

6. Is DL good business? A larger study should be done around DL school/district business funding and business models. What are the costs (both explicit and implicit) associated with the current model used for DL in BC? Is DL as ‘profitable’ as we think and what does profit mean in the arena of public education?

**Conclusion**

This research explored the experience of BC teachers whose teaching practice was defined as taking place in full-time distributed learning environments. It collected and presented stories of the ways in which teaching and learning changed in a distributed learning environment. This research also explored the ways in which the experience of teaching online transformed participants’ perceptions of their practice and it revealed ways in which their online teaching practice has changed over time.

Participants openly reported on the challenges of teaching in distributed learning environments; however their stories should not be interpreted as an indictment of the current DL educational system. Distributed learning in BC is no longer in its infancy. One might argue that it is in its ‘adolescence’. At times, we tell our teens “You should know better”, because their collected experiences (to that point) allow them to make informed choices about their actions. The stories shared by the teachers who participated in this research should be interpreted in terms of their worth as part of the collected experience that will help those involved in the administration of, governance of, and facilitation of DL programs make informed decisions related to the future of DL that will see it gracefully through to its ‘adulthood’.
It is also important to consider online teaching and learning, and DL programs in particular, in terms of the broader scope of the human experience. Carr (2011) stated the intellectual ethic, “the message a tool or medium transmits into the minds and culture of its users” (Carr, p. 44), of a technology is rarely recognized by its inventors simply because they are so focused on divining a solution to a problem, that they don’t see the broader implications of their work. In order to mitigate learning over a distance, educators have turned to technology. What intellectual ethic, or, message about what it means to educate and be educated, has/is being transmitted through our use this of medium? This question, a thorny one, must be asked in order to ensure that technology is leveraged to express our best intentions for the education of today’s students.
References


Appendix A: Interview Guiding Questions

1. How long have you been a teacher? Has all of your teaching practice been in BC?

2. Tell me about how you chose teaching (through what formal/informal career path?). After this—tell me about the transition from the classroom to online teaching.

3. Has online teaching changed your beliefs about learning?

4. What do you do when you teach online? Tell me about how you teach and how your teaching practice has changed over time.

5. As an online teacher what would you like to do that you can’t do?

6. Tell me about the ways in which technology helps you to connect with your students in your online classroom. Probe - In an ideal world what would the technology look like?

7. In your opinion, have students changed since the commencement of your teaching career? If so, in what ways have they changed? If students have changed how this changed your practice as a teacher?

8. What have you gained or learned from your experience in online teaching? How does this compare with what you expected to gain or learn from your experience in online teaching?

9. In closing, is there anything more you would like to add about your experience as an online teacher?
Appendix B: Letter of Introduction

Dear Online Teacher,

As part of my Masters in Learning and Technology thesis at Royal Roads University I am researching the experiences of online teachers in order to gain a clear understanding of the experience of teachers in online learning environments. I am emailing you in the hope that you might participate in a 30-45 minute interview to share with me your experience as an online teacher. Ultimately this research project may help to influence online teacher training programs and determine areas of need in online teacher professional growth.

I am attaching an informed consent form that explains the study and your role. If you would like to participate in this study, please read, fill out and return the attached informed consent form; then reply to this email. I will then arrange a time to conduct the interview. If you have any questions about this study please call or email me. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Bill Muirhead, Associate Provost Academic at University of Ontario Institute of Technology; or Colleen Hoppins, Office of Research at Royal Roads University, if you have any questions or comments regarding your participation in this study. This research project has been reviewed and approved by the Royal Roads Ethics Board.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request.
All the best,
Kim Lemieux
Appendix C: Research Consent Form

Project Title: The Experience of Teachers in Distributed learning Environments: Implications for Teaching Praxis

I understand that I have been invited to participate in research conducted by Kim Lemieux, graduate student in the Master of Arts in Learning and Technology program at Royal Roads University.

Research Purpose: The main purpose of this research is to gain information on the experiences of online teachers and to elicit key themes related to this experience.

Research Procedures: As a participant in this research I will be asked to participate in one 30-45 minute, in–person or online interview and one shorter, follow-up phone call.

Data Collection: Data will be collected in-person or recorded using audio/video recording tools. If I choose, I may request that the interview be recorded in audio only. After a period of one year all forms of records or documentation associated with this study, save the thesis project itself, will be destroyed.

Confidentiality: Although the data that I provide will not be anonymous, appropriate care will be taken to ensure that the data can be linked with my identity only by the primary investigator.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this research.

Participation: My participation in this research is completely voluntary. I may withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason. If I withdraw from the study there is no penalty or loss of benefits to me and any data collected from me as part of this study will not be used. Lastly, there are no costs to me or any other party.

Contact: Should I wish to learn more about the results of the experiment, or about the general area of research, I may approach either Kim Lemieux, primary investigator, Royal Roads University Graduate Studies, Dr. Bill Muirhead, project supervisor and Associate Provost Academic at University of Ontario Institute of Technology; or Colleen Hopkins, Office of Research at Royal Roads University.

By signing this form, I am indicating that I understand the procedures, risks and benefits associated with participating in this research and I give my free and informed consent.

Signed ________________________________ this _______ day of _________.
Full Name (in print) ____________________________
Appendix D: Operational Definitions

The following terms were throughout this research and are defined to ensure readers of this research study are clear as to the meaning associated with them.

Asynchronous learning: Learning in which interaction between instructors and students occurs intermittently with a time delay.

Continuous enrollment model. This model of new student registration allows students to enroll throughout a calendar year.

Distributed learning. Distributed learning (DL) refers to “courses offered online or by video technology at a distance” (Ministry of Education, 2006). This term has evolved from the term ‘distance learning’ to reflect the distributed nature of teaching and learning when they occur through the medium of information communication technology.

Dropbox. The dropbox is the means by which students submit their files for assessment in an online course. It is usually housed within a learning management system. Students are able to use the dropbox to upload their work and to view teacher feedback.

Evergreening. The process by which an online course is altered in small ways to respond to changing curricular/student needs.

Full-time equivalent (FTE). See Student full-time equivalent.

Online learning. In this study online learning will refer to any curriculum, instruction and assessment that is provided to students through information communication technology (ICT).

Information Communication Technology (ICT). ICT is “an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing: radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems and so on, as well as the various services and applications associated with them, such as videoconferencing and distance learning” (CIO-
midmarket.com, 2011). This study will focus on ICT as it relates to education and, in particular, distributed learning.

**Online learning environment (OLE).** The term OLE refers to the virtual space in which engagement with learning occurs. This virtual space is made possible through the use of ICT such as proprietary or open source learning management systems.

**Learning Management System (LMS):** Software used to deliver and manage instruction. LMS software may be proprietary (a product provided by a software company) or open source (a product provided freely and without copyright/usage restrictions on the Internet).

**Neighbourhood school.** A school where instruction is delivered in a traditional face-to-face setting.

**Online teacher.** For the purpose of this study an online teacher is defined as “an educator with primary responsibility for student instruction within an online course” (Wortmann et al, 2008). The online teacher interacts with students using computer-mediated technology.

**Full-time online teacher.** This term describes an educator whose student instruction is conducted solely through the use of ICT.

**Classroom teacher.** An educator with primary responsibility for student instruction within the face-to-face setting of a classroom.

**Staggered-entry model.** Distributed learning schools may use a staggered-entry model for student enrollment which allows schools to accept new student registrations at any time during the school year. Students who enroll at DL schools using this model are not usually part of a cohort and completed their work at a pace specific to their individual needs.

**Student full-time equivalent (FTE).** represents the number of full or part-time students enrolled in an K-12 education program. One student whose course load is equal to the normal full-time
number of credits or hours required in a school year for normal progression in a public school program would generate 1.0 student FTE.

**Synchronous learning.** Learning in which interaction between instructors and students occurs at the same time and in the same place. When envisioning synchronous learning in a DL environment the medium of the learning environment or web-based classroom will constitute “place”.

**Teacher development.** While undertaking this research, I have defined teacher development as the process of change, over time, within a teaching career. While this change could be positive or negative, I have chosen to use the term ‘development’ as it connotes growth.

**Teacher on call (TOC).** A British Columbia-certified teacher who provides relief for regular, full or part-time contract district teaching staff on an on-call basis.
**Appendix E: Features common to learning management systems**

This appendix provides a brief overview and description of the elements common to learning management systems.

**Table 2**

*Features common to learning management systems.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Use^a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course homepage</td>
<td>The first page of an online course. Usually features a navigation bar, which contains links to LMS features such as course content, the course dropbox, the IM and email system, and the grade book; it also features an information section that displays information pertinent to new and returning students in a course.</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>This section of an LMS is the repository for all course instruction and assignments. Course content is usually presented in chronological order and appears as a series of links arranged around unit, chapter, or lesson headings.</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropbox</td>
<td>The means by which students submit their files for assessment in an online course. The dropbox is usually housed in a course’s navigation bar. It contains assignment folders to which students upload work and view instructor feedback on marked assignments. Instructors use this section of an LMS to download and assess student work.</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade book</td>
<td>The grade book contains student grade data. Instructors may choose from a variety of grade book views and may bulk export class grades as a Comma-separated values (CSV) file for use in reporting on student progress in cases where an online school uses a separate system for generating report cards. Students may access their grades as well; however, they may only view their own grade data.</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classlist</td>
<td>This section of an LMS contains a list of students in a particular course. Instructors may click on a student’s name to gather demographic information or information pertinent to a student’s progress or activity in an online course. Instructors may also use this section of an LMS to add and withdraw students.</td>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Email | Most LMSs are equipped with their own email message system. All communication within the email system in an LMS is archived on the LMS server. This allows for easy tracking of and managing of communication between LMS users.  
--- | ---  
Instant Messaging (IM) | LMSs are often equipped with their own instant messaging system. All communication via an LMS-based IM system is archived on the LMS server. This allows for easy tracking of and managing of communication between LMS users.  
--- | ---  
* Defines whether the feature is used by participants to communicate with learners (Communication), facilitate instruction (Instruction), manage details related to learner registration and progress (Administration) or provide learners with grades and feedback (Assessment).
Appendix F: Technologies used for communication in distributed learning environments

This appendix provides a brief overview of the technologies use for online communication mentioned by participants during the course of interviews.

Table 3

Technologies participants use for communication in DL environments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>A web-service that offers free calling between subscribers and low-cost calling to people who don't use the service. Skype enables file transfers, texting, video chat and videoconferencing on personal computers and mobile devices.</td>
<td>skype.com</td>
<td>Synchronous audio, video, or text-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>An online social networking service and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters, known as &quot;tweets&quot;.</td>
<td>twitter.com</td>
<td>Asynchronous text-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adobe Captivate</td>
<td>E-learning authoring software that allows users to create and maintain interactive e-learning content such as video tutorials and quizzes.</td>
<td>adobe.com</td>
<td>Asynchronous audio, video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>A system for sending messages from one individual to another via telecommunications links between computers or terminals.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Asynchronous text-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>A personal journal published on the Internet which consists of discrete entries called &quot;posts&quot;. Posts are typically displayed in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first.</td>
<td>blogger.com, wordpress.com</td>
<td>Asynchronous text-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elluminate Live! (now Blackboard Collaborate)</td>
<td>A web conferencing tool which functions as a virtual classroom. It features an interactive whiteboard where teachers and students can write, highlight and share information. The program allows for desktop-sharing and enable instructors to record their virtual class</td>
<td>blackboard.com</td>
<td>Synchronous audio, video or text-based</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instant Messaging (IM)  A system for exchanging typed electronic messages instantly via the Internet through the medium of a shared software application on a personal computer or mobile device.  Synchronous text-based

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^a Website addresses for specific web-based services listed are provided.
^b Defines the type of interaction the technology affords participants when communicating with students.
^c This technology must be purchased from the software developer.
^d Some blog programs offer audio and video sharing; however these are usually uploaded to a post and are not a means of synchronous interaction.