THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH 12 FIRST PEOPLES
AS AN ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION COURSE

by

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study documented the development of the online version of English 12 First Peoples and investigated which of the course qualities needed to be developed and nurtured differently in an online format. Data were collected through a reflective journal maintained throughout the course development process and analyzed by examining themes which emerged. The main themes involved e-learning as an emergent field in education today, the advantages of e-learning, and strategies for building community in a virtual classroom. Subsequent themes which emerged were organizational considerations for online course development and the challenges of time and technology. The research determined that important course qualities such as the provision of reflective and experiential learning opportunities and respectful interactions could be developed in an online secondary school classroom if deliberate attention were paid to using technology effectively to build community.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“When some people look at a room full of desks facing a central podium, they see a dinosaur.”

(Young, 1997, as cited in Garrison & Anderson, 2007)

Research Topic

This research project traced the development of the face-to-face delivery model of the new English 12 First Peoples course into an e-learning format for the North Coast Distance Education School (NCDES). The goal was to create an on-line learning model that would reflect the First Peoples principles of learning outlined in the English 12 First Peoples IRP, but would use technology to support and enhance students’ abilities to meet the prescribed learning outcomes. The proposed model would use the most current knowledge of best practices in establishing virtual classrooms and on-line courses to create a viable, vibrant online version of the course in which students from around the province could enroll and enjoy.

Rationale

There are many changes facing the education system today, including the impact of the emerging and essential role that technology plays in both the culture of our classrooms and in our teaching (Kajder, 2003). Rapid improvements in technology within schools, easy access to the Internet, and our students’ comfort with technology are providing teachers and students alike with new opportunities to explore the world, to take or teach courses not offered in their schools, and to make educational connections they would not otherwise make. *E-learning*, which is defined as a form of education where the main medium of
instruction is computer technology, is not simply an add-on to classroom practice (Garrison & Anderson, 2007). Instead, it can be seen as a different mode of communication, and because communication is vital to all successful educational interaction (Garrison & Anderson, 2007), its impact on education, teachers, and learners is significant. In fact, Garrison and Anderson (2007) argued that that “[e]-learning will inevitably transform all forms of education and learning in the twenty-first century” (p. 2). For me, it was an opportune time to take a revolutionary new course such as English 12 First Peoples and develop it into an e-learning format in order to broaden its reach, appeal, and accessibility to learners across the province and elsewhere.

Another consideration for this project was related to changes in the way school districts are funded in British Columbia. These changes in funding formulae have meant changes to the way many schools, particularly small schools and rural schools must operate. For instance, if schools must maximize class size enrollments at 30 students, it can be very challenging for a small secondary school, for example, to offer a full range of courses and fill each of them to capacity. Out of fiscal necessity, cuts to course offerings are made, often to the detriment of the students in those schools. However, on-line learning opportunities can fill the gap and allow students to take courses that are not offered within their schools. Conversely, it also allows small schools to offer courses that cannot be filled solely by their own students, but can be supplemented by students from other schools around the province. This opportunity, I believe, allows small schools to maintain an appropriate level of course selections for their students, allows students from smaller, often isolated, schools to gain exposure to and knowledge from students throughout the province, and brings equity to the educational offerings students in more rural areas often lack.
I chose this topic as a project because the opportunity presented itself to me at a time when I was trying to determine a project topic that was appropriate both to the University of Northern British Columbia's Multidisciplinary Leadership program and to my classroom practice. I was teaching English 12 First Peoples as a face-to-face course. It was the first time the course was offered in our district and at this time, Hazelton Secondary is still the only school in School District #82 offering the course. I was also, in 2007, one of 15 pilot teachers in the province to test various units of the course, and had been involved in other areas of training and development for the course prior to this time. The North Coast Distance Education School (NCDES) was interested in becoming one of the first distance education programs to develop it as an on-line offering, because of the uniqueness of the course and its creation, because of the significant population of Aboriginal students in our district, and because the course is not yet widely offered around the province. Because of my experience with the course and its development to date, the principal of NCDES asked if I would be interested in developing the e-learning version of the course and eventually be a facilitator for it when it is available online. It was a timely opportunity, because I wanted a project that was related directly to my classroom practice, had a connection to Aboriginal education issues and involved teacher leadership, and would be of benefit to my school and/or district. This project fit all of those criteria.

Importance of the Study

The project was important to me on many levels. Professionally, I believed it would enhance my classroom teaching practice and would open up new opportunities for me as a teacher. I have been teaching English, Grades 8 through 12, for 17 years. While I have
always strived to ensure I engage in ongoing professional development and employ current best practices, I know that many of my students are now far more advanced, technologically-speaking, than I am. They are of the technology generation, whereas I am a “digital immigrant” (Prensky, 2001) I firmly believe, however, that technology can and should be used purposefully and effectively in today’s classrooms, and that teachers, with the proper training, can use technology to enhance and support a positive learning environment and a range of student learning styles. Being given the opportunity to set up my classroom to support the e-learning model and become a facilitator for an online course that I am also teaching face-to-face was an excellent way to enhance my practice and create what Kajder (2003) called the “tech-savvy English classroom.” This opportunity would allow me to integrate technology meaningfully into my English classroom, to offer a new course to a wide range of students both within and outside of our school district, and to enhance opportunities for additional online course development in the future.

Secondly, having invested much time into the development of English 12 First Peoples for our school, I was pleased to have the opportunity to develop an e-learning model of the course for wider distribution that will do justice to the principles and pedagogy of the course. With a significant Aboriginal population in our school and our community, it was important to me that this course be successful. It was also important to me that the students who took this course recognized its value and significance, were successful in completing it, and embraced the opportunity they were given to engage personally in the various forms of text that focus on “the experiences, values, beliefs, and lived realities of First Peoples” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 11) from around the province, the country, and the world. My hope was, and continues to be, that students from around the province will have the
opportunity to use available technology in a meaningful, educational way to partake in this course, to engage with students from Coast Mountains School District, and to appreciate the rich vitality and diversity of First Peoples literature.

Thirdly, I believed this project would help me, and others who wish to develop courses online, to understand more fully how to create an interactive, collaborative, community-based virtual secondary school classroom. Palloff and Pratt (2003) stated that online learning, ideally, is centred on the learner. They also indicated that the students in a virtual classroom must take control of the learning process and that they must work collaboratively with their classmates in order to achieve the learning objectives. In addition, opportunities must be given to ensure that students are able to reflect on their learning activities in order to increase their ability to think critically and to recognize that the creation of knowledge occurs mutually and collaboratively online (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

For me, the development of the English 12 First Peoples course in an online format was an ideal course to develop as we pursued those objectives. The BC Ministry of Education’s Integrated Resource Package (2008) for the course is developed around the following First Peoples principles of learning:

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational.
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one’s actions.
- Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities.
- Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge.
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story.
- Learning involves patience and time.
- Learning requires exploration of one's identity.

(Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 12)

These principles of learning mesh well with the principles of e-learning that Palloff and Pratt (2003) outlined. They described effective online learning as a "transformative experience" (p. 8) that requires reading, experiential learning opportunities, reflection, and personal responses, which the majority of lesson plans for English 12 First Peoples also emphasize. They discussed how reflection should include an exploration of the meaning the course material has for the student's life and the questioning of important ideas (Palloff & Pratt, 2003), which are also critical elements of the course. Effective delivery of the English 12 First Peoples course requires significant community-building, sharing, and the development of trust between participants; an effective online course requires the same (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). In a well-developed online classroom, as in a face-to-face classroom, the sharing of reflections should transform the learner, the group, and the instructor, and an appropriate atmosphere must be established in which to share.

Research Question

The central question of my research sought to identify the key elements required to create and sustain an appropriate e-learning model of English 12 First Peoples and ensure that an online version maintained the integrity of the original course, which by its nature is
very personal, reflective, and experiential. To this end, I investigated the following question: Which of the English 12 First Peoples course qualities needed to be developed and nurtured differently in a virtual classroom than in a face-to-face setting, and how? Additional supporting questions included the following: How does one build mutual trust and respect in a virtual classroom among students who not only do not know each other, but also cannot see each other in person? To what degree was this possible? What supports would students need to be successful participants in the course? What online activities would encourage the development of a sense of community and social presence? What online practices may hinder successful participation and the development of a sense of community?

The English 12 First Peoples curriculum also places an emphasis on the study of local First Peoples culture and literature when applicable; this concept took on a different element when one considered that members of a virtual classroom may come from many different locales. The requirement to incorporate local content needed to be addressed through flexible lesson plans with various options for students from different places to access and explore material that is “local” to them.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter 1 outlined the importance of the study and introduced the central research topic. This chapter reviews the professional literature as it relates to my research project. As with many qualitative research projects, the literature review was an ongoing process that continued throughout the project. I encountered three main foci in my review that were applicable to my project: the emerging field of e-learning as a viable, transformative educational experience for a variety of learners in a variety of circumstances, the advantages of e-learning course delivery, and strategies for developing effective e-learning courses. The largest amount of information available relative to my project was the background information on the development of distance education, and more specifically, distance learning through computer-based technology. Most studies that involved online distance education offered a substantial overview of the history of distance education and the increasing importance of computer-based e-learning in education. Many of the studies also outlined the benefits and challenges of e-learning delivery models and followed up the theoretical discussions with practical, application-based strategies to guide teachers in developing effective e-learning courses.

Authors such as Garrison and Anderson (2007), Kajder (2003), and Palloff and Pratt (2003) have turned their research into texts and manuals for educators who are moving from traditional face-to-face teaching methods into online course delivery, and offered extensive overviews of the history and theories behind effective online course development and practical virtual classroom applications and strategies. Notably, much of the research in this field is very current, generally less than ten years old; however, it is also worthy of note that
much of the research available at this time also targets post-secondary education and adult
learners, rather than secondary school settings. This relative lack of secondary school
information reinforced for me the importance of the project.

The E-learning Field

Current research on the e-learning field emphasizes the growing importance of e-
learning to the general field of education and the importance of understanding how to use it
effectively to support today's students. Hannum, Irvin, Lei and Farmer (2008) researched the
effectiveness of training on-site facilitators in secondary schools to follow learner-centred
principles to support distance education students. This study was conducted in rural
American schools, using a cluster-randomized selection process of 36 matched pairs of
schools and 246 students. Results indicated that students who were offered appropriate
support interventions completed courses at a higher rate than students in the control group.
The study offered a solid overview of the proliferation of distance education in schools
across the US in the past few years, noting in particular the increase of students in rural areas
who access online distance education is nearly double the rates of students in urban or
suburban regions. It also addressed the specific needs of students enrolled in distance
education courses with respect to on-site support and personal contact with an adult involved
in the course; the study hypothesized that this support was important to maintaining student
engagement and motivation in online courses and to improving student success.

Although this study looked specifically at the training of on-site facilitators (separate
from the actual teachers of the courses) to support students as they participated in their online
courses, it is of relevance to my project because of its focus on secondary schools and
because of the information provided on the increase in and benefits of distance education, particularly for students in rural areas and small schools. It also examined student needs and various means to meet those needs. While it targeted the use of facilitators to support and guide students through their online courses, it also noted strategies for communication and discussion forums to build an interactive learning community, which I believed to be key to the development of an effective online version of English 12 First Peoples.

Selwyn, Gorard, and Williams (2001) conducted a review of the United States government's educational policy following implementation of an information infrastructure initiative under the Clinton-Gore administration. This initiative was meant to expand equitable use of information technology throughout the United States and overcome traditional barriers to education and lifelong learning opportunities, such as socio-economic and geographic barriers. The research reviewed economic and political issues that impacted or supported the success of the initiative, which is beyond the scope of my project. However, the overview of the emergent field of technology in education and the impact of the availability of technology to support the equitable access to education in rural and isolated areas assist in establishing a foundation for my project.

One area for further consideration in this study is its suggestion that online distance education opportunities through ongoing improvements in technological infrastructure in the US is not going to improve lifelong learning opportunities for all isolated or socio-economically restricted groups. This seemed to be a logical conclusion for those adults who have not had any exposure to distance learning online, as was the case with those examined in the study. However, I believe that if students are exposed to distance education
opportunities online at the high school stage and are successful in those opportunities, it is more likely that they will seek out and successfully complete similar educational opportunities as needed in adulthood. Regardless, those negative conclusions in the study reflected a focus on adult learners. No similar conclusions were drawn about high school students, who were the main focus of my project. However, because the creation of a successful online English 12 First Peoples course was my goal, it was wise to consider the information provided in this study in the hopes of avoiding similar negative outcomes for my students. Additionally, as I worked with the NCDES administrators on the computer components of the course development, I was informed that it was likely that some adults may be enrolled in the English 12 First Peoples course through NCDES; as a result, consideration of the needs of adult learners became more relevant.

Garrison and Anderson’s (2007) work was recommended to me by the principal of the NCDES as important to the development of the e-learning version of English 12 First Peoples. Garrison and Anderson compiled years of research and numerous studies of the important role of technology in education and effective e-learning delivery models into a text for teachers and developers of online distance education courses, and their theories and recommendations are expected to be components of courses developed for NCDES. They drew on their extensive research to explore the pedagogical and technological implications of e-learning and offered a range of practical models for educators to assist in the design and development of online distance education courses and described how to migrate traditional courses to e-learning versions. Their explanations of the role of the teacher as facilitator in online courses, their ideas for effective assessment and evaluations, and their ideas for effective course design and organization have provided me with important understandings.
about the scope of this project, considerations for its development, and a foundation on which to base further research and literature reviews.

Palloff and Pratt (2001, 2003) have also developed comprehensive references manuals for educators moving into the e-learning field. Their books, based on their extensive research studies, offered thorough background information about the field of e-learning, its advantages, and numerous practical models and ideas for online course development. Given the numerous references to Palloff and Pratt throughout much of literature I have reviewed, I expected their work to play an ongoing role in my understanding of developing an effective e-learning English 12 First Peoples course and felt confident considering and implementing their recommendations and suggestions as I developed the course. Kadjer (2003) wrote a similar teachers' guide, geared specifically to the high school English teacher working with technology to meet learning outcomes. The practical design elements of Kadjer's research and personal work have also enhanced my understanding of the elements needed to develop the practical strategies components of my project.

A common theme throughout the work of these researchers described the extent to which the use of distance education through technology has increased dramatically in recent years (Hannum, et al., 2008; Mupinga, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Selwyn, et al., 2001). The proliferation of personal computers and ready access to the Internet has precipitated profound and far-reaching changes in society, and by extension, education. Although its greatest use has been at the post-secondary level, the use of technology to provide distance education courses is gradually finding its place in all stages of education, including many secondary school offerings.
It was somewhat difficult to locate Canadian secondary school statistics, but a 2005 Statistics Canada survey on Canadian Internet usage is cited in McKeown and Underhill’s 2007 research on the use of the Internet for education purposes. This survey reported that as many as one-quarter of Canadians are accessing the Internet and other technologies for educational purposes, which included distance education and correspondence courses, and that a significant percentage of these people (nearly one-third) are from rural areas and are accessing distance learning opportunities. McKeown and Underhill offered an interpretation of the article and its data, summarizing Internet use by Canadians for a variety of educational reasons. Their ideas were applicable to the information I needed about e-learning as an increasingly important option for students, particularly those in rural or isolated settings and in smaller schools seeking alternative course delivery options. More recently, an April 2009 column in The Vancouver Sun quoted a news release from the Virtual School Society (VSS) of British Columbia regarding online learning statistics. The Virtual School Society operates LearnNowBC, the government organization that gives students access to a range of educational support and course offerings. The organization reported to The Vancouver Sun that eight percent of school-aged students in the province were enrolled in at least one online course in the past school year, and stated that this number was expected to continue to increase in upcoming school years.

Specific statistics from the United States were easier to locate in the research. In the United States, approximately 20% of high school students were reported to have taken e-learning courses (Hannum, et al., 2008), and a majority of states reported significant rates of growth in the past decade in enrollment in their on-line education offerings to secondary school students. A 2002-2003 US Department of Education study distributed a questionnaire
to a representative sample of 2305 public schools in 50 states to determine national data on distance education in public K-12 schools, with interesting findings. Approximately 80% of school districts stated that one of the main reasons for offering distance education courses was that it enabled them to provide courses that would not otherwise be available to students. This consideration was relevant to my project, considering that a greater proportion of districts in rural areas were offering online distance education courses than those in urban areas, and overall, nearly 40% of high schools were offering online distance education courses ("Megabits", 2003).

The traditional modes of classroom delivery of curriculum are also changing "[b]ecause of the changing nature of today’s students, economic pressures, and rapid implementation of distance learning courses and programs" (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 3). The use of distance learning technologies has both grown out of and enhanced our classroom practices, and it appears to be here to stay. Mupinga (2005), a technology educator who explored the challenges and benefits of distance education through his personal experiences as a teacher in Indiana, described distance education as “instruction that occurs when the instructor and student are separated by distance, time or both” (p. 105). This definition appeared to be widely accepted. Ascough (2002), a teacher of theology (including online courses) at Queen’s Theological College in Ontario, added additional descriptors to the definition of distance education, stating that the planned learning occurs in a different setting than the teaching and therefore requires special techniques of course design, special methods of communication and instruction through the use of technology, and particular organization and administrative planning.
More recently, the computer and the internet have become important elements of
distance education, through computer-based instruction, web-based or online classes, virtual
classroom management programs such as Blackboard, interactive video, wikis, and other
communications technologies. Such technology is often used as an enhancement to a face-to-
face class, but more and more, it is used to create virtual classes as well, where there is little
or no face-to-face contact with the teacher or one’s classmates; all contact is made through
the use of technology (Collins, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Courses can be offered
synchronously, asynchronously, or as a blend of both methods. Synchronous participation
occurs when participants are all online at the same time, interacting in real time, while
asynchronous classes take place at anytime; participants access the course when they wish,
reading and responding to material on their own time.

Garrison and Anderson (2007) argued that communication is at the centre of all
educational experiences; it then follows that communication through technology must be
developed to enhance and maximize the educational experience for all involved. Clayton
(2002), referred to two key objectives in using instructional technology: preserving a sense of
community among teachers and learners, and sustaining or increasing the quality of
communication between teachers and students and between students in the class. She
indicated that the mandate should be to create learning communities through interactivity.
This premise was also supported by the work of Kehrwald (2008), in his study of social
presence in online learning environments.

Kehrwald (2008) undertook a qualitative, constructivist study in an effort to define
social presence in online learning environments and provide suggestions for educators for the
creation and sustenance of social presence in their online courses. Although this study was university-based with a small sample of only 20 students, Kehrwald's personal approach with respondents through questionnaires, interviews, and asynchronous group discussions provided a solid definition of social presence as defined by participants and suggestions for developing and maintaining social presence. He also confirmed the need for providing novice online learners with assistance in developing their skills in using technology to foster their own social presences and in understanding the social presence of others.

Kehrwald's (2008) definition of social presence resonated with my understanding of the need for creating community in the online English 12 First Peoples course. He described social presence as the means by which students participating in online courses indicate their presence and interest in the online learning environment and their "availability and willingness to engage in the communicative exchanges which constitute learning activity in [this environment]" (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 94). This willingness to actively participate and interact is critical to creating community in an online classroom; given the personal, reflective, and interactive nature of the English 12 First Peoples curriculum, the importance of both developing students' skills and providing opportunities to use those skills to create a positive social presence and build a sense of community remained paramount in my mind as I developed the online English 12 First Peoples course.

Although current research suggested that distance education in the form of on-line or e-learning formats was as at least as effective (and increasingly more effective than) traditional classes in terms of meeting learning outcomes, it also suggested that many students often fail to complete online courses (Hannum, et al., 2008). Clayton (2002) and
Palloff and Pratt (2001) suggested that this rate of attrition could be reduced by creating effective online classroom communities that promoted interactivity, offered appropriate support and feedback, and provided relevant, reflective learning opportunities that promoted a sense of connectivity, rapport, and mutual engagement.

Citing a US-based education commission for web-based learning, Garrison and Anderson (2007) stated that creating a viable e-learning experience involved a serious commitment on the part of educators to understand the features of this medium and determine how to use it most effectively to support student learning. Teachers must understand their role in maintaining a sense of community and purpose in order to sustain the effectiveness of an e-learning course format. One essential purpose of quality e-learning is to “blend diversity and cohesiveness” (Garrison & Anderson, 2007, p. 3) into a dynamic, stimulating learning environment. This dynamic learning environment is an important element of student motivation.

Understanding the processes required for developing and maintaining a sense of purpose, motivation, and community was necessary for the successful development of an online version of English 12 First Peoples. Community-building was particularly important because the nature of the course is such that building respect and mutual understanding was vital to successful participation in the course. A portion of the assessment of, for, and as learning in the course is based on journaling and the creation of reflective learning logs. Creating an environment in which students were willing to participate and share on a personal level was important part of my role as the teacher of this course. I also expected that implementing specific requirements for interaction, reflection, and discussion to aid in the
development of a sense of community and collaboration. The research indicated that there is ample opportunity through technology to create effective online classrooms and e-learning environments in which this sense of community is a key component.

Advantages of E-learning Delivery

Critics of distance education have cited the “distance” created by the loss of face-to-face contact with the teacher and classmates as a reason for the failure of students to complete online courses (Clayton, 2002). They also reported concerns of students about a lack of cohesiveness and personal connection to the class (Hannum, et al., 2008), as well as degrees of self-motivation (Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2008; Parker, 2003). Selwyn, et al., (2001), in their study of educational policy in the United States and the need to develop policies to ensure equitable access to digital education opportunities nationwide, identified barriers such as cost factors, personal motivations and circumstances, and lack of appropriate computer training and support as common reasons for lack of success with online coursework. These studies, however, as well as those by Zembylas (2008), Ascough (2002), and others discussed the strategies to avoid and overcome these limitations that students sometimes experience in distance education. They emphasized that effective teacher-training, the use of appropriate and timely feedback for students, and course construction that focuses on the effective means of interaction and communication through the technology being used are all critical to successful, interactive courses. They also suggested that support for the student on-site (whether it comes from family, a school facilitator, or other support person) can lessen the sense of isolation and offer face-to-face communication that might not otherwise be available.
Furthermore, the studies indicated that it is not possible to teach effectively an online course using the same pedagogical styles, lessons, and expectations one uses with a face-to-face course; replicating or simulating traditional face-to-face methods of instruction are neither appropriate nor logical approaches in developing e-learning courses (Garrison & Anderson, 2007). Online courses are different than traditional classroom-based experiences; attention must be paid to the technology used for communication purposes and the pedagogical practices incorporated into the use of that technology (Ascough, 2002). Simply transferring traditional content-driven course curriculum to an online format will not provide opportunities for deep learning experiences, interactive dialogue, or reflection, and may instead contribute to issues of isolation, lack of engagement, and failure to complete the course (Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman, 2006). I kept these important concerns in mind when developing the e-learning course.

Mupinga (2008) presented a limited study of the benefits and challenges of distance education in high schools in the US based on his own teaching experiences with online courses. He described a variety of formats that distance education courses have taken over time and explained different types of e-learning models developed by educators who pioneered a well-known virtual high school in Florida. Using information provided by a number of similar high schools throughout the US, he described the types of students who typically enroll in e-learning programs at this age. Notably, he mentioned rural or isolated students and those who have problems remaining in or accessing traditional classroom courses. Describing his personal experiences as a teacher of online courses, Mupinga offered a straightforward, practical overview of both the challenges of and considerations for developing an e-learning course that maximizes communication opportunities and builds a
sense of community. I ensured I considered the challenges and pitfalls that could detract from effective online course delivery and maximized my use of strategies, principles, and design ideas that were recommended by others by developing practical strategies based on sound pedagogy from teachers directly involved in distance education e-learning delivery.

A 2002 study by Ascough also provided practical design strategies for online distance education. He hypothesized that “online distance education provides opportunities for quality education” (Ascough, 2002, p. 17). However, he cautioned that online distance education could also lead to poor pedagogical practice and that for “online distance education to be effective, one must understand the medium and the pedagogical principles that can lead to deep learning in the online environment” (Ascough, 2002, p. 17). Ascough provided an extensive overview of online distance education, its development over time, its importance to educational institutions today, and his involvement in teaching theology courses through an online e-learning model in an Ontario college. He promoted the use of online course delivery but advocated that the use of technology should be driven by sound pedagogical principles and that pedagogical decisions should not be determined by technology.

At first consideration, this strength of this article for the purposes of my project seemed focused on the theories of e-learning and the background information provided about online distance education. Given that his research was based on his personal experiences as a college-level theological instructor, I did not expect to find extensive relevance to the development of a senior level high school English course. However, the classes on which he based his case study were beginning theology courses which incorporated extensive biblical and other literary readings; the teaching methods, course expectations, requirements for
reflective responses appeared applicable on many levels to English 12 First Peoples. Ascough’s suggestions for community building, online discussion forums, text readings, and participation requirements were based on activities and teaching methods used in his class and supported by narratives and interview responses from his students. Additionally, he indicated that the intention of his study was to provide a representative overview of possible online teaching strategies with the hope of stimulating further thoughts for others teaching online distance education courses (Ascough, 2002). This type of practical overview was important for me as I contemplated a range of online classroom strategies and teaching activities for English 12 First Peoples.

Collins (2001) study examined the US Army’s Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) and the perception of the program’s teachers and administrators toward the use of the Internet as a distance learning tool in teaching a specific secondary school subject. Specifically, the research question asked whether teachers perceived that using the Internet as a distance learning tool enhanced their ability to meet the desired learning outcomes in the courses they were teaching. The research was conducted using surveys with a 5-point Likert scale addressing teachers’ ability to meet the learning outcomes using the Internet and measuring their concerns about using distance learning delivery models to meet learning outcomes. Surveys were conducted at 33 of 1380 Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps units that had Internet-based course delivery options. An analysis of variance (n= 658) measured the level of ability of teachers to meet learning outcomes and measured their level of concern about doing the same. The researchers also collected qualitative data in the form of open-ended questions about any obstacles faced by teachers using the Internet to offer courses that they survey did not address.
The results of this research were of some interest to my project. Because it addressed secondary school course offerings and sought the opinions of teachers about the advantages, challenges, and concerns of teaching an online distance education course, it offered important information from different teachers’ perspectives. Results clearly indicated positive responses from the teachers’ perspectives; they stated that using the Internet as a teaching tool was preferable to teaching in the traditional way (Collins, 2001). Teachers also indicated the types of support they needed to manage the technology, the infrastructure needs of their schools, and the staff development required to become confident and effective e-learning teachers. This information was relevant to the development of English 12 First Peoples as well. The researchers offered practical suggestions to address concerns and challenges faced by teachers, but did not address one key topic I was searching for: the building of a sense of community in an online environment. The researchers did caution that because this was a study based on the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps education program, it should not be assumed that results can be generalized to all high school programs. Additionally, the study did not specify information about which courses were taught, so it did not offer specifics about teaching English online, which would have made it more relevant to my project. Nonetheless, there were some important considerations about the advantages of teaching online courses at a secondary school level.

Clayton (2002) constructed a personal narrative of her experiences teaching web-based literature courses to college freshmen in two different classes over the course of a school year. She solicited feedback from her students through an informal survey on the effects of interactivity and collaborative activities in her courses. Albeit a small personal study, the results were overwhelmingly positive (92%) in favour of the extensive use of
online interactive tools such as discussion boards and class websites to build a sense of a community of learners. She also noted improved retention and completion rates in these courses compared to retention and completion rates from previous years, and a slightly improved GPA over previous years. She did not apply statistical significance to this, but noted that the results were encouraging and that she would continue to follow such trends with her classes. For me, this paper offered important information about potential advantages of online courses and describes several important features from both a teacher’s perspective and a student’s perspectives about community building in the virtual classroom setting.

Parker (2003) conducted a study to test the theory that the level of self-motivation in students is significantly correlated with academic persistence in students taking online distance education courses. She also hypothesized that the level of self-motivation increased in students enrolled in web-based courses. Ninety-five students and four instructors completed the surveys, which were hand-scored and analyzed using SPSS 10. Again, this was a study conducted with first-year US community college students, so its results were not directly applicable to my students. However, the study addressed important issues that I was exploring, particularly the supports needed for students with little or no face-to-face contact with teachers or classmates and the need for effective forms of online interaction to enable good communication. She noted that effective technological interaction and online instruction “can improve students’ sense of competence, independent thinking skills, and self-motivation” (Parker, 2003, p. 3). Although, as Parker noted, the results did not provide evidence that could be generalized to all e-learning courses, she did find significant correlation between level of self-motivation and completion of courses. As well, her results indicated that students who enroll in online courses become more self-motivated than those
who enroll in traditional courses, and that these factors should be taken into consideration when developing e-learning courses for students.

Kember, et al., (2008) also addressed the motivation of undergraduate students. They interviewed 36 students in Hong Kong universities to determine main factors for motivation. Although this study was small and was conducted with students who did not fit the profile of students expected to enroll in English 12 First Peoples, the results were consistent with Parker’s findings and others who discussed motivation as important to student success. In this study, students identified subject relevance, effective assessment, and a sense of belonging or community in the virtual classroom as key to maintaining motivation and supporting student success. In spite of the different backgrounds and demographics of the students involved in these various research studies, consistent themes appeared with respect to the advantages of e-learning and the need for a sense of community and interaction in virtual classroom situations.

Wang and Reeves (2007) suggested that motivation could be improved by challenging students’ abilities through online activities that aroused curiosity and increased student autonomy. Their study involved the design of a web-based learning tool for tenth grade science teachers to use as a student-centred learning activity for a specific science topic. The web-based program was designed as part of a larger four-year study intended to enhance the use of laptop computers as cognitive tools in a K-12 school. The study was applicable to my project in that it was a reflective inquiry tracing the development of innovative learning practices using technology, and because it targeted motivation and engagement of high school students using web-based learning tools. Although this was a
specific program designed for a specific grade, subject, and teacher, the results confirmed
that students were more engaged when using interactive web-based activities than they had
been using traditional classroom activities. When students were given clear opportunities to
take responsibility for achieving the prescribed learning outcomes, explore new information
in new ways, and engage in experiential learning, student motivation improved. These were
important considerations in designing course activities for English 12 First Peoples and in
considering ways to maximize effective use of the tools available in Desire2Learn to
encourage student engagement.

Boyer, Maher, and Kirkman (2006) conducted a phenomenological study of a specific
graduate level course and supported much of the literature examined to date. They described
in detail the emergent field of e-learning and identified a sense of community and belonging
in the virtual class as an important motivator and element of success for graduate students.
They also examined evidence of transformative learning and identified the ability of online
reflective discussion as key to transformative learning, which they describe as dramatic
change in the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. Collaborative learning
was critical to this change, and my goal was to design a course for high school level students
that would also help them see the world around them, through the literature of First Nations
authors and storytellers, in new and different ways. Although this research was conducted
with graduate level students, it provided me with some inspirational guidance about the
benefits of collaborative learning and a sense of community, both of which are important
components of the English 12 First Peoples learning outcomes.
Passey's (2000) study of how teachers in primary and secondary schools in Britain developed strategies for developing and implementing distance education courses also supported these concepts. He emphasized evidence of improved subject learning, motivation, attitudes towards learning, independent learning abilities, and online social interaction as ongoing benefits of distance education courses. He also reiterated what other researchers have noted: the negatives of isolation and lack of course completion can be mitigated by proper course development and recognition of the supports and social interactions in which students need to feel engaged and successful.

Teachers understand that learning is a dynamic, complex process, and that genuine learning comes from the development of ideas, not facts. Garrison and Anderson (2007) postulated that the excessive use of standardized testing has resulted in an education system that imparts information but does not encourage critical thinking. High school students need to develop better critical thinking skills and self-directed learning skills if they are to be successful life-long learners. While e-learning can enhance anyone's access to information, what today's learners need are "better ways to process, make sense of, and recreate this information" (Garrison & Anderson, 2007, p. 4). E-learning has the potential to be both constructive and interactive, and offers the opportunity for teachers to create for their students a true community of inquiry or community of learners where students' experiences and ideas are shared and discussed in a collaborative environment of mutual respect (Garrison & Anderson, 2007). I believed that because of the principles of learning embedded within the content and learning outcomes of English 12 First Peoples, the development of this course into an effective e-learning format using the concepts of such community-building was possible.
Clearly, the content of the course itself is not sufficient to define a quality learning experience. The way an online course is designed and the interactions involved will determine its success. A critical consideration for migrating the course to an e-learning format is integrating content and context (Garrison & Anderson, 2007). The content of English 12 First Peoples is well-developed within its IRP. There are more than a sufficient number of units, texts, assignments, and assessment opportunities outlined for teachers to use in a face-to-face delivery model or online. Context refers to the appropriate levels of social interaction and presence needed to reinforce the educational goals, enhance cognitive development, and realize the higher-order learning outcomes (Garrison & Anderson, 2007). It was my job to effectively blend the course content and its context to create a successful online English 12 First Peoples course.

Garrison and Anderson (2007) assert that current computer technology has the capacity to support reflective interaction between student and course content. In this era of immediate access to information, the advantage of e-learning technology is not faster access to more information; instead, the advantage is that existing technology gives educators and learners practical ways to learn collaboratively by facilitating communication and sharing of ideas, thereby encouraging the construction of new meaning and knowledge. I saw this concept as an excellent fit with the learning outcomes of English 12 First Peoples. E-learning should not be used as simply another tool in the delivery of information to our students; it has the potential to expand students’ educational horizons and it should change how they experience learning (Garrison & Anderson, 2007). It should provide what Boyer, et al. (2006) called a transformative learning experience, which changes the way students perceive themselves and the world around them.
Zembylas (2008) conducted a study of adult learners (who were mainly teachers) in an online university course about engaging with issues of cultural diversity through personal reflection and addressed the benefits of online learning for engaging in such personal reflection. The study confirmed the importance of building trust while discussing personal and sensitive cultural issues, addressing personal biases and challenging one’s own world views, and reflecting on emotional responses to reading material – all through the use of technology for communication. In this study, Zembylas (2008) described online learning as an excellent opportunity for reflective, thoughtful interaction that can transform how students perceive and understand the world around them. Such opportunities for deep learning, I believe, are important for all students, and particularly those in rural and isolated communities for whom distance learning is crucial for equal access to the range of educational opportunities available in the province. As we move towards a more knowledge-based future, the ability to access and understand information and interpret its importance relative to their understanding of the world they live in is vital to students’ future success.

Another advantage of e-learning is the opportunity it can offer for more in-depth intellectual interaction. Often in a traditional classroom, the more extroverted learners dominate discussions, group work, and other social situations. In my experience, less confident students or those who require more processing time to formulate ideas and responses often participate to a lesser degree. However, people generally interact differently online than they do in class (Ascough, 2002; Boyer, et al., 2006). When regular contributions and active online participation are key requirements in an online course, even the more introverted participants are required to share thoughts, ideas, responses, and reflections. Having the opportunity to do so in writing, in a chat forum, or in an asynchronous
environment has shown that, although people will participate at different levels, everyone will participate (Ascough, 2002; B. Hartman, personal communication, March 31, 2009; Zembylas, 2008). Again, the degree to which this is done effectively was an ongoing part of the focus of my work in developing the English 12 First Peoples course for the North Coast Distance Education School.

Ascough (2002) and Palloff and Pratt (2001, 2003) also noted that online courses can change the social dynamics of a class with respect to gender, class, and race issues. Participants can disclose information as they feel comfortable about their personal circumstances, but there remains a degree of anonymity if students so choose. However, this may be counter-intuitive to the idea of building a learning community in which all participants are active members; finding a balance that respects people’s comfort zones and encourages reflective sharing practices remained an ongoing consideration for effective course development.

E-learning Strategies for Course Development

Additionally, there was a wealth of practical information on distance education and on-line course design and the theory behind building effective on-line courses through books such as those by Palloff and Pratt (2001, 2003), Lynch (2002), Conrad and Richardson (2004), Lever-Duffy and McDonald (2008), and others. The study of these books and the incorporation of their design suggestions as applicable to English 12 First Peoples was an ongoing process throughout my research and project. As I developed specific resource material and lesson plans to meet the course’s learning outcomes, I continued to seek out and
incorporate the practical strategies outlined by researchers and authors as the culmination of
their extensive experience and research.

It was my belief at the outset of this project that at the heart of developing a
successful online version of English 12 First Peoples was the development and incorporation
of strategies that build a sense of community in the virtual classroom setting. It was my
intention to use strategies that encouraged interaction, reflection, and transformative learning
experiences. To do so, I knew I would have to develop some idea about the students who will
enroll in the course and get a sense of their learning needs, including an assessment of their
technological skills and the access they have to various modes of technology. McLoughlin
(1999) noted that, in order to move from surface level comprehension to deeper learning,
online delivery models “required incorporation of culture specific values, styles of learning
and cognitive preferences” (McLoughlin, 1999, p. 231). It was important to establish an
understanding of who would be enrolling in the course and their reasons for doing so through
the distance education format. I was able to formulate some understanding of my students
through information provided by NCDES registration process and through an initial
introductory assignment students were required to submit as part of the registration process.

Additionally, it was likely that many of the students would be computer-savvy, but it
was also possible that others would not be particularly technologically proficient. To begin
the course, I created an opportunity to have an orientation process to the technology being
used, the course structure, and the online requirements for participation, communication, and
submission of assignments. Based on the literature review, I felt this would be beneficial to
the class as a whole (Boyer, et al., 2006). Throughout the course design, I found myself
reflecting on my own teaching style in order to ensure that the teaching elements I incorporated into the course were geared to my own strengths.

The learning outcomes of English 12 First Peoples are clearly and thoroughly established in the course IRP, so I did not need to develop the course goals and objectives, but I had to give consideration to how those goals, objectives, and learning outcomes could be met online. The technology being used must be at the service of the teaching and learning process; the teaching and learning process should not be driven by technology (Ascough, 2002). The technology was the tool by which to facilitate communication, interaction, sharing, reflection, and learning; it must be employed to help maximize the potential for student learning. One of the key aspects of e-learning is the ability of the available technology to facilitate interaction between teacher and student, between students in the class, and between students and the course content. Such wide-ranging interaction “allows for the creation and synthesis of knowledge” (Ascough, 2002, p. 22). Researchers agreed that the collaborative process of online interaction through reflection, sharing, and exploration leads to deeper student learning (Ascough, 2002; McLoughlin, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). I believed part of my role as teacher would be to guide students through the reflective process, enabling them to experience deeper learning and engage in what Boyer, et al. (2006) described as a transformative learning experience. As I taught more of the course in my regular classroom, I began to better understand the potential for English 12 First Peoples, if delivered effectively, to be a transformative learning experience for many students from a diverse range of backgrounds.
Two other important components of building a course that enables collaboration and a sense of community are engagement and motivation. Encouraging engagement and motivation must be deliberately built into the design of the course. Grisham and Wolsey (2006) studied online literature discussion groups in middle school classrooms in California and stated that community was at the core of all learning. They concluded that what students learned was defined by those with whom they shared their ideas and built that learning. An important element in creating a community of learners who are motivated and engaged was to provide opportunity for students to get to know one another. Specific activities, using the available technology, included setting up a forum for students to introduce themselves and interact socially and informally throughout the course (Ascough, 2002; Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; McLoughlin, 1999). In addition to informal contact, students should be required to participate formally in online discussions and be expected to offer reflective, thoughtful responses to class readings and discussions regularly (Ascough, 2002; Pallof & Pratt, 2001). Additionally, to promote a sense of community of inquiry, activities had to be designed to move students away from simply being recipients of information and towards being constructors of knowledge and collaborative partners in disseminating information and problem-solving (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006; McLoughlin, 1999). With appropriate teacher guidance, I expected students to take an active role and accept responsibility for contributing regularly and thoughtfully, demonstrating their learning and encouraging others to do the same.

As the literature review and the course design progressed, I explored more research around factors that influenced online participation. Clearly, students will not be successful in online courses if they do not participate. Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005) explored factors
that influenced learner participation in a graduate online course for teachers about using technology in the classroom. They used a case study approach and several data sources, including questionnaires with a Likert scale, interviews, and a thematic data analysis of online discussions about participation. The results of this study were applicable to my research on several levels. Once again, however, this was a study of graduate students who were mainly teachers, so its conclusions are not necessarily directly applicable to a high school course. However, they offered some insight into several of the questions I had to consider while developing my course. They noted that students’ technology skills and the design of the discussion board influenced student participation and reflection in course activities (Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005). I found myself spending time designing and redesigning my discussion board, to the extent Desire2Learn allowed any sort of flexibility, considering both ease of use for students with varying levels of computer skills and the creation of a board that felt welcoming, accessible, and useful. Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005) also noted that student participation was impacted by the sense of comfort and community among class members, a factor that had been reinforced throughout the literature. A third component of participation that resonated strongly with me was students’ indication that assessment criteria played a role in their participation (Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005). Ensuring what type of participation (deep and meaningful reflections versus superficial postings, for example) and how much participation was required became important considerations as I continued to develop assessment criteria for the course.

The key areas of literature on which I focused my research – the e-learning field, the advantages of e-learning, and effective e-learning strategies – resonated throughout the actual course development process for the online version of English 12 First Peoples. From aiding
my understanding of the field of e-learning and the importance of the opportunities that the availability of this course and others like it will provide to future students, to ensuring that I developed a course based on the most current and sound practices, the literature helped shaped all levels of the project. It also emphasized that the e-learning is still an emerging field in education, particularly at the secondary school level, and I hope this project will add to the knowledge base high school teachers need in order to pursue developing new e-learning courses for their students.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter 1 introduced the research problem and the research question, which asked what qualities of the English 12 First Peoples course need to be developed and nurtured differently in a virtual classroom than in a face-to-face setting, and how. Chapter 2 surveyed the literature and demonstrated that the emergent field of e-learning, particularly in the secondary school environment, can broaden the educational opportunities of students in rural regions. It also demonstrated that it is possible to create a strong sense of community in a virtual classroom, provided specific consideration is made to do so. This chapter will outline my research methodology. It begins by addressing background information about my English 12 First Peoples experiences and the evolution of the project. Then it addresses my reasons for choosing a qualitative research method over quantitative or mixed methods. It then defines and discusses action research and autoethnography. It also includes an explanation of my reasons for selecting autoethnography as the research method for this project. Finally, it discusses my data sources and research tools.

From the Classroom to the Computer

In 2006, I became involved in work related to the creation of English 12 First Peoples, a new course developed in a unique collaboration between the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and the BC Ministry of Education. The course was designed to meet the graduation requirements and standards equivalent to that of the traditional English 12 course, but focused exclusively on texts by First Nations authors from Canada and around the world. At that time, I was asked to become a trial writer on a contract basis for the newly-developed provincial exams. Shortly thereafter, a pilot teacher for the
course from a neighbouring northern school district had to move unexpectedly, and the First Nations Education Steering Committee urgently needed another English teacher who would be available to pilot one unit of the course during a regular English 12 class in the Fall semester of the 2007-2008 school year. I was asked by the course development team leader at the First Nations Education Steering Committee to participate as a pilot teacher, in addition to my trial writing work. I obtained permission from school administration do so and attended a training session in Vancouver in July 2007 as preparation for teaching a unit of the course in a pilot format.

I taught a pilot unit, Residential Schools Literature, in my English 12 class at Hazelton Secondary School that fall, which was successful and generated a significant amount of interest in the course in both our school and our community. In consultation with the English Department, the school administration decided to offer English 12 First Peoples as a regular course during the following school year, 2008-2009, and assigned it to me to teach. It was offered in the second semester of the school year, and 27 students enrolled in the course.

Shortly after I began teaching this class, I had to select a project topic to fulfill my Master of Education degree requirements. During the same week in which I was contemplating project possibilities, I was approached by the principal of the NCDES, who had consulted with the First Nations Education Steering Committee about the possibility of developing an online version of the course. After discovering that Hazelton Secondary was offering the first class of English 12 First Peoples in the district and that I had been involved in piloting the course, he asked if I would be interested in taking on this project and
eventually teaching the course for NCDES online in 2010. The opportunity was intriguing, and the idea of undertaking the process as a Masters project was borne.

Choice of Methodology

I chose to do a qualitative research project for several reasons. Qualitative research focuses on the views of participants and asks broad, general questions. It looks at what participants have to say and analyzes their words, thoughts, and ideas for important themes (Creswell, 2008). The research inquiry is subjective and personal, and the project I undertook met the criteria for qualitative research. I did not feel a quantitative approach was suitable for the project I designed. My questions were broad and I could not envision useful quantifiable data emerging from the story of developing the online version of English 12 First Peoples. For instance, my central research question asked which qualities of the English 12 First Peoples course needed to be developed differently in an online classroom. The answer to this question did not appear to be quantitative based. The data were subjected to text analysis and thematic development as opposed to the statistical analysis or comparison of relationships among variables that quantitative research would require. For these reasons, I did not use mixed methods either; the quantitative component was simply not appropriate for the project.

I also excluded other qualitative methods such as hermeneutics and phenomenology when choosing my research methodology. Hermeneutics involves the interpretation and understanding of social events by analyzing their meaning to the people involved; phenomenology pertains to research concerned with understanding the subjects’ point of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I felt these methods did not accurately fit the process I wished to undertake; I wanted to emphasize the personal narrative, the reflective analysis,
and the practical results of the research. The project was a highly personal exploration of a particular process, and so I chose to conduct an action research project that is best described as an autoethnographical study.

*Action Research and Autoethnography*

An autoethnography, according to Chang (2008), is a qualitative research methodology that emphasizes a personal approach and provides the researcher-participant with opportunity to explore and reflect on experiences. Through this reflection, the researcher-participant gains understanding of the research experience by first telling his story and then subjecting it to in-depth analysis and interpretation. Chang (2008) emphasized that, in spite of the personal nature of the research, it must be planned and implemented with the same rigour required by other types of research. Chang (2008) described autoethnography as an important tool for social scientists, including teachers, to give insight into a process or make sense of an issue and offer solutions or recommendations (such as developing an online course that offers a strong sense of classroom community).

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) defined autoethnography as research in which the researcher is the object of the study. It demands solid description of a situation in order to provide meaningful interpretations and new understandings. Creswell (2008) added that autoethnography is a highly personalized account of the research that develops an understanding of a particular phenomenon or situation after describing, analyzing, and interpreting the author's reflections on meaningful data. My research provided a detailed account of the process of developing an effective online English 12 First Peoples course, and my views as both teacher and researcher on both the process of course development and its
outcome formed the basis of my research. I chose autoethnography as a research methodology because of the elements Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Chang (2008), and Cresswell (2008) described; it is personal, yet connected to a larger element in education, and it seemed to be the best fit for my project and my research needs at the time.

Action research is a form of reflective inquiry and fits well with autoethnography; it is an appropriate method for teachers to use in examining their teaching practices. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described, the action researcher is a practitioner such as a teacher who wants to use a qualitative approach to examine his practice with the intention of improving it. Creswell (2008) added that a teacher-researcher might examine a problem and determine solutions to resolve the problem. In conducting this action research project, I developed the online version of English 12 First Peoples, and throughout its development, I analyzed and reflected on the process. I believe this approach suited my project because I wrote the story and constructed a personal portrait of my experience with the development of the online version of English 12 First Peoples. Autoethnography is a form of action research which includes a reflexive account of one’s own experiences and looks critically at the process being described. As Creswell (2008) noted, autoethnography allows for subjectivity and the inclusion of thoughts, feelings, and personal observations which were all-important components of my project. As the project progressed, I became increasingly confident that this method was the best method I could have chosen for this project, and confirmed that the depth I hoped for in analyzing and reflecting on the process existed.

Although there is always the potential for an autoethnographical study to become too personal in its narration (Chang, 2008), I did not see this as a significant problem for this
project, particularly as I became more immersed in the practical components of the course development. The concerns I had about creating a course of substance that did justice to the purpose of English 12 First Peoples were reflected in the literature, as were the many questions I had about building community in an online class. As I focused on creating the most appropriate activities, reflections, and discussion topics, I found myself referring frequently to the research and literature for ideas, solutions, and suggestions. It was also gratifying to have that information reinforced by the NCDES administrators who were supporting my work.

The narrative elements in the journal targeted the work I was doing in creating the online version of the course. The focus of the narration remained on course development, ideas for creating opportunities for student engagement and community building, and other elements of transforming a face-to-face course into an e-learning format. The research provided a thorough account of these processes, and my views as both teacher and researcher on both the process of course development and its outcome formed the basis of my research. I chose autoethnography as a research methodology because of the elements Creswell (2008) described; it is personal, yet connected to a broader circumstance. In this case, the personal component was my classroom practice and the process of undertaking the online course development of English 12 First Peoples; the broader circumstance included considerations for future opportunities within our school and district to develop other new online course offerings.
Data Sources

My data sources for this project were limited in number but rich in detail, and the research tools used in this study were appropriate for an autoethnographic study. The most important source of data was my reflective journal, which was written using Microsoft Word and stored on my personal laptop. A reflective approach was necessary in this autoethnographical research study, and the use of a reflective journal is an increasingly accepted research tool that can facilitate reflexivity (Ortlipp, 2008). Maintaining a reflective journal is also an important educational practice for educators interested in exploring, understanding, and improving their teaching practice (Loughran & Russell, 2002). Thus, it was an appropriate tool for this project.

Throughout the process, the reflective journal documented the process of teaching English 12 First Peoples face-to-face and then transforming the course into its online version for the North Coast Distance Education School. I began the journal in February 2009, when I began teaching the first English 12 First Peoples face-to-face course, and maintained it throughout the process of writing this document. At times, I wrote daily in the journal; other times, notes were made weekly or less frequently; the frequency depended on numerous factors throughout the process, but it was an invaluable record of what was, at times, a convoluted process, and it helped maintain a sense of organization throughout that convolution. As Ortlipp (2008) noted, it also helped to maintain the rigor of the research process and allowed for critical self-reflection which enhanced the course development process overall.

The journal itself was multi-faceted, and as I wrote in it, I endeavoured to remain cognizant of the areas of research the literature review addressed: e-learning, its advantages,
and the practical strategies for building an effective course. Early on, the journal was a running record of activities I conducted with the face-to-face English 12 First Peoples class, as well as thoughts, ideas, comments, and questions that arose as I taught the class. I tried to record the ideas on which I was reflecting as I was teaching, keeping in mind the research question about migrating particular course qualities to an online class. I often made quick hand-written notes in class as thoughts or questions arose, then transferred them to the main document saved on my laptop and added more in-depth comments and reflections. My intent was to try to capture important ideas about community building and effective lesson plans that I felt would be most relevant in the online course. I also recorded informal feedback I received from my English 12 First Peoples students about various lessons and activities. I usually jotted down comments verbatim if they resonated strongly with me, then transferred them to the official journal at the end of the day and reflected on their significance. Other times, I would paraphrase the comment during my reflection. For example, I noted that a particular student “told me how much he enjoyed today’s Thomas King reading” (journal entry) and then noted my reflections on the reasons he provided.

In the journal, I also recorded personal reviews of the successes and challenges of various lessons I had designed or had adapted from the English 12 FP Teacher Resource Guide. As I delved further into the project, including the literature review and the actual course development work, the questions in my journal became more prominent. I certainly had more questions than answers for a time. I also recorded concerns I had about learning the technology that I would need to teach the course, including wondering how much training I would need to feel comfortable teaching a course using the technology and who would help my students with technology issues if I could not.
One significant theme of the journal clearly emerged by the end of the summer of 2009: frustrations with technology. I had reached the point when I wanted to start uploading lesson plans, activities, and lectures to the NCDES course site, and needed assistance from administration in order to do that. I wanted to see what the online course would look like to the students and needed to feel like I was making progress in that particular component of the project. However, I felt isolated and needed more technological support than was available at the time; I needed more in-depth instruction on the tools I was supposed to be using to create the course, and it struck me that this frustration was similar to what students doing online courses without effective support could easily experience. This theme and others will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Four.

The content of this journal was a significant component of my research. My intention with the journal was to record more than just a chronicle of events; in recording personal and professional observations, connections to literature, and critical assessment and analysis of my experiences, I uncovered data in the journal that helped make explicit the knowledge and understanding I gained in the development of an e-learning course.

I am the only actual participant in this project, but other sources of data came from my reflections on informal discussions with other distance education and e-learning teachers in our school and district and from students enrolled in those courses. My journal notes also included sections containing ideas about challenges and pitfalls to avoid, as I encountered them through my own face-to-face delivery experiences, online course development, the literature review, and my discussions with other teachers and students involved in distance education e-learning courses. All of these notes were recorded using Microsoft Word,
maintained on my personal laptop, and backed up on my external hard drive for safekeeping. The laptop and hard drive were kept in separate and secure locations in my personal home office.

Supplementary Data Sources

Another rich source of information was the literature itself. The literature provided important guidance which helped inform the selection of promising practices in the development of appropriate course components. In particular, the literature provided practical strategies for building community. It also provided suggestions for course development considerations such as student orientation activities, which prompted further discussions with North Coast Distance Education School personnel about their processes for such activities.

Additionally, the English 12 First Peoples Integrated Resource Package and Teacher Resource Guide for the course provided important foundations for the initial stages of the project. Using them, I developed lessons and activities for the course throughout the semester; as required in the prescribed learning outcomes, the concept of respectful communication and community building was a constant focus. My experience teaching the first English 12 First Peoples course in the traditional face-to-face format was another important component of my research. That experience helped formulate much of the data in the beginning sections of the reflective journal. The class gave me a starting place for lesson ideas and highlighted the importance of building community in this particular course. As well, it provided a rich source of the information about the research question, which focused on what qualities of the English 12 First Peoples course needed to be developed and nurtured differently in the online version of the course. For example, I could see what types of class
guidelines fostered respectful communication and what topics allowed for rich small-group discussions. This knowledge provided much insight into what qualities needed to be fostered online and required deep consideration as to how to do that effectively.

Technology as a Data Source

My research tools also included the technology that was used to develop the online course, because the technology options in place determined several elements of the structure of the course. The course management system that NCDES used was a key research tool. Desire2Learn (D2L) is their system of choice, and I received in-service on several occasions for using it; this support will continue to be provided throughout the teaching of the online course itself. It was important to learn its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the tools embedded within it for creating assignments, facilitating communication, and promoting that important sense of community. I also received training in using Elluminate, which is an Internet software program that functions like a virtual classroom and allows the teacher and students to interact via the Internet in real-time. I maintained a section in the journal that reflected my experiences learning the many facets of the technology required to effective teach an online course.

As the course development became more of a reality in terms of becoming an actual course offering for NCDES, a classroom in our school and section of the library were designated for use by students attending Hazelton Secondary who were enrolled in e-learning courses through the North Coast Distance Education School. Additional wireless technology was installed in the school, computers were designated for students enrolled in the course to use, and videoconferencing equipment was made available. Classroom space and computer
access were provided for teachers of online courses, and the block of teaching time
designated to the online course was funded through the North Coast Distance Education
School's budget. The NCDES administrators also worked with enrolling students who were
not attending Hazelton Secondary to ensure they had the technology in place to participate
fully in the course. I included these developments as part of the narrative elements of the
journal, as they were important components of the overall process.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed the journal for themes by initially focusing on the three most prominent
areas of research I had uncovered in my literature review: e-learning as an important
emergent element of the education system, the advantages of e-learning, and practical
strategies for creating viable online courses. Patton (1987) argued that this type of natural
categorization was "indigenous typologies" while those categories that came out of the data
after further analysis were "analyst-constructed typologies".

I first began the coding process by using different coloured highlighting pens to
highlighting words, phrases, and larger sections of text related to the three main themes of
the literature review. I assigned a different coloured highlighter to each of the three themes.
Shortly after beginning that process, I switched to using the highlighting feature in Microsoft
Word, as it was just as efficient to highlight the data then cut and paste the references into a
separate document under their individual headings and count them. This second document
was an effective visual organizer which allowed me to view the data in its entirety, see
patterns, identify gaps in information, and move data into different categories as needed.
Initially, I intended to use NVivo 8 to analyze the data because of its reputation as a powerful research tool for managing data. However, the extensive challenges with our school's technology infrastructure throughout the fall of 2009 and the damage to my personal computer after an accident at home made timely access to the NVivo program questionable at best. I also experienced difficulties in an early trial using the program to code sample data. Using the school's computers to practice using the program, I was unable to retrieve saved data and received error messages indicating the file had been corrupted. I was extremely concerned about entering large quantities of data and then losing access to it, and ultimately elected to code data manually. In spite of initial reservations about this decision, I also recognized that my data was manageable without NVivo. Mine was not a large study with several participants; I did not have, for example, numerous interviews to transcribe and then code by hand. The bulk of the data generated in the journal centred on the themes of the literature review, and the volume of data was not so overwhelming as to require a computer program to manage it.

Within the journal, many of the references to e-learning as an increasingly important part of the public education system and its advantages for students in this region came from reflections on my discussions with NCDES staff. As experienced practitioners in the e-learning field and strong proponents of the e-learning field, their enthusiasm and knowledge of current practices in online course development were valuable to my research. Critically reflecting on my conversations with them reinforced my understanding of the literature and helped me see how it applied to the work I was undertaking. These reflections helped guide the course development process and enhanced the research.
After reviewing the data covering the three main themes, I noted that the category I called “practical strategies” actually contained two very different foci: building community and organizational strategies. I subsequently divided theme of “practical strategies” section into two sub-themes. The most prominent section involved the concepts of building community, which included comments such as “Could we try a talking circle in a chat room? Rules for turn-taking? Can I do that online?” (journal entry). The importance of building community was emphasized throughout the literature. Additionally, it is reflected throughout the prescribed learning outcomes for English 12 First Peoples; for that reason, it became a focus of my actual research question. Many sections of the journal that reflected on my classroom practices while teaching English 12 First People specifically discussed community-building strategies. I was looking at concrete ways to build this important course element into online lessons, discussions, and class activities. At the same time, I was trying to understand the technological features that would best enable community-building practices. This theme had the greatest number of references in the data collected as described in the next chapter.

The second sub-theme that emerged from that initial section on practical strategies involved “organizational considerations”. These considerations involved practical teaching strategies for the actual online course, including technology orientation plans for students, time management strategies for online participation, and course development questions. The frequency of references to these types of practical considerations increased as we uploaded coursework into the course webpage and the time to teach the course online drew nearer.
Once I had a clear picture of the data involving the themes that developed from the literature review, I noted that there were still several lengthy sections of the journal that did not fall easily into any of those previous categories. It was visually obvious that I had highlighted very little data in these particular sections. As I reviewed them again, it became clear that they focused on emotions. Because this was a personal reflective journal, it made sense that emotions would play a role in the reflections I made on my work, my project, and my experiences teaching English 12 First Peoples for the first time. I then began highlighting these data, identifying different emotions with different coloured highlighters. There were many positive experiences noted throughout the journal, but the emotion that I reflected on most frequently can most clearly be described as frustration. The frustration had two main sources: time and technology. I chose to categorize this new data theme as “challenges”, because I believed that it would be important to identify the challenges that arose during the project and attempt to learn from them. I also believed that understanding the causes of such frustration would be beneficial in avoiding such pitfalls in future online course development. This section on challenges was second only to the section on community building in terms of the frequency of the data.

This chapter focused on background information about my experience with English 12 First Peoples and the development of the project. It then addressed my choice of research methodology, which was an action research project in the form of an autoethnography. Finally, it discussed the sources of research data and the method of data analysis. The next chapter will discuss in detail the data collected from these sources and the themes that emerged through analysis of the data. It will also offer my interpretation of the data and of the challenges faced in undertaking this process.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Chapter 1 introduced the research problem and the research question, which asked what qualities of the English 12 First Peoples course need to be developed and nurtured differently in a virtual classroom than in a face-to-face setting, and how. Chapter 2 surveyed the research on the advantages of the emergent field of e-learning and on using technology to create a strong sense of community in a virtual classroom. Chapter 3 outlined my research methodology, discussed action research and autoethnography, and concluded with an overview of my data sources and research tools. This chapter will describe the data collected through the course of the research. As noted previously, the main data source was a reflective journal that I maintained from February 2009 to February 2010. I will provide a detailed description of the data, which included information about e-learning as an emergent field in the education system, the advantages of e-learning, and practical strategies for building community online. The data also included other prominent themes uncovered during the course of the research, including organizing for effective course delivery, challenges to effective organizing, and technological challenges. Finally, I will offer my analysis and interpretation of them in an effort to answer the research questions.

Research Findings

I first reviewed my main data source, the journal, keeping in mind the three most prominent areas of research I had uncovered in my literature review: e-learning as an important emergent component of the education system, the advantages of e-learning, and practical strategies for creating viable online courses. Additionally, upon further reviews of the data, two other themes emerged that related to organizational considerations and
challenges encountered during the process. After further review of the data, I divided the theme of challenges into two new themes: organizational challenges and technological challenges. Table 1 summarizes these themes and is followed by an in-depth discussion of each theme.

Table 1

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<th>Theme type and frequency of journal comments (in raw score)</th>
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<tr>
<td>E-learning as an emerging field</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advantages of e-learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational Considerations</td>
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<td>Organizational Challenges</td>
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<td>Technological Challenges</td>
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E-learning as an Emerging Field

In the early stages of the project during the spring of 2009, I met with a teacher and the administrator of the NCDES on three occasions. These meetings were focused on organizing the process of developing the online English 12 First Peoples course and establishing a timeframe for making it available to students. During the meetings, the NCDES staff outlined the role I would fill as one of their teachers and the expectations they had for the course. The school offers a full range of courses to enable people to meet BC Ministry of Education graduation requirements. I was shown a variety of the online courses
offered by NCDES, which ranged from elementary Science and Social Studies, to high school French Immersion classes, to adult photography courses. During our third meeting, I was also shown basic profiles of the diverse range of students enrolled in the school’s distance education programs. These profiles helped me understand the great potential that online courses had in meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners, particularly in rural or isolated areas.

It was both inspiring and enlightening to view the potential for English 12 First Peoples to be developed in such a dynamic way as these other courses were designed, and to see how far-reaching and diverse the potential student enrollment in the course could be. As time passed and NCDES began publicizing the opportunity to enroll in English 12 First Peoples in 2010, I was encouraged by the interest expressed by potential enrollees. A group of First Nations adults living on reserve and working with NCDES to complete their high school graduation requirements expressed their interest in taking the course, as did a number of high school students in various communities in the Northwest. As one colleague from NCDES commented, “Courses like yours can open so many doors for people, and we want to take advantage of every opportunity like this one to be leaders [in the distance education field]” (journal entry). The reflections in the journal about these conversations highlighted my growing awareness of the importance of distance education opportunities for our school district and its clientele.

During one meeting with NCDES staff, I also made particular note of the principal’s discussion about the school’s growing partnerships with adult education programs in the Northwest. There are a number of adult programs in the area, including several on-reserve
programs at First Nations education centres. The North Coast Distance Education School has been working with these programs to offer a wider range of courses to adults who are working towards completing high school graduation requirements or who are upgrading the courses they took in high school. The NCDES principal indicated that a “significant focus of [their] work” (journal entry) recently was to increase awareness of the availability of online courses for students in these adult education programs and to develop new online courses as needed to meet the needs of these students. Indeed, following several of his visits to meet with me at Hazelton Secondary, he was also meeting with directors of other education centres in the area, working to develop new partnerships between their programs and NCDES and increase the number of online course offerings available to their students. I made note of his comments about these partnerships in my journal because it reflected the research about e-learning as an increasingly important option in rural or isolated settings.

As the course development work progressed, I also developed a better understanding of the staffing and program structures of NCDES. Some of the early questions in my journal centred on who was responsible for certain tasks. I knew what my role was in terms of developing the online English 12 First Peoples, and knew that I would teach in online when it was ready. However, I had questions regarding the how the course would fit into my daily schedule at school. The teaching block that would be assigned to English 12 First Peoples in my teaching timetable was funded by NCDES. Students would be enrolled in NCDES for that course, even if they were still regular students at Hazelton Secondary or at another school. I was initially unsure of the registration process for them. Who was responsible for it, Hazelton Secondary staff, or NCDES staff? Would students have to pay for the textbooks? How would I do daily attendance as required by Hazelton Secondary, if the students were not
Hazelton Secondary students during that class? Who would assist students with computer problems if they arose? These issues caused confusion both for me and for our office staff responsible for timetabling and student programming, simply because we were unfamiliar with the details of the process. Although we had many individual students enrolled in distance education courses, we had never had a full class enrolled in an online course prior to this time. I sought answers from the NCDES staff in an effort to resolve this confusion, and over the final weeks of preparing to teach the course, found resolution in the assistance they provided.

I coded the data that addressed these areas of concern under the theme of e-learning as an emergent field. In subsequent meetings with NCDES personnel, these questions about day-to-day structures, responsibility for various tasks, and enrollment procedures were answered readily. As experienced practitioners in an established distance education school, the NCDES staff had well-established structures for technology support, registration procedures, recording students’ marks, and other areas for which I had expressed uncertainty. Many of their procedures, including the registration process which requires students to complete a course assignment before being officially enrolled in the course, were established under strict BC Ministry of Education guidelines for distance education. Others, such as technology orientation, were simply necessary and logical parts of the structures and procedures of the school itself that had been established over time. With the increased use of technology to support distance education programs, NCDES also recently added personnel directly responsible for the technology components of their course offerings. This support included training teachers of online courses in the use of the technology, ensuring students
had access to all necessary computer software and programs, and assisting in the
development of online courses.

Near the end of the course development process, a number of Hazelton Secondary
students approached me at school about enrolling in the online version of English 12 First
Peoples. I had several conversations with these students, all of whom I had taught previously
in other English classes. Students initially expressed confusion about the option of taking the
course online, but when I explained the situation to them and how we envisioned the
structure of the course, they became quite interested. They had questions about what we were
doing, why we were offering the course online instead of in a regular class, and how the class
would work. One suggested that because of her part-time job and family responsibilities, she
would much rather take a course online on her own time if it was available. Others suggested
that it would be hard if they did not have reliable computer access at home and wondered
about how the process would work at school. Another student indicated he considered
himself a very independent worker and was eager to enroll in the course because it “sounded
just right” (journal entry) for his needs this semester.

I reflected on these conversations in the journal and coded that data under the theme
of e-learning as an emergent field for several reasons. I listed their concerns in the journal
and noted that the concerns and comments expressed clearly by students reflected the
literature about e-learning as an emergent field. The conversations with the students
highlighted for me the importance of proper course design as well; the course needed to be
accessible and student-friendly. Students needed have sufficient training and support to
manage the course, and they needed to have good communication with the teacher in order to
ensure they could successfully complete the course. It was important for me to remember that I wished to create more than just an online correspondence course; interaction and effective communication were a focus of the research question and a focus of the considerations for course design.

It would appear that School District #82, through the initiatives of the North Coast Distance Education School, has embraced the trend emphasized in the research about the proliferation of e-learning courses. In reviewing the thoughts generated in my journal after these discussions, I had a strong sense that a northern district like ours, with students living in relatively isolated locales, should be on the forefront of online course offerings. The fact that they have endeavoured to be the first to offer a new course like English 12 First Peoples speaks to their efforts in this area.

Advantages of E-learning Opportunities

In addition to enhancing my understanding of the e-learning field as an increasingly important part of the education system, my early discussions with NCDES staff enlightened me about various advantages of e-learning opportunities. Certainly one advantage is the opportunity for students to take courses that may not otherwise be available to them. As noted previously, the NCDES administration was working towards developing deeper partnerships with adult education centres in the region. One group of adult learners had enquired about the possibility of taking English 12 First Peoples, which prompted staff at NCDES to explore opportunities to offer the course online. I reflected in the journal how significant such opportunities could be for people who had been unable to complete high school initially, and now could make choices about the types of courses they wished to take
in order to do so later in life. I also reflected on the students I knew at Hazelton Secondary, and the potential for deepening their understanding of the lives of others by participating with students outside of our school in an online course such as English 12 First Peoples.

These reflections highlighted for me once again the importance of building community in an online course and taking advantage of the technology to do so. One particular discussion with NCDES staff focused on the potential of the features of Desire2Learn to be used when designing my course, keeping in focus the importance of building community. Making good use of email, chat features, video conferences, and other features of Desire2Learn were described as vital to a successful online course. These discussions led to further reflections in the journal. I wondered, for example, how to "become sufficiently comfortable with these features myself in order to help students become comfortable using them" (journal entry). I also questioned how much time it would take to become proficient and when proper training could actually take place. I reflected on the need to maximize the potential of these technological features to build a sense of community in my online class, understanding that I could not do so until I had sufficient course material created in order to have a course site created. This led to another critical question that highlighted a big challenge of the process: "How do I create a sufficient amount of appropriate course material, with an emphasis on building community, so that [North Coast Distance Education personnel] can create my course site, in order for me to be able to access the features of D2L and better understand how to use those features to enhance that sense of community within the course material?" (journal entry). The convoluted nature of the question highlighted the dilemma I was facing at this stage of the project. The advantages of
e-learning courses seemed obvious to me, but I had several concerns about how to make the best use of technology in order to maximize these advantages.

I used the question about creating appropriate course material and using the features of Desire2Learn (D2L) as a heading on one page of my journal, and over a short time filled the page with answers to the questions. As I progressed through the creation of course material, I was able to work with D2L to enhance the community-building elements of the assignments I created. Understanding that I could experiment with the features of D2L and make modifications to various discussion topics and assignments in order to enhance the sense of community within the class meant that I could continue to make improvements over time to the work the class was doing.

Subsequent meetings with the teacher in charge of technical and computer support for NCDES occurred on three separate occasions in October and November 2009. His role was to provide training in the actual use of Desire2Learn and to assist me in uploading all course material I had created to the actual course website. He also showed me his online course websites, which allowed me to see the various features of Desire2Learn in action from both a student perspective and a teacher perspective. This information provided valuable insight into potential uses of various communications tools within Desire2Learn for building community in an online class. It also highlighted the advantages of using technology to create a positive and inclusive learning environment.

During these meetings, I also spoke to another teacher at Hazelton Secondary who recently began teaching a French Immersion course online from our building for NCDES. He echoed the teacher overseeing technology training in noting that there are many useful
features in Desire2Learn, but stated that it was "a challenge to learn how to make the best use of it all when there is so much to learn at once" (journal entry). This comment paralleled many of the questions I had noted in the journal. I made several comments about addressing the research question in conjunction with learning the technology. I wanted to determine which qualities of the course needed to be developed and nurtured differently online so as to ensure I was not simply creating an online correspondence course. I wanted to ensure I "used the technology effectively to create community" (journal entry) and to maximize its potential in the best interest of my students.

By late October 2009, much of the course material I had created was uploaded to the course website. I met again with teacher responsible for overseeing the technology I was learning; with his guidance, I explored the course site both as a teacher and as a student would see it. My first focus was to gain a better understanding of how the technological functioned as a virtual classroom; my second focus was to "determine what sense of community I could feel" (journal entry). I listed questions in my journal that I wanted to answer when I explored the course site: "Would I be comfortable answering these questions in a class discussion forum? Can I follow the instructions for this assignment? Can I find the proper location to comment and share with the class? Is the format of this assignment an appropriate use of the technology available?" (journal entry). Through the last two weeks of November, I periodically entered the course website simply to look at the assignments and evaluate them from the perspective of a student, keeping in mind the questions noted in the journal. I added new material, revised existing material, and added components that were similar to what I would say or do in a face-to-face class to prepare students for new material, such as pre-reading activities and discussion of important background information. The goal
was to ensure the course material made effective use of available technology and that the use of the technology supported the practical suggestions uncovered in the research for building community.

In later discussions with students who were enquiring about enrolling in the English 12 First Peoples online course when it was offered in Semester Two, I became aware of other advantages to online course offerings for students. One student, who only needed to complete his English 12 requirement in order to graduate, indicated to me that he had a full-time job he wished to maintain and that he was worried about how to complete school at the same time. When I outlined the structure of the course for him, he realized that taking English 12 First Peoples online would allow him to continue to work and complete his graduation requirements simultaneously. Another student noted that family members in university do some coursework through online avenues and suggested that this type of course would be good preparation for future undertakings: “It’s going to get us ready for the future!” (journal entry). I coded these data as advantages to e-learning and reflected that it was important to note that students identified advantages I had not necessarily considered or had reviewed in the literature.

In summary, numerous advantages for students were identified in the data. They ranged from personal advantages for students to practical advantages for our school. One important advantage was our ability to offer several students a course in a format that was more convenient and appropriate to their personal circumstances than a traditional face-to-face class would be. Another involved having students in rural, isolated communities enrolled in a course with people from elsewhere in the region. Offering the course online also
alleviated some timetabling concerns for Hazelton Secondary. Establishing infrastructure to be used with future online course offerings and training teachers as online course facilitators will also provide Hazelton Secondary with other opportunities in the distance education field.

Strategies for Building Community in an Online Classroom

As noted previously, I first coded data in the journal under the heading “practical strategies”. It became obvious as I analyzed the data that I was looking at two different types of practical strategies, however. Because my research question focused in part on the concept of building community, much of the research focused on determining ways to build community in an online class. As I explored the literature about this topic, I also uncovered practical strategies for designing online courses that were essentially step-by-step instructions for online course design in general. I realized this information was important in addressing some of the challenges I faced with the rather convoluted process of designing the course, so I began coding it as separate data from the practical strategies for community building.

The initial data recorded in the journal about building a sense of community in an online class included a list of strategies and personal strengths that I felt enabled me to build community in my regular classes. The list included notations such as “Humour and laughter; Personal greetings to students entering classroom; Encouraging the sharing of personal reflections and opinions; Emphasizing respect—from teacher to student and between students…” (journal entry). These elements of my teaching style were vital qualities I wished to maintain in my new role as an online course facilitator. I also made note of the importance I placed on modeling when teaching. As a classroom teacher, I have always endeavoured to model the respectful behaviour I expect to see in my class; I also model what is expected on
assignments, and frequently teach using the method of gradual release of responsibility. I reflected in the journal that, in my experience as a classroom teacher, “if students know what is expected, whether that refers to behaviour or to quality assignments, they are more likely to participate more fully and meet those expectations” (journal entry). Creating a welcoming environment that fosters a sense of community comes quite naturally to me in a regular classroom; I had to determine how to use those strengths and strategies in an online environment.

I then looked at the expectations for English 12 First Peoples and made a corresponding list in the journal of qualities of the course that involved building a sense of community and fostering a respectful classroom environment. Recommended strategies included establishing classroom rules for respectful communications, providing students with opportunities for sharing information about their own cultures, and offering extensive opportunities for personal reflections on literature and important issues. I gave significant thought to a variety of introductory activities that would allow students to familiarize themselves with each other and the technology. I also wanted them to participate in the establishment of rules and guidelines for respectful communication and interaction, and to use the technology effectively to do so.

Finally, using information from my conversations with NCDES staff about the features of Desire2Learn (D2L) and suggestions from the literature review, I made a third list in the journal. This list focused on the online classroom environment. It contained ever-evolving questions and ideas for revising the course material I was using to teach English 12 First Peoples face-to-face for use in the distance education course. The list included
comments such as “Determine the best place in D2L to have students submit personal reflections on a reading passage - should these be public or private [submissions]?” (journal entry). It also contained reflections such as “I hope I can make my own online presence reflective of who I am in my regular classroom – how do I make this happen?” (journal entry). Additionally, I made notes about making changes to assignments to better suit the online environment, such as “use discussion forum in lieu of class discussion”, “set up small group chat for this question”, and “virtual field trip possible?” (journal entry). It was helpful to note that there was a variety of options available to explore.

As the course development neared completion and I became more comfortable using Desire2Learn to create and modify assignments, I recorded more data about community building in my journal. Specific assignments were designed to promote discussion and sharing; evaluation of such assignments included marks for participating in discussions. The colleague who taught the online French Immersion Social Studies course advised me that “students seem to participate better when there are marks involved” (journal entry). Although I endeavoured to create meaningful assignments that would promote interaction naturally, I also understood from my years of teaching experience that sometimes students are more motivated to participate when their marks depend upon their participation.

I also took into consideration my assessment practices in my face-to-face English courses. I have noted over the years that students make an effort to improve their work when they receive meaningful comments and information about how to improve their work on their assignments, rather than just a numerical grade. Providing opportunities to conference with students and discuss their written work has also been beneficial in supporting student
improvement. I believed such opportunities were also important in building a community of learners. In considering ways to build community and engage students in the online course, I reflected on ways to use technology to conference with students about their work, with the intention of providing feedback that could lead to improvements in writing and other areas of learning. I also noted in the journal that I should also endeavour to “contribute meaningfully to discussions as teacher-facilitator” (journal entry), providing both commentary and informal assessment of the discussions. I believed that ensuring that students received feedback that would help them continue to improve their level and quality of participation would also support the type of virtual classroom environment I wished to foster. Encouraging them to be supportive of their classmates through their classroom discussions and through informal assessments of each others’ contributions was also noted in the journal as an important consideration for enhancing the virtual classroom community.

During and after my training sessions with NCDES personnel, I spent time practicing the use of the various features of Desire2Learn that I felt would be most beneficial to community-building. Such features included email, the paging system, the discussion forums, and the blog. I noted in the journal that I would need to “feel comfortable with the technology… in order to support students in feeling comfortable with the technology” (journal entry), especially when sharing ideas or personal opinions. I spoke to colleagues who were familiar with Desire2Learn to get opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of various features and was advised that “the success of using different features varied from class to class” (journal entry). I reflected on the need for flexibility in the design of some assignments and the need to remain open to adjusting methods of interaction when the course began. I also reflected on different types of assignments that would support community
building, particularly early in the course as students familiarized themselves with the course, the technology, and each other. I noted that involving students in the creation of rules for respectful communication and deliberately creating opportunities for positive interactions were deemed as particularly important by other online teachers.

The data about building community was substantial. It began with questions and evolved into lists of pedagogical considerations and practical suggestions. Ultimately, the answers to those questions began to emerge as I became more familiar with the technology I would be using. I became more confident about developing and nurturing that sense of classroom community when I finally had the opportunity to use it to redesign some assignments and create new ones based on the features of Desire2Learn.

Organizational Considerations

In the journal, data about organizational considerations emerged as I coded data about building community. Reflecting on my readings, various discussions with NCDES personnel, and my understanding of the English 12 First Peoples curriculum, I made numerous notes about community-building strategies. In the process, however, I was also reflecting on other how-to ideas. To some extent, these ideas involved elements of community building, but they also focused on basic organizational considerations. For example, a colleague who was studying the development of online courses using Desire2Learn at the same time as I was learning the program mentioned to me that her “orientation to the features of D2L as a student really helped [her] grasp the best ways to use it as a teacher as well” (journal entry). Highlighting these data allowed me to recognize that there was more to teaching a course online than simply presenting the curriculum. This recognition prompted me to delve further
into other organizational considerations. These considerations included establishing a more concrete timeline for my own training in using the range of technology and software programs I needed to master before February 2010. Other planning included developing specific tasks for orienting students in the use of various features of Desire2Learn prior to any real coursework, meeting (in real-time or online) with students to gain an understanding of their computer self-sufficiency, and ensuring that I had the proper supports in place for myself to ensure I could assist students as needed.

Challenges

After reviewing the data for themes that emerged from the literature, I reviewed the journal again in its entirety and focused solely on challenges that arose. These challenges arose from two main issues: organizational challenges and technological challenges. Organizational challenges pertained mainly to time factors and scheduling difficulties; technological factors related to computer issues and challenges with the infrastructure. Occasionally, the two issues overlapped.

Organizational Challenges

Organizational challenges were multi-faceted. As discussed previously, the project began to take shape in February of 2009. Once approvals were obtained from the University of Northern British Columbia Research Ethics Board and Coast Mountains School District #82 to pursue the project, preliminary meetings took place with the administrator of NCDES. In the Spring of 2009, these meetings were basic planning sessions for the course. We discussed his vision of the course, the practical aspects of offering it online with me as the
teacher based out of Hazelton Secondary School, and the training I would need. Much of the
background work for establishing and marketing the course and ensuring the technology was
in place was the mandate of the staff of NCDES. My role was to develop the course material
to be used online, learn the technology needed to teach the course, and be prepared to teach
the course in February 2010.

Over the summer of 2009, I continued to maintain the journal, focusing on lesson
ideas and developing course material. With holidays there was less contact time with NCDES
staff, and as questions arose about formatting assignments for the website, or teaching the
course itself, I simply noted them in the journal for later reference. The course development
process slowed as school began in September. I had a full teaching load of four English
classes and no designated preparation time for the Fall semester. Arranging time to meet with
personnel from NCDES was difficult. Then, the teacher in charge of technology training took
a reduced teaching assignment from full-time to 0.6, further reducing available contact and
training time. The NCDES principal then retired in December; his replacement took over the
position in January 2010. These unexpected changes impacted my ability to complete several
tasks in a timely manner, and the data from the journal highlights numerous concerns and
questions that arose from this period and remained unanswered for a significant period of
time. An example of one of these questions was “Is the timeframe for getting this course
done still reasonable?” (journal entry). I also wondered if I “should ask for release time to get
caught up” (journal entry). It is important to note that NCDES staff made every effort to be
available to assist me whenever I needed; my appreciation for their efforts was also noted in
the data.
As the February 2010 start date for the course drew near, Hazelton Secondary counseling staff in charge of student schedules and timetables approached me with questions about the structure of the course as well. It was necessary to coordinate registration procedures with NCDES, to meet with students to explain that they would be taking English 12 First Peoples online and not in a face-to-face class, to seek parental permission, and to ensure student access to computers was sufficient and reliable. These requirements resulted in additional discussions with NCDES staff and also involved Hazelton Secondary counselors and administrators in order to ensure the needs of the students were being met; it was also vital to ensure all paperwork and procedures for both schools were completed. The discussions highlighted the need for proper communication, consultation, and coordination of roles and responsibilities between all stakeholders in the online course process. Although these organizational processes were not directly related to the research question about which course qualities needed to be development differently in an online course and how, they were vital to developing the course effectively. Without conscious consideration of all elements of the course development process, from the organizational requirements to the delivery of the curriculum, it would have been difficult to uncover answers to the research questions. All parts of the process were important to the development of the online course.

Technological Challenges

Challenges with technology also resulted in time delays and other frustrations throughout the process. Over the summer of 2009, our school district’s informational technology infrastructure was being overhauled. I worked from home in August, and “made great progress revising assignments to better suit online delivery” (journal entry) over a two
week period. I also had sufficient time to become more familiar with Desire2Learn and with the North Coast Distance Education School’s website. Then, the hard drive on my personal laptop crashed, and I was without a home computer for nearly four weeks due to unexpected complications with the repairs. School began in September 2009, but the work redesigning the school district’s technology infrastructure had not been completed, and teachers had very little reliable computer access of any kind through most of September. A colleague whose work also relied largely on technology at this time commented, “I wonder how we’re supposed to make distance learning worth doing if we can’t even get on our own classroom computers to do the most basic daily tasks!” (journal entry).

It is difficult to express fully the extent of the frustration and the challenges that such technological unreliability caused; it was, at times, a truly overwhelming situation. Although I continued to develop course material, I noted in the journal early in October, “This [the online course development] is an impossible job!” (journal entry). When one’s job relies on technology that simply will not function, the problems and the frustrations multiply continuously. Intermittent problems with access to programs, the Internet, and saved files continued through December 2009, when we then lost all access to our school district’s email system for nearly three weeks over the winter break and into the new year. At that time, I was also unable to access my course website online, causing further delays in completing the project and readying the course for its February 2010 start online. Clearly, a reliable computer infrastructure is important for online course development and for e-learning to be a viable part of the education system. When technological challenges arise, sufficient support is important for teachers and students alike is required to maintain the integrity of the online programs, minimize frustrations, and maximize opportunities for success.
In summary, the data in the journal provided important information about how the online learning model could reflect the First Peoples principles of learning as outlined in the BC Ministry of Education's English 12 First Peoples Integrated Resource Package (2008). Through the reflective journaling process, I found answers to my questions about how to use technology to help students meet prescribed learning outcomes, including those about reflexive learning and community building. The data contained in the reflective journal provided insight into the three main themes identified in the literature review: e-learning as an emergent field in education, the advantages of e-learning, and strategies for building community in an online classroom environment. The data also uncovered three additional themes connected to the process of online course development: organizational considerations, organizational challenges, and technological challenges. The themes addressed the central research question, which sought to identify which English 12 First Peoples course qualities needed to be developed and nurtured differently in an online environment and how. The data also addressed several of the supporting questions, including how to build mutual trust, respect, and sense of community in an online class and what supports were needed for students to be successful.

Discussion of Findings

The previous section addressed the data produced in the reflective journal. The journal was a powerful tool for recording the narrative of the course development process and enabled me to reflect on the process and make interpretations on my findings. Ultimately it allowed me to draw conclusions and make recommendations which will be explored in the final chapter. This section will discuss my interpretations of the data contained in the journal.
The process of taking a newly-established course, English 12 First Peoples, and transforming it appropriately for use as a distance education for the North Coast Distance Education School was informative and enlightening. It was a more daunting and convoluted process than expected, but it provided insight into the value of online distance learning opportunities for both teachers and students.

E-learning’s Emergent Importance in Education

Selwyn, Gorard, and Williams (2001) reviewed the US government’s educational policy following implementation of an information infrastructure initiative under the Clinton-Gore administration. They highlighted the ability of information technology to overcome traditional barriers to education and lifelong learning opportunities, such as socio-economic and geographic barriers. My conversations with the NCDES staff were enlightening about similar opportunities for our current and potential future students. The North Coast Distance Education School enrolls students from around the province but focuses its mandate on the four northern school districts located along the Highway 16 corridor west of the Lakes District area. It currently has several hundred students enrolled. With approximately ten percent of students at Hazelton Secondary enrolled in distance education courses through NCDES this year (journal entry), it appears they are embracing the trend at an increasing rate towards supplementing traditional in-class course offerings with distance learning opportunities.

As the enrollment at Hazelton Secondary School continues to decline, it will be important to rethink our traditional course offerings and to consider alternative course delivery models. Hannum, et al. (2008) suggested that offering alternate course delivery
methods, such as online courses, can enable school districts to offer courses that would not be available otherwise. I reflected on the opportunities online courses could offer Hazelton Secondary students following my early discussions with NCDES staff about the English 12 First Peoples course development. Learning of their growing partnerships with education centres and schools throughout the region suggested that because of the different needs of today’s students, changing demographics, and declining enrollment, traditional modes of classroom delivery are also changing. These changes mean that creating viable and appropriate online courses to meet student needs and to enable student success may become increasingly important to today’s teachers as well.

Another element of the increased importance of e-learning in education today involved the changing role of the teacher. Mupinga (2005), Garrison and Anderson (2007) and Palloff and Pratt (2001, 2003) discussed the concept of the role of the teacher of online courses as that of facilitator more so than that of a traditional teacher. This concept was also clarified for me through my conversations with NCDES personnel, who indeed see themselves as course facilitators. I began to revise my traditional vision of myself as a classroom teacher as I worked through the process of developing English 12 First Peoples online. I had to create opportunities, using technology, for students to interact with each other, with me, and with the course content. I also had to ensure I used the technology to create a welcoming, respectful environment rich in opportunities for interaction. I learned that I had to be conscious of the need to track discussions and to contribute to them, and that I also had to encourage critical thinking and discussion opportunities. I recognized through reflection on my discussions with NCDES colleagues that it would take time for everyone to become comfortable with this new class format and environment, and that enabling students
to appreciate this type of course would require them to take more responsibility for their learning.

In my discussions with NCDES personnel, I also received the impression that the teachers worked as a team with each other, with the technology, and with the students to facilitate effective courses. That sense of collaboration resonated strongly as I met with the NCDES staff to work on the technological components of the course development and with a Hazelton Secondary colleague who taught an online course as well. The support, collaboration, and communication between colleagues were important parts of my training and enabled me to envision the type of support and assistance that students may also need. I received the impression that because technology is constantly changing and updating, it was necessary to work closely with all partners involved in the online courses to ensure the necessary support was there in order for people to successfully participate in them.

The support I was offered throughout the development of the course was substantial; it increased over time as the course start date drew near and will remain in place throughout the semester. The need for such support was emphasized in the research of Ascough (2002), Collins (2001), and Zembylas (2008), citing improved retention and completion rates in online courses when sufficient support for both teacher and students was provided.

Hannum, et al. (2008) also reinforced the importance of training facilitators to support students and noted that such support was important for building community and creating an interactive learning environment. As the time to teach English 12 First Peoples drew nearer, I recognized my own need for more training and needed to designate time each day to work with the technology. I also observed a colleague orienting several students to the technology
needed to engage in their own online courses over a period of several days. Seeing their initial confusion and uncertainty turn to clarity and confidence reinforced the need for appropriate supports to be in place. These observations suggested that for students to feel engaged and successful, and ultimately to participate effectively in the online classroom community, making the necessary time to orient and support students to the expectations of the online environment was vital.

Advantages of E-learning

There are clearly many advantages to online learning opportunities, particularly in our region. Declining school enrollment makes it more challenging for schools to offer a full range of courses for secondary school students. For example, at Hazelton Secondary, we have traditionally offered two English 12 classes and a Communications 12 (non-academic English) class each year. If we are to meet class enrollment requirements, each of those classes should have 30 students in them, but we no longer have that many grade 12 students each year. However, we still need to offer enough sections of that course in order for all students to meet their English 12 requirement and still take all of the other courses they both need and want in order to graduate. This situation results in imbalances in the school timetable and in teaching loads, which can be challenging to justify to staff and to school administration, and can have impacts on our funding formulae. Considering alternate modes of course delivery and offering teachers the opportunity to become involved in the delivery of those non-traditional course offerings can alleviate some of the complications noted. As NCDES staff discussed with me, the increasing number of partnerships between their school and others can positively impact such situations.
As an example, consider two English 12 courses that I taught three years ago, one in each semester of the school year. One class had 10 students; the other had 33. The Communications 12 course that year had 28 students. Realistically, the English 12 class of 10 should have been cancelled, but because the school year had begun before the imbalance was recognized, it would have wide-reaching implications affecting many students as well as staffing levels. Such imbalances have far-reaching effects on the entire timetable in a small school; an under-enrolling class in one block generally means another block at that time is over-enrolled, and other ripple effects are also felt. If we had recognized the issue early on, we would have been able to accommodate those students through alternate means, such as an online course, and numerous problems would have been alleviated. By setting up a system within our school that allows us to partner with NCDES and offer online courses on-site, with trained teachers and the technological equipment required to accommodate students within our school and from elsewhere in the province, timetabling concerns can be alleviated.

As I began to understand how NCDES and the courses it offers fit into our school system, I came to more fully appreciate their mandate, which is to provide all students with successful learning experiences through access to a full range of support and programs, using appropriate technology. For students, these opportunities are clearly beneficial; additional benefits for small schools like Hazelton Secondary as they endeavour to provide students with a full range of programming are also evident.

Through conversations with NCDES staff, I also developed a greater appreciation the importance of personal contact between teacher and student and between teachers in the program as well. As both Clayton (2002) and Kehrwald (2008) described, the quality of
communication between students and between the students and the teacher-facilitator was a critical component of building and sustaining a sense of community in the online classroom. Both the teachers and the administrator emphasized how they used technology to support contact and communication, with each other and with students. Individual teachers used different features in different ways, often depending on their comfort level with various components of the technology, but it was clear that they felt they could not function effectively as teacher-facilitator of their courses without using communication features extensively. They stressed to me that in order “to avoid that sense of isolation that working solely in an online environment can create” (journal entry), regular communication between NCDES staff, between teachers and students, and between students themselves was vital to successful course delivery. This information was important because it directly addressed the additional questions I wanted to consider as I researched what qualities of the course needed to be developed differently. Some of these supporting questions included determining how one built mutual trust and respect in a virtual classroom among students who not only do not know each other, but also cannot see each other in person, and determining what supports students needed in order to be successful participants in the course. Placing an emphasis on teamwork and communication and being able to facilitate those qualities through the technology in use can provide students with dynamic education opportunities they may not otherwise be able to access.

Community Building in the Online Classroom

The design of English12 First Peoples is inherently supportive of community building in the classroom. The Introductory Unit of the course is intended to establish a respectful,
comfortable environment that encourages mutual trust, respect, and openness. These factors are particularly important for a course like this one because of the nature of the material covered. With literature about topics such as residential schools, child abuse, First Nations spirituality, suicide, the Indian Act, and racism, many of the class activities and discussions must be conducted with sensitivity and the utmost respect for people’s feelings, opinions, and personal experiences.

My training for teaching English 12 First Peoples emphasized numerous ways to establish an environment of trust and respect and demonstrated ways to incorporate traditional beliefs about teaching and learning into the methods used to establish such an environment. Introductory lessons on developing guidelines with the group about what respect looked like in our classroom and for speaking in turn about difficult, sensitive, or controversial topics were considered vital for building a sense of trust and community. Discussing and exploring the cultural backgrounds of students in the class through individual, small group, and whole class sharing activities proved to be critical get-to-know-you activities for the class as well. In spite of the fact that my face-to-face class consisted of 27 students who had spent much of the last five years in school together (and had me for their English teacher for three or more of those years), I realized that many of the students knew very little about their classmates outside of their immediate circle of friends. Over the course of about two weeks, I could see that sharing information about their backgrounds, including the sharing of artifacts that represented themselves as individuals, their peer group, their family, and their culture, opened students’ eyes and minds to the people around them. It was interesting and gratifying to see students who had never really spoken to each other in depth
begin to ask questions about each other’s grandparents, to look at each others’ travel photos, and to sample new foods from different cultures.

These deliberate opportunities for students to get to know their classmates and share information of a personal nature with each other were clearly important to establishing a sense of trust and respect, and were important considerations as I sought answers to the research question. Students’ interest and enjoyment in the activity was evident, and it was particularly heartening to see certain First Nations students whom I have known to be less vocal class participants over the years sharing their families’ artwork, traditional foods, and personal stories. Students also indicated to me that they felt comfortable sharing because they knew me as their teacher and because I had also shared my story and my artifacts with them first to model what was expected. By spending several days working through these introductory activities and discussing as a group the importance of trust, respect, and a sense of community in the context of some difficult topics, it felt as though the right tone was established for the course.

As this introductory process unfolded, I consciously wondered how I would establish the same sort of rapport with a group of students in an online environment. I was not sure initially of how to do so successfully, without face-to-face participation or the same sense of familiarity I had long established with my current students. My journal notes listed several questions and concerns about this issue. Many months passed before I felt like I had any viable answers, but as the course development process unfolded and the technology became more familiar, I developed a deeper understanding of ways to use the technology features to create community.
The research of Ascough (2002), Kehrwald (2008), and Kemper et al. (2008) repeatedly emphasized the importance of building community. They also reiterated that it was not possible to simply take face-to-face activities and use them in an online environment, but that they had to be transformed to meet the needs of online learners. The importance of community building was the most prominent theme throughout the journal. It was the source of the most questions and my biggest concerns. Fortunately, the idea of building community and practical considerations for doing so was also one of the most prominent themes throughout the research as well. Additionally, community-building is also emphasized in much of the English 12 First Peoples Teachers’ Resource Guide. There was no shortage of ideas for lessons and strategies that supported the concept of community-building. However, I also had to consider the features of Desire2Learn when considering how to design certain assignments. Although Ascough (2002) stated that pedagogical decisions should not be determined by technology, practically-speaking, they were determined by it to some degree. I had to design a course for NCDES that used the course management system Desire2Learn (D2L); this requirement was not a choice, because D2L is the system used by NCDES. Available features of the technology had to be considered when I designed lessons, for example, based on the Oral Communications components of the prescribed learning outcomes.

In my face-to-face class, designing a lesson or assignment that focused on oral communication was straightforward, and many assignments contained an oral language component. The oral language component was an important consideration, because it is one of the three main curriculum organizers for English 12 First Peoples. Assignments emphasizing this component might have involved simply sharing reflections with a partner in
class, discussing a reading passage in a small group and then sharing findings with the class, or doing a larger oral presentation to the class. All of these examples were important to the assessment of students’ oral language skills for the purpose of meeting prescribed learning outcomes. They were also important to that sense of community and social presence. The question then became, how do I create similar assignments in an online course, particularly if it is asynchronous? How do I assess oral communication effectively, when our main mode of communication uses word processing? My journal through this period of reflection was highlighted with the word “How?” The oral language component was an area of huge concern, and I initially had difficulty ascertaining many advantages to e-learning when it came to assessing oral communication.

Knowing that oral communication was a key component of building community, I turned to the teachers at NCDES for more guidance. I had some solid lesson ideas, but I was still not fully versed at that time in all of the features of Desire2Learn (D2L) and the other technology available, so I was unclear as to how I might develop lessons that would work effectively within that system. I hoped that once I had more knowledge of the technology and could see D2L in action, I would have more answers to my questions. In the end, this hope proved accurate. I was able to design lessons that offered students several options. We could “meet”, if it was convenient for the class, synchronously through Elluminate to discuss readings. Students could also submit video presentations of projects, story-telling assignments, and other oral communications assignments for me to assess. These assignments could be uploaded to the class site for everyone’s viewing, or they could be sent directly to me. Although I found some restrictions to Desire2Learn, as I became more familiar with it, I discovered that I could make it work with most of the assignments I wished
to create. I was also able to record myself teaching for students to view, with the hope that as they became more familiar with me, that sense of community would be enhanced. Ultimately, I determined that many of the interactive and reflective qualities, include elements of oral communication, could be addressed using a variety of technological features.

Other lessons that were designed to enhance that class sense of community were not challenging to revise for online use. Once I had some exposure to Desire2Learn and its features and confirmed that the students and I would have access to Elluminate, it became easier to add components to assignments that would enhance student interaction. To encourage participation and meaningful communication, I required specific types and levels of interaction for certain assignments, as recommended by Ascough (2002) and Kadjer (2003). I incorporated components to be addressed through the discussion board and created opportunities for online partnerships. I also had to consider ways in which students would respond to assignments. Additionally, I provided instructions for using chat features and encouraged the use of those features for less formal discussions with classmates. The use of email and the paging button were also encouraged for communicating and asking questions. For an assignment requiring a standard written response or a personal reader reflection, I had a variety of options to offer for submission. These options included email or the course website’s assignment drop box. Although technology should not be used to dictate pedagogy, it was important to consider ways to make optimal use of the technology when designing curriculum was important, particularly to enhance communication and community-building.
Other practical considerations for course development involved creating assignments and activities that would provide that transformative learning experience, including reading, experiential activities, and reflective responses in the online environment. As noted previously, recommended lessons for English 12 First Peoples were based on providing transformative learning experiences which are consistent with First Peoples’ pedagogy. I wanted to maintain or enhance the integrity of the assignments in an online format; I did not want to simply upload a standard assignment to the course website without consideration for how the online environment might affect that assignment. Class discussions on specific topics needed to be guided differently than in a face-to-face environment. I had to provide revised instructions on numerous assignments. I recognized that in an asynchronous situation, students would respond in the discussion forum to discussions on their own time; I would need to monitor, guide, and respond to discussions in a timely manner. Deadlines for online responses were required in order to complete discussions so that the class could move on to the next stage of the assignment. Creating opportunities for synchronous class discussions, lectures, readings, and other assignments had to take into consideration the schedules and circumstances of individual class members. The online environment offered other interesting opportunities for experiential learning, including web quests, virtual museum tours, and virtual field trips. It was important to seek out these opportunities deliberately, so that regardless of where students were located, they could partake equally in them. Such opportunities also provided another advantage of e-learning for students in rural or isolated areas by allowing access to cultural facilities that they could not readily visit in person.
Ascough (2002), Hannum, et al. (2008), Kerhwald (2008), and Palloff and Pratt (2001, 2003) noted that requiring specific levels of participation in discussion forums was important for ensuring all students participate to a satisfactory level in order to successfully complete the course. This information factored into several assignment designs. As I learned more about the features of Desire2Learn, ways to create opportunities for meaningful communication became more obvious. I used features for teacher-student online conversations, class or small group online conversations, and informal discussions. In addition, the use of Elluminate as a communication tool for students became another opportunity for building a sense of community. I discovered that it could be used for students to work on group projects, which were important to the assessment of the prescribed learning outcomes for English 12 First Peoples. It could also be used for class sessions, ad hoc meetings, and other situations where a virtual “face-to-face” setting was needed. From the outset of the course development, it was important to ensure that students understood the importance of meaningful contributions to class discussions about the curriculum. These contributions were included as an important part of the assessment of student grades for the course.

Because of my experience as a classroom teacher, I also believed it was important to encourage casual chats, in order to facilitate building trust and community. I have seen this type of community-building frequently in my regular English classes. Students chat frequently of course, often about topics that are not at all connected to the subject at hand. But they also embed in the most casual of conversations discussions about the readings or assignments being done in class. I felt that using the chat features in D2L and Elluminate to encourage casual conversations would enable students to get to know each other as well as
discuss the work being done in class. Although these conversations would not be graded, I saw value in them for students. This value was reinforced in the journal, where I made note of casual student comments that I overheard or that were said directly to me through the course of teaching my first English 12 First Peoples. I particularly endeavoured to ensure I noted comments that were related to that sense of community, because I felt their insight as we progressed through the course would be valuable from a student perspective.

Because this was an autoethnographic study, I did not formally include students as participants in the study, but as their teacher, I believed my reflections on and professional assessments of their input were important data to consider. I recorded some of the most telling comments regarding community building in the journal. One student commented to another, “It’s cool to be talking about stuff like this [part of the novel, *Monkey Beach*] that happens on our rez all the time” (journal entry). Another noted with pride as she listened to members of the class discuss their backgrounds, “I never knew we all had so many different cultures in us – we are way more diverse than we look!” (journal entry). A student who was generally reluctant to speak out in class said to me, “We should talk like this [in groups, about components of the *Indian Act*] more; it’s weird and kinda scary, but you learn a lot about our history” (journal entry). During a class presentation, another student noted, “It can be hard to talk about these things [referring to a relative’s residential school experience], but we need to do it to try to better understand each other” (journal entry). These sample comments come from a variety of units in the course, and were made without any prompting from me. I recorded them because they were profound comments from teenagers that resonated emotionally. They reflected a growing comfort with discussing sensitive issues and an awareness of the important of respectful communication. These comments also reinforced
for me why specific and deliberate attention needed to be paid to developing a classroom environment, virtual or otherwise, that facilitated this level of communication. Facilitating this level of communication would also help ensure that the online version of English 12 First Peoples was more than just a typical correspondence course.

Organizational Considerations for Developing an Online Course

As I became more comfortable with the concept of community-building in an online environment, I gained confidence that as I worked more with Desire2Learn and the other technology available to me, I would be able to use it to build community effectively. I knew there would be ongoing support in place for me throughout the process of developing and then teaching the course. As the data showed, the issue of community-building was at the forefront of much of the research. Less prominent in the data, but still significant as the final details of the course were developed, was the issue of practical strategies for students entering the course. Kadjer (2003), Parker (2003), Passey (2000), and Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005) noted repeatedly that sufficient student support was vital to student success. They also noted that lack of course completion could be mitigated by appropriate student support with both technology and curriculum. It was important to me to understand what supports were in place for students enrolling in NCDES and what my role as a teacher entailed with respect to support for technological issues. It was also important for me to be sufficiently trained to use the technology in order to support students with challenges they may face with it.

According to Collins (2001) and Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005), a formal system of orientation was important. During my training, I discovered that NCDES had an
orientation system in place for students enrolling in their programs and that teachers of online courses also provided some orientation to their individual courses. Introductory assignments were required as part of the enrollment process in order to determine both student commitment to the program and technological and academic proficiency levels. A certain level of basic computer proficiency was required, and extensive information about the NCDES staff's role in providing support was provided to students as well. Tutorials were available for various computer programs through NCDES website in addition to support from personnel.

My role was to provide support for my particular course. Ensuring that the course description, syllabus, and evaluation methods were available online to students prior to enrollment was a priority. Initially, I simply had to provide the information to NCDES staff and it was uploaded to the school website. I also had to structure the course as I wished to present it online. Once it was in place, I had access to it to revise it as needed. Having this access meant another significant amount of training. I had to learn how to edit the website and how to arrange my course page to suit my preferences and the course itself. I had to ensure students could access course materials, lectures, assignments, and activities easily. It was important to understand the whole system in order to ensure students could do so as well. This training occurred over several sessions, usually after school hours, with one of the NCDES teachers, and will continue as needed throughout my delivery of the course. It was clear, particularly through the final stages of the course development process, how critical proper training was for successful course development. Sufficient preparation time was also an important factor.
In addition to the basic course requirements, I had to be aware of student needs with respect to expectations for individual assignments, methods of communicating with me and with classmates about assignments, methods of posting assignments, and how grades would be sent. Although I noted several questions and concerns about this in the journal, particularly near the end of the process, I realized through my Desire2Learn training that the mechanisms I needed for meeting those requirements were built into the system. It was simply a matter of learning which features were best suited to my requirements and how to use them properly. Once I became comfortable with those features, I understood that I would also have to teach students how to use them effectively as well. I expected that receiving appropriate orientation in how to use all of these features would be an important part of students' success in the course. In the final days before beginning to teach English 12 First Peoples online, I also observed a colleague at Hazelton Secondary orienting his students to the use of Desire2Learn and other elements of his online course. I noted student reactions to this orientation in my reflective journal. It was very clear that offering detailed instruction to students in advance of undertaking their actual coursework was imperative to minimize confusion, frustration, and dissatisfaction with the online process.

Finally, through discussions with other distance education teachers, I learned that it was also necessary to review online etiquette, or "netiquette", with students. Kadjer's (2003) research also emphasized the importance of teaching online etiquette. She noted that guidelines for respectful communication must be established early on, and expectations for all types of communication must be made clear. As an English teacher, proper writing and grammar are important to me; they are also important in the evaluation process for assignments. Students who are used to chatting online or texting frequently use a short-hand
form of writing; in an informal discussion, that shorthand may be appropriate, but it would not be appropriate for formal class discussions or assignments submitted to me. Such expectations needed to be clearly outlined for students in advance of formal coursework.

Challenges

When I analyzed the themes that emerged from the journal, the second most prominent theme that emerged involved the challenges of this project. These challenges had two main foci: time and technology. As I wrote in the journal, I endeavoured not to spend too much time complaining about the problems I was facing. Instead, I tried to reflect on the challenges professionally and objectively. I hoped to learn from the challenges, and believed that understanding why they arose throughout the process would be beneficial in addressing them. I also believed that understanding the causes of such challenges would help mitigate the effects of similar challenges in the future. Although these two main sources of frustration, time and technology, were closely intertwined through much of the project, I will attempt to address them separately for the purpose of data analysis.

Organizational Challenges

As I described at the beginning of this chapter, the process of undertaking this project began in February 2009. At that time, I was teaching the first class of English 12 First Peoples in the school district and was developing the ideas for the actual project. I also sat in on two sessions with the NCDES staff as they worked with another teacher on our staff who was teaching a French Immersion Social Studies course online. These sessions allowed me to
see what an online course looked like from a teacher’s perspective and to get a sense of some of the successes and challenges he faced as he undertook that class.

Initially, I felt like I was creating very little solid course material for the online course. Teaching the face-to-face course was exciting and interesting, but very time consuming. Working full-time, taking university courses, and doing all the regular extracurricular and family activities left very little extra time to work on the course. I have excellent time management skills in general, but I realized that it was far more time-consuming than expected to work on this new course in addition to all of my other work and family obligations. I made journal notes questioning where to add the time to develop a new course and learn the technological components needed to teach it into an already full work schedule. These frustrations highlighted for me several important concepts. Teaching an online course for the first time presents numerous challenges. It was difficult to know what to expect in advance or to identify the challenges that may arise. Once the challenges surfaced, having the support and training to learn how to address them was critical; recognizing the importance of such a support system will help mitigate such challenges in the future. By the end of the process, it was clear that sufficient preparation time was important as well. It would have been more efficient to incorporate specific training times for learning the computer programs in advance and to establish a more formal training and implementation schedule early in the process.

As summer approached, I had more personal time to work on the course material, but school holidays had some impact on my ability to connect with NCDES staff for assistance. My journal through this time period reflects a more hopeful stretch, where more time was
available to work and fewer other obligations took precedence. Then, two seemingly minor accidents resulted in the loss of my computer for nearly four weeks at the end of the summer. Fortunately, all of the work I had completed over the summer was backed up on an external hard drive, but the loss of the actual computer meant a significant loss of work time. As I returned to school in September, time was once again of the essence, but technology challenges had an even bigger impact on the course development schedule.

Technology Challenges

September 2009 saw the issue of time once again return as a major theme in the journal. I had a full course load of four English classes, but compounding the sheer lack of time to work on the English 12 First Peoples distance education course was a major technological problem. From August until early October, the school district’s computer infrastructure was almost completely unusable. Major restructuring had not been completed in time for the beginning of the school year, and it took many weeks and much frustration before any real work through the district’s computer system was possible. This lack of working technology was out of my control, but had an impact on my ability to work on the course development, and thus add to my research, for a lengthy period of time. Coupled with the loss of my personal computer, and with a February deadline looming, my concerns over completing the course were mounting. Computer problems continued intermittently through December 2009, impacting course development, communication, and the research process. These setbacks highlighted another important consideration for organizing the development of an online course. Technology challenges with the school’s computer system infrastructure had a significant impact on the course development schedule I had planned and caused
numerous delays. Recognizing the potential for such challenges to impact course
development and preparing for delays will also be important for future online course
development plans.

The data uncovered numerous implications for online course development. Online
courses can provide significant opportunities for schools to provide courses for students that
may not typically be available to them. They can also enhance educational opportunities for
students in rural or isolated communities. Online course offerings can also help address
timetabling challenges for smaller schools. A strong computer infrastructure is important in
any educational setting, but was clearly a factor in some of the challenges that arose
throughout the course development process. These challenges impacted both the timeframe
of course development and the integrity of the process at times.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 1 introduced the research topic and questions. Chapter 2 reviewed the literature. Chapter 3 outlined the data, which were collected in a reflective journal that was maintained throughout the year-long project, and Chapter 4 provided interpretations of those data. This chapter will summarize the results of the research and offer conclusions about the autoethnographical study I undertook during the process of transforming English 12 First Peoples for delivery as an online course for the North Coast Distance Education School. It will also make recommendations for those teachers wishing to undertake a similar process.

As outlined in the previous chapter, this project took the form of an autoethnographic case study. As the teacher of English 12 First Peoples and the developer of the online version of the course, I was the primary participant in the project. The project evolved into a more multi-faceted process than initially expected, with four key components.

The first major component of the project was my ongoing work as the teacher of the face-to-face English 12 First Peoples class. Although I had excellent training in preparation for teaching the course, solid support from the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) personnel involved with the course, and the provision of an abundance of curricular materials, teaching a brand new course for the first time is a learning process, regardless of one's teaching experience. I was focused on developing interesting and appropriate lessons for my students, on learning the new literature, and on working through the other details that are involved with teaching a new course. Much of my preparation time at school was devoted to this course. All of this work and preparation for the course essentially became preliminary work for the project. In the immediate moment, my first responsibility was to my face-to-face
class. Additionally, I knew that what I was doing would also help lay the foundation for the online version of the course. The project, which included work for both completing the requirements of the Master of Education program at the University of Northern British Columbia and for NCDES, was always in the forefront of my planning, and the journal reflects much contemplation about all of the overlap between the various elements of the project.

The next two elements of the project consisted of the actual development of the online version of the course and the work involved in learning the various technological components required for teaching an e-learning course for NCDES. It was difficult to do both at the same time; I had the distinct impression that if I had a better understanding of the technology early on, I would have had fewer questions about appropriate lesson design and could have better envisioned what online lessons would look like. In order to answer my research question, I had to identify the key course elements required to create and sustain an appropriate e-learning model of English 12 First Peoples. It was important to ensure that an online version maintained the integrity of the original course, which by its nature is very personal, reflective, and experiential. The research question asked which of the course qualities needed to be developed and nurtured differently in a virtual classroom than a face-to-face setting, and how. Teaching the face-to-face course at the time helped focus on which course qualities were important to maintain and nurture differently, but answering the question “how?” was challenging until I had a more complete understanding of the technology involved.
As I taught my English 12 First Peoples class over the weeks and months of the semester, worked on lessons for the online course, and endeavoured to learn the necessary technology, I wrote many notes in my reflective journal. The journal, which reflected on the processes involved with all aspects of the project, was the fourth major task of the process. Knowing that the journal was a key component of the Master of Education project research and that it would also offer important guidance through the actual of the development of the online course, the notes I made in the journal were vast and varied. At times they were quick thoughts and ideas for lesson plans; at other times they reflected much concern and frustration about the technological aspects of the project. At certain points they appeared to be rambling, random thoughts, while at other points, they were focused and reflected my readings in the literature.

I discovered through the course of this whole process that I work better in a linear fashion, rather than in a circular fashion where tasks overlap; I would have felt more comfortable and confident in the whole process if I could have finished teaching English 12 First Peoples in my face-to-face class, then learned the technology sufficiently to create the whole e-learning version of the course, then developed the course and uploaded it in its entirety to the North Coast Distance Education website, and then fine-tuned the course as time passed and I began teaching the online course. This process did not unfold in that manner; many tasks overlapped or interfered with other tasks, some required backtracking when I only wanted to move forward, and others were put on hold until time or technology permitted, in spite of my desire to complete them.
Conclusions

In developing the English 12 First Peoples course, I gained insight into a number of areas of importance to me as a teacher. I explored the goals, objectives, and prescribed learning outcomes of a course in different ways than I would have if I had solely taught the course in a face-to-face manner. I had to look at ways to meet learning outcomes regarding participation, interaction, and reflection using technology. Ultimately, the research question sought to determine which of the course qualities of English 12 First Peoples needed to be developed differently in the online version and how. The research also took into consideration how to build mutual trust and respect in a virtual classroom among students who do not know each other. Additionally, I hoped to determine what supports students would need in order to successfully complete the course and what practices would help or hinder successful participation in the course.

At the heart of English 12 First Peoples are several principles of learning that focus on the connections between and among the self, the family, and the community. These principles of learning also involve understanding one’s history, identity, and place in the world; they support reflexive, reflective, and experiential learning. I believed that these course qualities, which are very personal and inter-relational, were the qualities that needed to be carefully addressed in the creation of the online course. I wanted to ensure that the online version of English 12 First Peoples developed a sense of inter-connectivity and interaction among students. I wanted to ensure that there was a sense of community and an environment that fostered mutual trust and respect. Otherwise, the key principles around which English 12 First Peoples was created would be lost.
Ascough (2002) and Zembylas (2008) both emphasized that a well-developed online course must make effective use of technology for the purposes of communication and interaction. Interaction was important to reinforce educational goals, learning outcomes, and cognitive development. Garrison and Anderson (2007) also stressed the importance of social interaction, noting that for learning to be dynamic, it must effectively integrate content and context. Ensuring students interacted with each other, with the technology, and with the content were critical elements of effective course development. It was not sufficient to simply recreate ordinary classroom lessons online; it was critical to make use of the technology to facilitate communication, interaction, and reflection. These concepts were at the forefront of my lesson planning throughout the course development. It was vital for me to understand the technology and to make use of the programs available to me as I developed interactive, reflective, and experiential lessons.

Passey (2000) and Kehrwald (2008) also noted that proper course development should mitigate the sense of isolation that students in online courses often feel. Deliberately developing requirements for interaction as well as offering numerous ways for the class to interact both formally and informally was paramount in the course development process. By creating these opportunities for interaction, several of the key principles of learning and important learning outcomes were addressed.

Additionally, Passey (2000) noted that online interaction helped mitigate instances of student failure. Hannum, et al. (2008), Clayton (2002), and Palloff and Pratt (2001) affirmed that rates of attrition were reduced by creating a welcoming, interactive online community. Students' connectivity and rapport was enhanced through opportunities to share reflections,
to receive timely feedback, and to communicate in a variety of ways using technology. Again, I kept these concepts at the forefront of my planning. I designed a variety of interactive assignments, created opportunities for students to learn about each other and converse online, and ensured students would receive timely feedback on their informal discussions as well as formal assignments. I endeavoured to honour the First Peoples' principles of learning through the design of online lessons and assignments and to ensure that the learning outcomes were met through the effective use of technology.

I believed at the outset of this project that at the heart of developing a successful online version of English 12 First Peoples was the creation of a course that encouraged collaboration and engagement. It was vital to develop strategies that would build a sense of community in the virtual classroom environment, using the available technology to its utmost advantage. It was also important, as Ascough (2002) and Kehrwald (2008) noted, that students be provided with the technological support needed actively participate in the online environment and to be successful in the course. The importance of this support was made clear to me through my own training for the course; experiencing various levels of frustration allowed me insight into the challenges students would face if they were not sufficiently oriented to the use of the necessary technology. The more comfortable I became with the technology, the more I was able to experiment more fully with its various features and ultimately, feel more confident in using its numerous features. For a time, I was essentially a student learning the programs needed to successfully teach the course, and that situation enabled me to understand the challenges students might face when beginning the course. As a result, I ensured the appropriate processes were in place to enable students to receive the support they would need throughout the course.
Developing and offering English 12 First Peoples in an online format had several implications for our school and students. Through our partnership with NCDES, we were able to offer a course we would not have been able to offer otherwise this year due to enrollment numbers. As well, it allowed a number of adult students in the region to take a course that was both culturally relevant to them and that would allow them to complete their high school graduation requirements. It also enabled a number of high school students with job and family obligations to take a course that allowed some flexibility in their schedules, because they could do the course work on their own time as needed. It also provided important professional development for me as the course facilitator. Being trained to use the online course management system and work with colleagues on such a project were excellent opportunities that will enable us to undertake future opportunities for course development and online course offerings as they arise. With training complete and infrastructure and systems now in place, offering future online courses can occur more readily.

Recommendations

Creating the e-learning version of English 12 First Peoples provided good insight into the demands of online course development and determined which course qualities needed to be nurtured differently in the online environment. It also provided some considerations for future course development and further research.

One recommendation with respect to course development involves the timeline. It is important to be aware of the amount of time such development can take, particularly if significant computer training is involved. Ideally, designated preparation time to create the online course should be provided. As well, scheduling specific training times in advance of
the development of course content can make the process of designing online lessons and assignments simpler. Once sufficient technology training is completed, developing the content area of the course and making effective use of the technology to do so will become a more straightforward undertaking.

A second recommendation with respect to time factors is consideration for potential technology problems to disrupt the course development process. Educators often rely heavily on computers for classroom administration, lesson planning, and other tasks; when the technology fails, frustrations can arise. However, when one relies entirely on technology to teach a course, and the technology fails, frustration is compounded by the inability to actually do one’s job. The training process can be interrupted, the course development process can be delayed, and the actual teaching of the course can become problematic until problems are resolved. Although computer problems are impossible to predict, it is important to remember that they can and will happen. Ideally, technology support will be immediately available, but it is important to build flexibility into one’s schedule in order to mitigate the delays that may be caused by computer problems.

Another recommendation concerns technology support. It is important for the course teacher-facilitator to have sufficient training prior to developing and teaching the course. It is important to have ongoing support through the teaching of the course as well, to address new questions and issues as they arise. The teacher-facilitator must be able to manage both the course development and teaching demands, as well as be able to assist students during the course itself. Students also need support, particularly at the outset of the course, to learn the
technology needed to successfully participate in the course. It is also important to ensure students have support throughout the course.

With respect to course development, I advocate maintaining some flexibility in the design of assignments. Learning outcomes and teaching lessons needed to be clearly established in order for the course to begin. Incorporating assignments at the beginning of the course to enable students to interact and get to know each other are also critical starting points for building community. It is important to take the students' needs, experiences, and backgrounds into consideration when creating some assignments over time, however, particularly those that are reflective or more personal. As the teacher becomes more familiar with the students, and the students become more familiar with the course technology, designing the most appropriate lessons becomes easier. Thus, maintaining some flexibility with assignments over time can help enhance both the success of the assignments and the sense of community within the virtual classroom environment.

Considerations for future research include determining whether building community would be different in an asynchronous course versus a synchronous course. Lessons, discussions, and activities that are designed to build community may be different in a synchronous environment, where students are interacting in real time. Building community may take on different forms or requirements in a course with a less personal focus than English 12 First Peoples as well.

Specific areas of e-learning instructional design issues are also areas for future research. Possible topics include online assessment strategies, online collaborative learning practices, and blended learning practices. Literature on e-learning in secondary schools was
underrepresented in the research, so a focus on practices in secondary schools would be appropriate for further study as well.

Another consideration for future study would be to explore course development through personal learning environments rather than through course management systems such as Desire2Learn. The design of course management systems dictate to some degree the design of the course; a personal learning environment allows the students to control their learning environment and choose the technology tools that best support their learning needs. (Attwell, 2007). Such research is more learner-centred than course- or institutional-centred, which was the case with my research.

Finally, the timing of this project enabled me to trace the development of the online course itself, but not the actual teaching of the course. Another area of research to explore would be to extend the research from the course development process to the actual implementation of the course and assess the success of the community-building strategies and other activities.

Undertaking an autoethnographical study that examined the development of English 12 First Peoples in an online setting required critical examination of learning outcomes and course requirements. It required me to consider new ways to achieve those outcomes in a non-traditional classroom setting through reflection on the entire course development process. Deliberately creating opportunities for building community and promoting reflective and critical thinking using technology were critical for successful course development. Doing so fulfilled not the only the learning outcomes of the course, but also honoured the First Peoples’ principles of learning around which the course was based.
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