

Professors' and Instructors'  
Experiences with Transitions and Policies  
for the Online Environment

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**Abstract**

Professors develop policies and procedures for their courses that are relevant and applicable for their classroom or learning platform. In particular, professors transitioning from a traditional to an online (synchronous or asynchronous) course delivery platform may adjust and/or design policies in their course outlines to fit each respective learning platform in which they teach. This thesis is a qualitative study based on interviews of professors at a certain mid-sized university. The study investigates professors' policy decisions centering on their transition to an online modality and the challenges they face identifying and resolving problems with the existence or lack of online policies for students. Six professors were interviewed about their policy evolution and development emerging out of their recent transitions from the traditional to the online setting. Data include the interviews and review of the course outlines provided. The project report presents the policy development issues encountered as professors moved into the online setting and concludes with some recommendations based on these data.

Keywords: online learning, e-learning, policies, procedures, online modality, online learning platform, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Online courses are a relatively recent evolution. Many universities and colleges are gradually evolving to include online courses in a wide variety of subject areas and departments. The growing sophistication of the internet and its increasingly widespread use has now encompassed learning: education is shifting to account for the new modalities of online learning and the related priorities of online learners. But policy planning may lag behind the transitions. Wallace (2007) comments that, “[The] online environment of teaching and learning activities has, however, seldom been part of a planned vision, and universities are now beginning to experience the impact of the increasing use of online technologies on academic policy” (p. 88). New innovations often do introduce different behavioural requirements. Thus the progression of e-learning course delivery via the internet can present new issues centring on human behaviour. As Traina and colleagues (2005) state, “Codes of conduct and resultant policies are markedly different in the online environment than in traditional on-ground environments” (Traina, Doctor, Bean & Wooldridge, 2005, p. 2).

In the e-learning environment students may never have face-to-face contact with the professor or other students. Because of this, traditional policies for conduct geared to on-campus situations might not naturally transfer to the online environment and may need to be adapted for better applicability. The delivery method for teaching online is different from the traditional classroom and can also vary in and of itself, depending on whether the delivery method is synchronous, asynchronous or a hybrid of both. While a synchronous or hybrid delivery method might utilize video conference or teleconference, the written word is what drives most of the communication and learning processes. Given these differences, policies may need to be

adjusted to address the elements of this developing form of learning delivery in the online setting.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The literature review covers six key topics with regard to professors' transitions from the face-to-face classroom into the online classroom. Each topic emerging from the literature is organized into its relevant section. The first section covers a review of the relevant literature on professors' transitions, the related definitions of online learning and what it means for professors and students, plus a discussion of some of the different types of online learning settings. The second section looks at online learning within the broader scope of education, distinguishing the different learning components of online learning as to what knowledge is acquired inside and outside the online classroom. The third section looks at online learning (e-learning) within the context of higher education, exploring the concept that geographical limitations are a thing of the past.

In the fourth section, policy definitions from the literature review are discussed, with some elaboration on policies as a whole and the importance of studying education policy in the online learning setting. The fifth section introduces illustrations from the literature of professors' thoughts and experiences with their transitions to the online teaching modality. The final section focuses on conclusions that emerge from the literature concerning the implementation of policies in the case of professors making the transition to online teaching.

### **Online learning defined**

Allen & Seaman tell us that “[a]n online course is defined as having at least 80% of the course content delivered online” where there are typically no face -to-face meetings. (Allen & Seaman, 2003, p. 6). Many different types of online courses are offered by universities and

colleges. Some online courses are offered in a synchronous mode, while others are offered in an asynchronous mode, where asynchronous means that the learning exists via the online/internet platform and is “commonly facilitated by media such as e-mail and discussion boards” (Hrastinski, 2008, p. 51). The asynchronous learning model “supports work relations among learners and teachers, even when participants cannot be online at the same time” (p. 52).

Hrastinski further tells us that “[a]synchronous e-learning makes it possible for learners to log on to an e-learning environment at any time and download documents or send messages to teachers or peers” (p. 52). In this learning mode, students “may spend more time refining their contributions, which are generally considered more thoughtful compared to synchronous communications” (p. 52). In contrast to asynchronous, “synchronous e-learning is commonly supported by media such as videoconferencing and chat;” this way of learning “has the potential to support e-learners in the development of learning communities” (p. 52). In the synchronous mode of online learning, “learners and teachers experience synchronous e-learning as more social” and are able to ask and answer questions live.

### **Online learning**

Online learning is not merely the learning that happens in an online classroom setting, because according to Anderson, “Communication technologies are used in education to enhance interaction between all participants in the educational transaction” (p. 43). Anderson considers online learning to be a subset of learning in the broader sense (p. 43), which is most effective in higher education when segmented into four focus areas. These different areas of online learning form an effective model when the experience “is learner centered, knowledge centered, assessment centered, and community centered” (p. 35). Learner-centered learning in online

learning pivots on the “unique cognitive structures and understandings that the learners bring to the learning context” (Anderson, 2004, p. 35).

The learning context addressed by Anderson (2004) is that of the online learning environment for higher education. One of the roles of the educator in this setting, very early in the initial class meetings, is to secure “an understanding of students’ pre-existing knowledge” and facilitate an environment that “respects and accommodates the particular cultural attributes” of the students being served (p. 35). In order for the educator to effectively facilitate learner centered learning, he/she “makes efforts to gain an understanding of students’ pre-existing knowledge” as well as “preconceptions and cultural perspectives;” the ability to do this is a challenge limited to the online learning tools that “limit the view of body language and paralinguistic clues” (Anderson, 2004, p. 35). Just as in a face-to-face higher education setting, according to Anderson, an “experienced online learning [educator] make[s] time at the commencement of their learning interactions to provide incentive and opportunity for students to share their understandings, their culture, and unique aspects of themselves.” This opportunity is often accomplished with the use of “virtual ice-breakers” (p. 36).

Online courses, according to Anderson should allow students “more opportunities to reflect upon their own thinking” and “transfer knowledge to an unfamiliar context or to develop new knowledge structures” (Anderson, 2004, p. 37). The internet allows learners to have a wide range of “knowledge resources” and allows for an almost “limitless means for students to grow their knowledge” (p. 37).

Anderson (2004) also comments on assessment in online courses. Assessment involves determining how much and what the student has learned over a period of time. In the traditional setting, assessment is necessary “for effective learning environments” and is a vital part of the

learning process as well (p. 37). The online learning environment “provides many opportunities for assessment: not only opportunities that involved the [educator], but also ones that [utilize] the expertise of peers” to make assessment determinations in the online setting (p. 38). For online educators, there exists “the challenge” to provide “quantity” and “quality of assessment” while simultaneously “maintaining student interest and commitment” and the best way of achieving this is with the “development of a learning community” (Anderson, 2004, p. 39).

The social component of learning exists in face-to-face settings and this aspect of learning is found in “online learning designs” (Anderson, 2004, p. 39). The ability to build knowledge in a social setting is also a facet of Vygotsky’s (1978) understandings of constructed learning. Anderson states that this need can be considered by providing opportunities for students to work together and share knowledge (p. 39). Within the online learning community, learners develop “a shared sense of belonging, trust, expectation of learning, and commitment to participate and to contribute to the community” (Wilson (2001) cited in Anderson, 2004, p. 39).

In summary, the online classroom allows learning to occur away from the classroom. Thus the environment itself provides an opportunity for students to reflect and grow; building on the knowledge they accumulate on their own. This outside the classroom aspect is a critical component of the higher educational experience. The social context of leaning/learning is important (Vygotsky, 1978) and in higher education and online learning (Anderson, 2004). Attention to the social element allows students to network and build relationships in which commitment and accountability thrive just as well as they do in the traditional classroom setting.

### **Learning (e-learning) in higher education**

Chickering and Erhmann point out that “new communication and information technologies have become major resources for teaching and learning in higher education” (1996,

p.1). They review cost-effective and appropriate ways to use computers along with the peripherals of video and telecommunications technology to advance their authority of the Seven Principles of Good Practice. One of Chickering and Erhmann's principles surrounding good practice states that there needs to be "frequent student-faculty contact in and out of class" and that this "is a most important factor in student motivation and involvement." (p. 1). Universities now employ "communication technologies that increase access to faculty members" (p. 1) more frequently.

Distance and geography have less bearing on learning in higher education at present, since the online learning platform allows for "joint problem solving and shared learning" and can often "augment face-to-face contact in and outside of class meetings" (p. 1.) The issue of geographical distance becomes an issue of the past when the online environment allows students in higher education to participate without the commute. Geography and time are less of a limitation on higher learning opportunities. Ladd (2012) also speaks to this by showing that "higher education is becoming dissociated from geographical limitations" (p.1). This access is an affordance of technology (Kennewell, 2001) but creates a need for managing continuous email access to the professor.

Another principle of Chickering and Erhmann which is bolstered in the online learning environment, is the collaborative, constructivist, and team approach towards learning. They theorize that in higher education "[l]earning is not a spectator sport" and it is necessary for students to talk about what they are learning so as to be able to write effectively about this acquired knowledge (Chickering and Erhmann, 1996, p. 2). In so doing, students are able to relate "to past experiences, and apply [new knowledge] to their daily lives" (p. 2). All these elements of learning with technology that emerge from The Seven Principles of Good Practice

(Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996) were applicable fifteen years ago for the online learning modality.

Higher education and its paradigms have constantly changed since the arrival of the internet and all its technological components. Geography and time are less of a limitation on higher learning opportunities. Ladd (2012) also speaks to this by showing that “higher education is becoming dissociated from geographical limitations” (p.1).

Terminologies are not always consistent within academia and references to “online education”, “distance education” and “e-learning” may or may not be used synonymously in the literature. For purposes of this review of the literature, the term “e-learning” will be used and considered the same as “online learning” and “distance learning”. In any instance where the internet provides “an interactive, dynamic learning space that” at time also integrates “conference call technology” and web conferencing technology with browser enabled applications will be grouped into one category for all further discussions as the e-learning perspective (Ladd, 2012, p. 3).

With the growth of e-learning in higher education comes the struggle of adjusting teaching and learning paradigms to account for the learning that becomes possible with the internet, social media, and cloud computing and mobile devices. According to Ladd (2012) “The challenge for higher education is determining how to harness that opportunity to create communities, distribute materials, and provide leading-edge exchange platforms” (p.4) that are relevant and productive for learners and professors alike and also connect with policies and procedures that give guidance for an efficient and effective learning experience. Educators that are currently transitioning into e-learning settings are faced with challenges “because the tools

and opportunities for discovering students' preconceptions and cultural perspectives are often limited by bandwidth constraints that limit the view of body language and paralinguistic clues" (Anderson, 2004, p. 35).

Anderson (2004) finds that one of the initial challenges is that "assessing student preconditions and cultural prerequisites are often more difficult in an online learning context, because teachers are less able to interact transparently with students—especially in the critical early stages of the formation of a learning community" (Anderson, 2004, p. 36). To alleviate this challenge Anderson suggests that the educator:

...make time at the commencement of their learning interactions to provide incentive and opportunity for students to share their understandings, their culture, and unique aspects of themselves. This sharing can be done formally, through electronically administered surveys and questionnaires, but is often accomplished more effectively by virtual icebreakers, and by the provision of an opportunity for students to introduce themselves (Anderson, 2004, p. 36).

The element of student sharing early in the course can be seen as an understood or informal policy of "good practice" for the educator who intends that the course outcome be successful for all students. The next section expands on the discussion of policies.

### **Define policies (elaboration on policies)**

Curriculum policy has been defined by Levin (2007) as "the rules and procedures governing" human activity and the clarification of these rules in terms of "what they are and how they are made" (Levin, 2007, p. 8). Educational policy is a subset of the broader concept of policy, and "governs just about every aspect of education" (p. 8). Educational policy looks at such things as "what schooling is provided, how, to whom, in what form, by whom" (p.8) and examines the resources utilized for the establishment and implementation of said policies.

It is important to study educational policy because educational policies impact every aspect of education, including the quality of professor/student interactions in e-learning. There are many different angles through which educational policies can be viewed. Policy analysis is one type of policy study, where “[p]olicy studies tend to focus on the processes through which policies are created” and once these policies are solidified, to look at “the effects of such policies once they are in place” (p. 8). Collins looks at “the consequences of policies if they are implemented” and show us that there is “an important distinction” between “analysis of policy process and the analysis of policy content” (Collins, 2005, p. 1). Collins (2005) explains that “the main focus of process analysis is policy formulation and the main focus of content analysis is the substance of policy” (p. 1).

This study examines both policy formulation and the substance of the policy as they relate to professors’ experiences in their transitions to the online modality. It delineates how their use and development of policies change as their courses are introduced and evolve over time. Policy analysis has been defined as, a “generic name for a range of techniques and tools to study the characteristics of established policies, how the policies came to be and what their consequences are” (Collins, 2005, p. 1). Educational policy analysis is important for the online modality because “the dynamics of [new technological] innovation, and [the] use of educational technologies invite exploration of broad social, pedagogical and economic questions” and these are essential discussions for a new type of learning and teaching that make up the current evolution of the online learning platform (Wallace, 2007, p. 88).

The subject of policy development can be viewed at the institutional level as well as the professorial level. Although this research study focuses on the professorial level, it is occasionally difficult to isolate each level because they are so interconnected. Institutions

generally have “academic policies established by their faculty councils and senates” (Wallace, 2007, p. 90). These policies, among other things, address the professor’s responsibilities to the students and class environment and all such related teaching functions. An overlap is easily noticeable if the professor’s teaching responsibilities are examined in light of “policies outlining responsibilities of professors with respect to their students and classes” (p. 90). These policies outline the conduct and evaluation of courses. Wallace (2007) makes a distinction between two types of policies. One category she outlines is “doing things right” which refers to micro issues with students, while the second category of policy deals with “doing the right thing” or the institutional policy processes (p. 88).

A disconnect may occur when some traditionally designed policies are transferred to the online delivery mode. For example, the time that professors spend in front of classes is usually written into policy, which also outlines according to Wallace (2007) the conditions for cancelling, or shortening a class. As an example she cites this policy: “Academic staff members shall not cancel, miss, terminate or shorten scheduled instruction except for good reasons” (Wallace, 2007, p. 90). This type of policy language certainly creates a disconnect when transferred to online delivery, where the teaching components may be synchronous or asynchronous. Wallace states, “While quantifying the time that professors spend in front of a class is relatively easy, negotiating an acceptable figure for distributed or online courses along with other often contentious issues relating to faculty workload in online courses, will be more of a challenge.” (p. 90). This scenario is a perfect example of how policy design may not be transferable from the traditional mode to online teaching, and how important it is for policy issues to be considered at both a macro and micro level of analysis. It is also important to examine policies from the perspectives of the institution, the professor and the students. Because

policy analysis is a complex matter, it lends itself to qualitative research to uncover the layers and perspectives.

### **Transitions to online teaching**

The transition to online teaching for a professor is not a simple change but one that is highly complex (Sugar, Martindale & Crawley, 2007; Wingard, 2004). There is a “steep learning curve associated with learning to teach online” (Gerlich, (2005) cited in Sugar et al., (2007, p.2).

According to Wingard (2004) some of these changes require the following: “adjustments in the amount, focus, and difficulty level of lecturing; increased interaction; heightened student engagement; increased comfort levels; and heightened faculty expectations” (p.34). These factors evolve and improve over time when a professor transitions to the online teaching environment (Wingard, 2004.). She states that, “heightened student engagement; increased comfort levels; and heightened faculty expectations – seem to evolve over time and with experience” (p. 34). A professor who transitions from the face-to-face to the online environment will more likely over time “derive pedagogical benefits from the technologies, but this process may take longer and require more collaboration” where this can be more than anticipated depending on the capabilities of the individual (Wingard, 2004, p. 34). Because this transition will evolve, according to Wingard, the nature of these evolutions “suggests that various types of technical training and support, as well as instructional development support opportunities, should be available to [the professor] throughout the process” (p. 34).

Wingard’s (2004) multi-institutional study looked at web-based instruction in higher education. (This study “assessed the kinds of changes that occur in a face-to-face instruction when faculty add web enhancements to their course” (p. 26). Allen and Seaman (2003) define

web-enhanced or web-facilitated learning as “courses which uses web based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course; and where they might use Blackboard or WebCT to post the syllabus and assignments” (p. 6).

Wingard’s study of professors who were newly-transitioned to the online setting, found that professors who could work with instructional designers to build their online learning environment “often reported that they increased their familiarity with learning theory and enhanced their teaching and course development skills” (p. 29). As time progressed with the transition experience, some faculty members from Wingard’s study spoke about “improvements in their own comfort levels in [the online] class and of feeling more prepared and more familiar with their students’ academic progress” (p. 31). She found that the online setting did not “necessarily change instructional content” but instead offered “alternate means of delivery” and additionally expanded “the amount of information available to the students” (p.31).

Similarly, Sugar and colleagues found that the experience of “transition[ing] to online teaching for experienced [professors] is not easy” and requires “[professors to] revise their teaching methods” (Sugar et al., 2007, p. 367). In order for a professor to be successful in the online setting, there needs to be an adjustment of the professor’s perspective and role in addition to the use of sound professional development for any professor transitioning into the online modality (p. 367). The experience of change should be a concern for both professor and university. New paradigms and standards for online teaching can help the professors to “change their perception of the teaching and learning process in order to develop a successful [online] learning program” (p. 367). There is no doubt whatsoever that “experienced teachers in a face-to-face environment” will “face a major transition to teach online” and simultaneously deal with the challenge of “preserving the core of [their] established [pedagogical perspectives]” (Sugar et

al., 2007, p. 367). The biggest challenge for this face-to-face to online transition is the need to “convert well established curricula to an online environment and, at the same time take advantage of the affordances of electronic media” (p. 367).

In summary, much of the literature to date has focused on the significance of the change to the online environment for professors, particularly in the area of pedagogy. Little has been written to date about policy transitions for professors moving to the online environment.

### **Transition research: professors making the transition and implementing policies**

In higher education the student base of adult learners comes with differing levels of technological aptitudes and so the effective e-learning educator must constantly probe for learner comfort and competence with the mediating technology, and provide safe environments for the e-learners to increase their sense of internet efficacy (Anderson, 2004, p. 36). Higher education in the online environment makes different demands of the educator, since there may be a mixed demographic of ages and technological experiences. Facilitating effective learning in this context requires careful understanding of how adults learn and of how differing competence levels adjust to the introduction of existing and new technologies. Educators’ biggest challenge according to Anderson (2004) is managing simultaneously different learning environments: “a learning environment that is simultaneously learning centered, content centered, community centered, and assessment centered” (Anderson, 2004, p.54). “Since there are a number of ways to do this then “[educators] must learn to develop their skills so that they can respond to student and curriculum needs by developing a set of online learning activities that are adaptable to diverse student needs” (p. 54).

Waterhouse (2005) discusses a seven phase process of creating a course of instruction. These phases have been found to be applicable to either a traditional or an e-learning course.

One phase of this process is the design phase, which is particularly relevant because it addresses the formulation of policies for a course of instruction. In contrast to the traditional model, the design phase of an e-learning course is the most time-consuming phase of course development. The course's objectives (syllabus) allow for definition of the learning activities, creation of course resources, creation of assignments and assessment tools, development of the course schedule and ultimately the resultant course outline which contains some detail of all the necessary elements inclusive of those just referenced. Waterhouse (2005) notes that at this phase it is necessary "to formulate policies about course conduct and student behaviour" (p. 51). A course outline contains policies which are specific to the academic institution, but most importantly needs to streamline with policies for the daily activities of life during the course cycle. The daily activities of life refer to how students interact with each other in the e-learning course, students' expectations of each other, and how the professor interacts and meets expectations in the course, as well as all guidance and recourse for common situations and circumstances that arise from operating in an online platform (Chickering and Erhmann, 1996).

According to Waterhouse (2005), as the professor moves into the design phase, and specifically into policy development, some appropriate areas for policy and procedures development come out of subject areas such as:

[H]ow to submit assignments electronically; what to expect when a technology failure occurs and an assignment is due; what kind of student email you will answer and how promptly; what you will and don't do for students who need help; how you plan to deal with students who appear in the course without the required prerequisite knowledge; the extent to which you intend to participate in online discussions; and what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in email and online discussion" ( p. 62).

Many of these aspects may seem trivial to an inexperienced online professor or student, but the reality is that all these details are vital to a successful experience in the e-learning setting, either

as student or professor (Waterhouse, 2005). When these policies are thoughtfully formulated and posted prominently in the Learning Management system (LMS), students can understand their respective responsibilities alongside the responsibilities of the professor.

Waterhouse states, “If your policy resources are nonexistent, imprecise or unfair to students, you will find yourself spending...wasting...a lot of time dealing with confused, unhappy and disgruntled students” (p. 62). The student-teacher ratio in an e-learning classroom - which is available 24 hours per day with a lag time for between a communication and expected response - makes it imperative for time and thought to be dedicated to developing policies and procedures, not only at the onset of a course, but quite often as the course evolves. Unusual issues and situations may arise which require prompt attention in the interests of good e-learning management.

Use of the words “policies” and “procedures” at this juncture requires clarification to bring this literature review into perspective. Quite often, these words are seen as being synonymous, when they are actually related and connected but with different roles. Waterhouse clarifies that “Policies are resources in the sense that students read them to learn about their learning environment” (p. 62). The contrast of policies with procedures is that procedures are set aside by the fact that they “are not precisely course resources but rather plans for dealing with foreseeable events that will affect your students’ use of course resources” (p. 62). Waterhouse suggests that students need not be aware of the existence of procedures until a situation arises that establishes the need for professorial intervention. The application of relevant procedures affects students in a course and,

include[s] but [is] not limited to what you will do if you are teaching a class and the technology you need to conduct it fails; how to deal with students who have very weak communications skills; how to deal with students who have little or no knowledge about how to use a computer at the level required by the course; and

what to do when unforeseen eventualities prohibit you keeping the schedule planned in the course syllabus” (p. 62).

In other words, policies are explicit guidelines clearly posted and available in advance to the students, while procedures are implicit guidelines, structurally in place behind the administrative scenes for the professor to employ when the need arises. Both are connected, but act together to allow for optimal course management and seamless integration in the online interactions of students and the professor.

In summary then, this review of the literature demonstrates that the learning experience in an online setting does not only occur in an online classroom but also outside of class (Anderson, 2004). Among other things, the experience of this learning platform involves reflective practice, a self-directed development of learning, and a knowledge-centred focus of learning (Anderson, 2004) all amidst a social and collaborative experience that is just as rewarding as that which occurs in the face-to-face setting (Hrastinksi, 2008). This review of the literature also shows that geographical and time constraints are a thing of the past in the higher education learning journey (Ladd, 2012). As the online modality continues to grow into new paradigms of learning, without geographical constraints, the issue of educational policy development is critical for developing rules and procedures. These provide guidelines for professors and students on how they can collaboratively interact in this new and evolving technological learning environment. The literature review shows that adjustments may be necessary for professors transitioning to the online setting, and while these transitions are certainly challenging, over time and with more attention to policy and instructional development, all universities with online offerings can reduce the difficulties of these types of transitions (Wingard, 2004). There has been little research to describe how professors design new policies and procedures when moving to the

online environment for course delivery. In the next section, a research study to investigate professors' perceptions of this transition is outlined.

### **Chapter Three: Research Study**

#### **Research Questions**

This study examines the following research questions, seeking insight into the experiences of a group of six professors as they experience transitions from face-to-face to the online learning environment.

Research question 1: How do professors create working policies for the online environment?

Research question 2: How do professors deal with instances of potential or perceived policy absences or mismatches with their individual course outline and general institutional policies?

#### **Methods**

As background for this study, I have significant experience in the online learning environment, having completed two Master's degrees in both synchronous and asynchronous settings. Additionally, I have also completed two certificate qualifications for adult education and online teaching in the asynchronous setting. It is amidst this backdrop of experience that professors at the chosen institution were identified across different departments. The professors selected are individuals who had transitioned to teaching in the online (Adobe Connect) platform over the past three to five years. None of these participants were my own professors.

The campus directory was screened for professors teaching in the online setting. The goal was to identify six participants who would be available to discuss their transitions from the traditional teaching setting to the e-learning modality. Initially, I intended to interview eight professors, but of the individuals solicited, only six were available to schedule interviews. The group of professors interviewed had varying levels of experience with teaching online. Their range of online teaching experience spanned from one to five years. They reported varying

levels of technological aptitude as well as different experiences with the use of technology.

Adobe Connect is the course meeting software and WebCT the Learning Management System used at the selected university. The participants often make reference to their experiences in connection with their use of these tools. Although the interview questions (see Appendix B) were scripted in advance, the interviews were semi-structured. Throughout these interviews, all the participants were encouraged to share freely beyond the scripted questions in regard to their experiences with their teaching transitions and conclusions they might have formed.

Additionally, at the time of interview scheduling, the participants were sent a short survey (see Appendix B) by way of Survey Monkey. Only three professors answered the survey, so the results were not helpful other than offering information as to the years of experience in the online setting. All six professors interviewed provided copies of their most recent course outline, and an analysis of these six course outlines are discussed later in this research project report in the section for “course outline document analysis.”

### **Data collection**

This section of the research project was a qualitative study using Adobe Connect software and recording devices for telephone interviews to capture the data. Invitations to participate in the interview process were sent by email and the professors were asked to complete a five question survey (via Survey Monkey) which gave insight into their years of online teaching experience. The survey questions for this study are found in Appendix A of this paper. Interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants, transcribed verbatim, and sent back to the participants for verification. All participants were guaranteed anonymity with the interviews and subsequent handling of the data procured.

Because there was a large amount of data, the following methodology was employed. The data were first organized digitally using colour-coding to identify the participants. Next, the data were analyzed relative to the responses of each of the participants. This initial coding was revised as topics or themes emerged in the data as they were reviewed and re-read (Lichtman, 2012).

These topics became categories for data. All of the quotations from all of the participants who spoke about a topic were put into that category or section. These clustered data were then re-organized a third time using categories that had been suggested by the review of the literature.

### **Background of the participants**

The six participants who scheduled interviews came from different departments. Four were from the Faculty of Education, one from the Faculty of Business and Information Technology and one from the Faculty of Health Sciences. The participants have been teaching in an online environment from one to five years; none of the participants held academic appointments except one. All six professors offered their class(es) with the use of Adobe Connect and WebCT. None of the participants were involved from the beginning with the instructional design and decision to use the learning management system chosen by their university.

In some instances the participants designed their own course outlines; in others, they inherited them from another professor. None of the participants began at the point of facilitating an already- developed course that was online. These were all first-time experiences for the participants with teaching these courses online, but this was not their first time teaching the courses. They had previously taught the same courses in a face-to-face setting. All six participants had support from their university with best practices and teaching within Adobe

Connect. One participant had experience with distance learning by way of video technology and older computer systems, but the experience was vastly different from the structure and requirements of an Adobe Connect setting. The other participants had no prior online teaching experiences before arriving at this institution. The following section presents key findings related to their transitions to their online roles; and their perceptions of challenges, as well as the advantages and disadvantages coming out of their experiences with transition to the Adobe Connect online classroom.

### **Chapter Four: Data Findings**

In this section the findings from six interviews conducted with professors are summarized and organized into themes. In these interviews the professors discussed their experiences with transitioning from teaching face-to-face to teaching in the online setting.

The data presented here are organized into themes which align with the literature review. The introductory section speaks to the fundamental experience of transition to an online learning platform, in which the professors discuss their challenges and successes with the transition in a general way. This section concludes with unscripted discussions that evolved out of each of the interviews. These discussions were not part of the prepared interview questions, but formed a natural progression within the interviews.

#### **Transitions**

This section of this research project looks at the participants' experiences with their transition to the online setting. In addition to the challenges they faced, they discuss how they had to adjust their teaching styles to be effective in this new technological environment.

### **Transitions from traditional to online**

All the participants stated that the transition to an online learning platform was difficult for them in the beginning, but that over time and with the occasional assistance of tech-savvy students in the class, they were able to learn how best to deal with the technological challenges of their new class rooms. One professor identifies the challenge of multi-tasking as the biggest hurdle to overcome in the online synchronous environment with the use of Adobe Connect,

In terms of transition, my biggest hurdle to overcome was the issue of multitasking. And by that I mean being able to speak coherently while flipping through a PowerPoint [ ] at the same time and occasionally having to deal with things that were going on on the screen simultaneously, such as when you give the students hosting rights, occasionally people would start playing around and things on the screen would change while I was talking.

This particular professor identified additional problematic areas and went on to discuss the challenge of ensuring that all students in the class were allotted equal time for speaking. This professor comments that,

I can think of another issue, [ ], and it's something I haven't discussed with you yet, and that's the issue of ensuring equal time for each student to speak, ensuring that everyone is engaged, is a challenge online in the same way that it's a challenge in a face-to-face setting. In a face-to-face setting there are of course always one or two students who are very keen to talk and one or two who just want to disappear into the walls. But somehow in a face-to-face setting you can use gestures, eye contact or lack thereof to indicate that the person who's monopolizing needs to wrap up. In a virtual setting sometimes it's less easy to do that with finesse. One wants to do it in a way that validates the person who's speaking but also clears the floor so that you can call upon someone who has not yet contributed.

Another professor speaks of the evolution of his approach to online teaching since his first course. He discusses an adjustment that is focused not only on himself but also on the students and their comfort level with the online environment:

I think it's adapted to the student comfort level online and to my comfort level using different tools. So that the types of tools that we're using have changed as

the publishers have brought out more tools and as our learning management system has changed.

This professor went on to state that in spite of the online transition, the same content still had to be presented but with a shift in delivery,

Another perspective on the easy transition from brick and mortar course outline transitions was given that the topics haven't changed and the order of the topics haven't changed. And I suppose the major assessment pieces, so the student project and the cases that they're covering, those haven't really changed but how they're delivered has changed. With respect to how much one individual's approach changed, to online teaching, since their very first course the feedback was that "I think it's adapted to the student comfort level online and to my comfort level using different tools.

The lack of face-to-face interaction and the ability to read body cues and reactions when teaching in Adobe Connect are noted as a challenge by one professor. This professor speaks of the difficulty of gauging student participation in the online setting and goes on to explain that even in her course outline she has a policy in regards to student participation. She discusses the challenge of keeping a balance, not only in encouraging participation but also in addressing situations where some students participate in such an overwhelming way that it precludes others taking part in the discussion. This professor suggests that she has considered a policy concerning students who participate "too much", and in turn blocking the opportunity of others,

There is a policy that could be made....I have said in my course outline something about the high degree of expectation for participation. But I haven't said the reverse, you know something like 'But don't talk so much that no-one else gets a chance to talk'. I don't know what that would look like if it was articulated as policy. Probably it's better to be something that's dealt with as it arises. But that is a challenge. It remains a challenge for me when someone is quiet and we have our webcams turned off because it ensures better quality of communication. So I have no indication whether that person is engaged, or sleeping, or making lunches for work the next day. I have absolutely no indication whether they're choosing to be silent, whether they don't feel comfortable waiting for that person to take a breath so that they can raise their hand.....so that remains a little bit of a challenge for me. I don't know whether it can be adequately addressed by policy, or whether it's simply an ad hoc thing.

Another professor who taught more than one course in the online environment comments on the transition challenges found in one course that are not found in another. In one course, she talks about the lack of technological aptitude of the students that make it very difficult for her to teach one class. In another class she speaks about another challenge where the students are unable to make the transition from a distance learning model to a synchronous online learning model. Quite often she says that when students sign up for her course, they believe that her course is structured like a distance learning course and are taken aback that her online course actually has synchronous capability:

Well, the one course is constantly evolving. So the [ ] course is a course that is constantly evolving for me and it's sort of at the opposite spectrum as the other [ ] courses that I teach. And one of the reasons being is that the students who sign up for that course, the [ ] course, do not feel like they are signed up for an online program. And their idea of an online program is a distance Ed program, For them to actually have a synchronous piece is just unheard of and they don't like it. There are also other complexities to do with that course which are sort of outside of the scope of this discussion.

This professor further describes the demographics of her online classes as composed primarily of mature individuals with very little technological aptitude and also very little time in their lives to learn the technology, something that would aid in her transition experience as a professor.

The students are very pressed for time. Most of the students... probably not... I don't know the statistics, but there are significant number of students that are single parents that are working full time and are also studying full time and the reason why they do both is so that they can get some sort of bursary or some sort of time off in order to study, because if they study part time, they don't get the money [ ]. So they are forced to be three people, a full time student and a full time parent. And so what that calls for.... And also they tend to be older and not very tech savvy. For example, I had one student this year come in and say "you know when I right-click this, what should I click?" And I'm like you should click that word that is blue and underlined. And she said really? And I said, go on, go ahead, click it! So she very very tentatively clicked it and of course it brought her over to a new screen and a new website. And she's like oh my goodness, is that what all these things are.

As a professor transitioning from face-to-face to the online setting, it is challenging enough to teach in a new environment filled with technology but the degree of technological ineptitude among students makes the task of teaching online an even more daunting one,

.....and I'm like, oh my goodness, in order to help these students I can't implement more new technology because they are already overwhelmed and I don't want to put more on them. So that's... do you know what I mean? So what I've done this year that has actually been a success is that I've actually put in a lot of redundancies within the course learning management system. So I've put all the assignments and all the classes and all the various whatever we have in the calendar. I've made a table saying this is when class is on, this is when this particular assignment is due.

This professor teaches her course/s with other professors, in a split arrangement, and because of the technological ineptitude of the students her transition required introducing all types of redundancies in the course design to help the students keep up with all that was required on a weekly basis. The split teaching arrangement required all professors to communicate regularly with each other so that the students would receive consistent information at all times regardless of which professor was before the group of students:

The class is also fairly unwieldy because it's taught by three different people. So the students feel like it's a better course-load because there is more than one person being involved. And previously, what happens is that I'm listed as the lead [professor], so students would actually e-mail me for everything that they question or query that they needed an answer to.....So I have all [course information], everywhere, so I think students were a lot happier if the information that they needed was right there on the screen, instead of them having to remember and to go back and to check another screen. So anyway, that's sort of my transition piece there's a few other things that are changed or modified to make the students happier. I haven't changed the course content, of course, because I don't want to make the course any easier or whatever. I just changed the support that they have.

The introduction of flexibility in class attendance was another area that assisted with this professor's transition. The ability to make adjustments for the students' attendance requirements went a long way toward allowing them to keep up with the course content:

But these online [ ] students, quite a few of them are [ ], so they work shift work, so it's not when they can actually come. That's when I realized that I did need to record the session, and on the other hand, that I could trust them to actually listen to get whatever discussion happened in the session. So that works well... painless, that transition.

Another professor had prior experience with transitioning to a technological platform through the use of audio/video recordings in distance learning, but this was his first transition to the online "internet" setting. In his earlier experiences he had found that it was necessary for him to "have everything well prepared" and to "have not only all the digital material prepared... [but he] had to know almost exactly what [he] was going to say if [he] was going to make a recording...[for his distance learning course]" In his prior experience of transitioning to distance learning he had dealt with the issue of multi-tasking with technology in the non-internet, audio visual setting, in that "at the same time I had in that system, time for questions, time for checking to make sure that they were hearing it was..... and it really required a lot of concentration and a lot of preparation." In comparing his earlier transition to the current transition, he believes the prior experience prepared him for his journey into teaching in the online setting and says that "so it's a radically different experience teaching online now than teaching online then. At this point in time, I enjoy teaching online."

Another professor found herself dealing with the challenge of multi-tasking within the technological platform of Adobe Connect,

So the constant multitasking was a major transition. For example, in a face-to-face classroom, when you're speaking you can see people raise their hands to talk but you get to finish your sentence before you call on someone. I should elaborate here perhaps. In a face-to-face situation, when a student raises his/her hand, you can make eye contact and give a little nod to indicate that you are aware of their desire to speak, but that you'd like to finish making your point before calling upon them. In an online classroom, the professor feels compelled to verbally acknowledge the raised hand(s) which (for me at least) interrupts the flow/coherence of the point being made.

It was difficult for this professor with the new necessary multi-tasking and with the issue of her need to acknowledge a student, where the “same could be said in an online classroom, except that people are also typing in the Chat Box. So as you’re finishing a sentence, somebody is typing something in the Chat Box.” This professor often felt compelled to incorporate what the student has just added into her instruction, so this aspect was a major transition for her. Another professor suggested “a meta-analysis of technology and learning.” With the additional challenge of technological failures, one professor mentioned,

You can experience the frustration that I think blocks the learning process because I’m sure that many students just get frustrated and say ‘Oh, this is not worth it’. Which they wouldn’t experience – or might experience in a different way – face-to-face but I think it’s a piece of the online learning process for sure. Many, many graduate professors who teach online have major frustrations and major concerns over the reputation of the program because of the technology not working the way we want it to.

### **Participants’ enjoyment of the transition to online teaching**

One professor told me that he found the “experience teaching online really enjoyable.” He said that “I like the kind of interaction I have with students there.” And he also liked “the portfolio of tools that are available for students.” He said that “as a person getting a little bit older, I like the fact that the list of names of all the students are there all the time” and also that his teaching was more about “what they say and what they write rather than any kind of visual impression or visual about the way they act.”

### **Distance Learning vs. Online Learning as perceived in the transition experience**

As a natural progression in two of the interviews, the distinction between ‘distance learning’ and ‘online learning’ came up. It seems they are sometimes used as identical terms, when according to one professor in reality they are two different things,

There is some fuzziness as to what each one means. So online learning typically means that you're online all of the time, right? And hopefully would mean that there is some amount of synchronous learning. And distance learning I put into the kinda old school kind of bucket of asynchronous. You're getting the material, someone's shipping it to you, and you do it on your own, and there's not a lot of interaction with your classmates.

Another professor thought that the distinction between the two is “really an individual difference.” This professor shared an experience,

I went to a conference last year, it was the CNIU, something about the national conference for innovation and education. So anyway, it used to be the distance Ed conference. For some people, distance Ed and online education is identical and that's one of the things that I realized in that conference because I was making a distinction between those two, but for some people, and some professors and for some institutions, they are identical. For me, what I think is what is different is that I think distance Ed never has a synchronous piece, whereas online education, depending on the student or the professor, does sometimes have the synchronous piece. Distance Ed is, I don't know, for me distance Ed is throwing the book at someone and expecting them to show up at a certain time to write a final assessment, whereas online education can be quite constructivist in nature and quite community based regardless of whether or not there is a synchronous piece.

This professor felt that she was able to say this “because in [one of her classes], some of the students never come to class, but the online classes are always recorded.” This professor knows that “they listen to those recordings because they e-mail [her] offering their thoughts about whatever we talked about during the recordings.”

### **Course outlines**

This section of this research project examines different aspects of the participants' course outlines, and how they reworked and rethought the contents of these outlines, to make them suitable for the Adobe Connect online environment. Some aspects of policy development with regard to course outlines also emerge naturally from the data within this section.

### **Course outlines and their origin**

All the professors were asked to indicate whether they had inherited or originated their course outlines. Most professors inherited their course outlines from a traditional (face-to-face) class room setting. Their thoughts and feelings are examined below in context to the course outline they had to work within their transition experience to the online setting. One professor found it a challenge to be immersed in learning the technology while at the same time having displeasure with the course outline design,

It was pretty dry and boring, actually. It was such a huge learning curve for me, having never taught in Adobe. There was not a lot of support for learning how to use Adobe. So I spent a lot of time with somebody at (our university), I sat down with them and said, 'What's a breakout room?' and 'How do you do this, what is that?' I was trying to learn about the technology, and I was so grateful that this person had given me their course outline that I really didn't put a lot of changes into it, but the next time I teach that course, it will be different.

This professor elaborated on the fact that in her face-to-face classes, she was always open to diverging from the course outline, and that her students had assisted in the evolution of her course outline from what she had inherited. She plans to use it in her upcoming class, stating,

The students helped evolve the assignments as they went too. They drove a bit of it. In other words, I didn't put all my energy into 'Wow, I'm revamping the course outline to exactly the way I want it, then I'm going to present it to the group.' That's not the way I teach face-to-face either. I have a pretty good idea, a detailed plan, but I'm totally open to going on tangents and seeing what engages the students.

Another professor did not feel that her course outline would look any different whether in a face-to-face or an online course. While she admitted to some modification from her earlier experiences teaching the class in Adobe Connect, she talked about the adjustments that she made to allow for more scholarly discussions between her students within the online classroom of Adobe Connect,

I don't think it would look a whole lot different ... whether it was an online or face-to-face course. I don't think my course outline would change too much. I'm just trying to think about it coming at it in reverse now, as if I was going to revert it to a face-to-face course.

I think one of the things that might be different is the amount of asynchronous time that the students spend doing course work. I do require now a great deal of time to be spent individually online participating in scholarly discussion, on a wiki for example and on WebCT.

I think probably if we were face-to-face we would spend that time having that scholarly discussion in person in the brick-and-mortar classroom. My reason for incorporating that amount of asynchronous time is because I just think it's an ungodly thing to ask anyone to sit at a computer for three solid hours and participate in an online class. So I was doing things such as an hour and a half of time in our Adobe Connect classroom and then an hour and a half of online work each week to be completed at the student's discretion, when they were able to work on that.

So if we were face-to-face I would probably have that level of discussion take place while we were together in person so that we could respond in real time to each other's arguments, questions, and have a real-time discussion. That would be the only thing that I can think of that I would change if I was to revert it from being an online course outline to a real brick-and-mortar classroom outline.

One professor, informed that his course outline was designed specifically for use in WebCT, and he said that "yes, it was designed for WebCT" and that it didn't have much more to offer on its effectiveness as initially designed. He did mention that he used it as received, and "there were some changes that [he] had to make but [the change] was a basic thing" and the course outline was used as designed and received. Another instructor who taught more than one class online had one "class she [designed herself]" and another that she "put together with [her] colleague." Another professor shared that she was the original professor teaching her course and that she "developed the original face-to-face, then the online, then back to these blended models." When asked whether or not it was difficult to transition the original of the course outline into the online environment, she answered, "I think the evolution from the online to the hybrid is easier than

from the face-to-face to the online.” With significant experience with online teaching transitions, this professor stated that,

So having gone through the whole kind of transition set, once you understand what you can and can't do online with a group of student population that you have, it's easier to figure out which elements to leverage that are online and which ones need to be in that face-to-face modality. I used our teaching and learning resources here on campus to help with the redesign both times.

That's mostly where I went. And we also created, on campus, an online pilot group. And I was our pilot person in my faculty. But then we had one person in all of the other seven faculties, and we got together on a every-other-week kind of basis over the summer when we were designing our online courses. To talk about what each one of us was trying to do and what we were having problems with, so we could leverage ideas off of each other.

Another professor stated that he fundamentally used the same course outline for his online course as for his face-to-face course. When he taught in the face-to-face setting, he did not generally put up an agenda on the board beyond something quick and general, but he found he had to do things a bit differently in the online environment:

With online teaching I felt much more that I need to make sure students knew what we would be doing and how long we'd be talking and we had access to being able to say we're running out of time or keeping on task as well as keeping them on task. I'm trying to think now if there's anything else that I would say changed about the course online. It changed some in that it became a bit more difficult to do group assignments because people didn't know one another, and yet if they came to me it was much more important to group assignments because students didn't have the opportunity in interacting with each other informally. They had opportunities to interact or would take the time to interact only if there were assignments that required them to do so, so group work became a much more important part of my course outline and assessment that was based on written product rather than every, any one test, which I didn't use a great deal anyway but it became impossible to put a test online...it became more possible to include student presentations as a part of work and collaboration in other forms of software possible products... that too began to change the way in which I assessed the course work.

When asked to analyze the origins of his course outline, this professor shared that he used a course outline he had created twenty years ago, but adapted it for teaching this course for the first time in the online environment:

It was a course I had not taught for twenty years so the course outline had to be radically changed and updated because of the amount of time that past and also because this [current] program..... is quite different from the [prior] program that I first started teaching graduate courses and so also those things require a rethink for the course outline and...it's only very slightly based on my old course outline.

The array of feedback was mixed evenly as to professors who designed their course outline just for the online environment, or had to take a course outline from the traditional face-to-face setting into the online setting. What was consistent in either response was that their course outline continually changed as they grew and evolved with their transition into the online learning platform.

### **Course outline policies challenged by students**

Of the six professors interviewed, three had never had their course outline policies challenged by students. A fourth had not experienced being challenged in a major way, other than being asked to have an extension of time for submitting an assignment, and this was more of a discussion and a collaborative decision than a student bringing it as a challenge,

The only one that was questioned was one that was collectively determined and that was an assignment due date extension, because some people were taking two courses in July which meant that they were online Monday, Wednesday and Friday for six hours. So they collectively asked me for an extension, and we extended it for everybody. But other than that, no I haven't, because I feel like we talk and negotiate – negotiation is a really important word in adult learning – so I have no problem with slightly changing things for people if they have outside issues. I think that's really important. That being said, there still has to be fairness for everybody, so you can't do something like, 'Oh, everyone's handed it in, but now I've extended it for this person.' But no, nobody's challenged me on policy, I think partly because I feel I'm very approachable. If people have a reasonable, negotiated, compromise solution then I'm willing to work with that as long as it's fair to everybody.

Only one professor had a significant experience of being challenged by student/s with regards to the requirements of group work for her class; she ultimately made adjustments and reverted back to an original policy where she was more flexible on the issue of making group work mandatory in her class,

I don't think I have had a specific policy challenged, other than for a brief time when I was heavy-handed about requiring group work based on a directive from other colleagues who were more instrumental in creating this program. So for a brief time I was making group work a requirement rather than optional and I had a number of individuals challenge that policy for reasons that I shared with you: "It's next to impossible for me to meet with someone online because of my schedule, that's why I'm doing an online degree." So the way I addressed that situation was to revert back to my original policy, to encourage collaboration, to talk about the benefits of collaboration, but to indicate my willingness to allow individuals with unique situations to work on their own.

The most interesting discussion I found with a policy being challenged by a student came from the professor who required students to complete their final exam component in a face-to-face setting. No other professor had this requirement, except one,

The only policy that's been challenged by a student is the fact that I require them to pass the final exam component where I can watch them face-to-face and I know they took the exam. And a lot of times, if students don't do well on that, they're like, "It's not fair, right? I did well on all the stuff up until then. And my calculated grade still shows that I get my fifty whatever, so I should pass." And that's the only one they like to challenge. I just need to know that they did it. Because with the online quizzes and discussion board postings, I mean really anyone can be posting those for them.

This professor stands by this policy which is supported by the dean. This policy requirement did not arise in any of the other interviews. This professor indicated that when challenged on the matter, she says that "We meet and we have a discussion" and has "very good support from [her] dean. It's a clear policy; it's explained in the outline. And so it stands."

### **Course outline policy revisions**

Course policy revisions and changes were found to be quite common among all the professors interviewed. Almost every professor stated that in their transition experience they had to make themselves more flexible to serve the needs of the students and insure the success of the course. One professor very shortly after beginning her course with a pre-determined course outline said “I threw out my course outline in five minutes and said ‘Great!’” In doing so, she was adjusting to the need of a student to present an assignment outside of the convention of the traditional essay format. By making the adaptation, “four of the students learned a brand new technology because of me changing my assignment policy” when she allowed her class to “tell me what you know in a digital format, it doesn’t have to be an old school traditional essay.” It was a “big piece of learning for” this professor” when she “let students who know a great deal about the technology show” her and the class “other ways to represent things” and being open to this two way learning experience was very successful for her. In her interview with me she talked about the concept of lateral learning between the students,

So there was a ‘lateral learning’, I would call it, between students that didn’t come from me. It came from me giving permission to change the assignment completely and I opened it up to everybody else if they wanted to do a different format which was fair and equitable. It also translated to what they produced on assessment I ended up showing to my [other students in my other class] because it was so excellent. It was such a great, fun, visual movie that worked the literature and all the readings, but tied it in, in a really unique way.

The professor who had her group work policy challenged by students, eventually made a policy revision in her course outline.

What I found in my first course was that people were emailing me saying things like: “I took this degree because I’m very busy”, or “I chose an online degree because I have very irregular hours” or “I have young children” and “When you give us group assignments it’s really difficult for me and my preference would be to work alone.”

In being flexible and available to her students after class, one professor explained that in this way she was able to receive regular feedback from her students and as a result, decided to revise her course outline in response to student requests, adding a policy for class recordings,

I have always stayed after class in the room for a minimum of thirty minutes but certainly for as long as anybody wanted me to be there. I always made that clear right from the outset, perhaps not in the course outline – I don't recall whether I said that explicitly in the course outline – but in the first class, and then every class thereafter I would repeat as the class started my intention to stay after class to address specific issues and concerns. Some of the other policies evolved as a result of student requests, so I had multiple students say, "You know I was present tonight in class, this was a really useful discussion and I'd like to have the recording of it. Could you please send out the link to the recording?" Those requests evolved into a policy that each week I would send the link to the recording for the class – and it was very clear that viewing the recording was not a substitute for being in class. In some cases the need for specific policies was brought to my attention based on student requests.

The professor who introduced a policy for class recordings also found herself introducing specific periods for breaks and for raising questions. She could not recall specifically whether these procedures and policies were introduced into her course outline, but definitely knew that a few regular items were calendared into her class sessions,

Most individual or group assignment questions or concerns were dealt with in that thirty minutes at the end of each class. I was always in class about twenty minutes beforehand as well, but that was typically to help the presenter get set up, so it wasn't normally considered a good time to raise a specific question with me. I can't recall, frankly, how much of that was included in the course outline, or whether they were specific policies that emerged that I would then put in an email and send out to everyone. Things like, "during tonight's class the consensus was that we skip break for such-and-such a period and finish early." As those kinds of things emerged, which they typically did in the first or second class, I would put them in an email and send them out. In the subsequent class, the first couple of slides in the PowerPoint would recap the decisions that had been arrived at collaboratively in the last class. I should add that I have also used Survey Monkey with my students on occasion to arrive at consensus for things like: Should we take Reading Week off or March Break off or neither? Should we start earlier so that we can end earlier?

Another professor interviewed had a very similar experience with student feedback and subsequent request to record the Adobe Connect class sessions. She began by trying to recall how and when she first started to record her class sessions,

I'm trying to think of when I first started because every class had been so different. I had one class that was very small and my experience at [a college in Ontario] was lecturing to 100 students and so, I went from lecturing to 100 students to classes that were less than 30. So, at any rate, one of the things that I had to look at was, um... it was more awkward to, um, to make the corrections that students would, say in a live setting, students would raise something say at the beginning of a class, "oh this isn't fair," direct a lively conversation right then and there. When it's online, discussion is a little more difficult and some students are not comfortable with the technology so it has to be a bit slower process, we had to, the second time I taught it, I had to make sure that I went over how to access everything and how to look at it and make sure that they, you know, if they had questions. So I had students formalize a process of questioning and questioning for understanding of the course itself.

So a lot of the students in the class I'm teaching right now, they work 12 hour shifts, so once every two or three weeks they have to miss the class because of work, so I record them all and they can listen and I give them opportunities for um, involving themselves in the discussions- like I give them an opportunity on WebCT to make some comments and have some discussion about what went on in class so they can engage... but it's not ideal, it's just better than not being able to take a course.

When asked whether or not these allowances for periods of absence are a stated policy in her course outline, she replied: "It's something so far that I just talk about at the course start; it's not in my course outline." Another professor when asked about feeling the need to revise her course outline didn't initially have much to say. When I prodded her to share something anecdotal, she eventually remembered a situation involving a student who did not understand what was required for being in an online class,

So mostly our policy issues would have been around, you know, students who we didn't see for the first two or three weeks, and then when I finally found them face-to-face in the hall way. One of the students I met in my online class the first time at our university fair because he was volunteering as a student ambassador. And I said to him, "You haven't been in class the last month and a half." He's like, "Oh, I had to go?" He's like, "I thought it was an online class, so I didn't

have to- I could just read the book and do the exam and I'd be done.” And I'm like, “No no no. It's an online class, like you have to come and participate and discuss, you're losing all these marks.” And after that day he was there every single time, he had all these questions. It's like something finally woke up about how the course was supposed to work.

Another professor when asked to discuss instances of policy revisions with course outlines, could not think of anything at all,

I've been thinking about that. I really can't think of things and it's probably because the evolution for me has been so gradual over such long period of time, certainly assessment practices changed for me in terms of assessment policy, I think it had been the case in some of my graduate courses before I started online that I would allow students to rewrite assignments, that become part of my customary practice online to allow students the opportunity to rewrite, that's a shift in policy. There are some policy requirements from the University that are embedded in the course that have to be there – with plagiarism, and things like that, those policies are not my own they're the university's and so that's different because it's a different university but there were – there were always policies of that nature they weren't always necessarily included in the course outline that's been a cultural shift in Canada over the last few years or so.

When provided with a few specific examples concerning adjustments in accepting assignments, he recalled one area of policy he had introduced in his classes. He introduced a policy which stated “that you may resubmit work that you are unhappy with” however the student's mark in such instances could “only go up two steps on the mark ladder so from B- to B+ but it can't go up beyond a B+ and in no case can a mark go beyond an A-.” He explained that doing this protected “students who did well the first time” and these students who did well first time around never felt poorly about the other students rewrite opportunity, as “being [ ] an unfair advantage in getting to do a rewrite after having seen [the professor's] feedback.” He continued to say that,

I've never had anyone raise a question or a concern about [assignment re-writes] but I have on occasion made exceptions to that in situations very like the one you described to me, so if the student says to me that was the wrong paper, here's the right paper, my response would be.. that policy does apply. I take their word that you haven't suddenly rewritten the paper because if they do that then there's been a couple of cases with something like that where for example, I have seen, I've looked at a paper and read it and thought, this student has totally and completely

misunderstood what I'm asking them to do for the assignment, they've given me something so far removed from my intention that I don't think it's fair to assess this because I think they need to understand what I was asking for better so in that case I say to them "look, I want you to rewrite the paper before you start, it looks to me you didn't understand what you're supposed to be doing, a, b, c, I'd like you to resubmit, you can get whatever mark you get on the resubmission" and I always negotiate a time frame for that resubmission, if it's a ten days submission, they will get it to me in a week, that sort of thing and all of the detail in that policy has emerged since I started teaching online, but I think I would probably be doing similar things if I were teaching face-to-face.

This elaborate illustration is an excellent illustration of a circumstance for course outline policy adjustments in an online class setting.

### **Other course challenges and course outline policy implementation challenges**

The discussions with the professors covered the experience of the transitions to the online modality on a broad scale, and on a narrower scale also the transitions related to policy implementations. When asked about their three biggest challenges with policy implementation in moving into the online modality, the answer quite often overlapped with the challenges generally, versus their challenges specifically in the area of policy implementation.

Yes, I think that is the biggest challenge. Because the things that I would do in a face-to-face environment to pick up on their engagement, their eye contact, whether I'm actually reaching them, assessing whether they're getting it, you have to do different things online. That's one of the biggest challenges I think, learning how to do that classroom management when somebody could be completely checked out and watching their email, or watching a video. That actually happened in another teacher's class, when they happened to share screens at one point, and one of the students was watching a movie during class. They all laughed about it. So she mentioned this to me before I started teaching the course and I said 'How do you keep them engaged?' I think one of the things is that you have to have a lot of variety. People can't stay on task for more than fifteen minutes, so you have to go to break-out rooms and talk about this or go check out this YouTube clip and come back and 'What do you think about this?' It can't just be talking because then people get antsy.

As the interviews got underway, participants sometimes recalled "other challenges" that they experienced in their transitions. When asked about policy implementation challenges, one

professor was able to present her concern regarding certain online class room behaviour. The matter has not yet been written into a course outline policy, but remains an unresolved issue for her to look into regarding the establishment of a code of conduct for the students in the class who may demonstrate this behaviour,

There's one thing that comes to mind that I don't think I have addressed. In terms of challenges, I've talked about the multi-tasking on my part, but that's not really policy. There's a policy issue that I have not dealt with head on - and I'm just analyzing why I haven't dealt with it head on - but I do feel that on occasion, the chat in the chat box gets quite far removed from the ongoing presentation. For example, the first one or two exchanges in the chat box might be relevant, but now the speaker has moved on to a new topic and the chat for another two or three minutes still relates to that original point, but it's chat that's more informal. I occasionally have been on the verge of thinking 'I need to address this issue with these individuals'. Because I taught elementary school years and years ago, all those little children lines would pop into my head, like 'we have to be good listeners' and 'we have to be good audience members'. But there is an issue of respect when someone is speaking. You wouldn't in a brick-and-mortar classroom be whispering or passing notes back and forth, so nor should you be chatting in an ongoing way. If it was a really scholarly discussion, then the individual should raise their hand and say to the speaker, 'Before you move on, a couple of us are still wrestling with a point you made a couple of minutes ago.'

The primary concern for this professor was to determine how best to articulate a policy into her course outline, that would speak to her concern of inappropriate "chat room" behaviour in the Adobe Connect classroom. The behaviour in question she felt might not best be addressed in a course outline policy, but would do better as a verbal policy that could be articulated at the start of a class,

But in some cases the chat has got goofy, or related to a movie that was very loosely connected to something the speaker had said, and then just wandered off topic. So a couple of times I have thought, 'I'm going to have to rein this in here if these two or three people don't get back on board', and just as I've been on the verge of thinking, 'OK I'm going to have to do something', they've allowed the conversation to peter out. But it becomes awkward if you're interrupting the speaker to ask two or three of their colleagues to remain engaged in the conversation, then you have to weigh the pros and cons of that interruption. So that's a policy that I have not implemented, but given the two experiences that I can think of, I think when I teach the course again that I'll want to make that piece

explicit. It's awkward when it's adults that you're teaching, but I think that's something I'd want to make explicit, not necessarily in the course outline, but certainly in the first couple of classes.

Another professor had no trouble listing challenges regarding policy implementation and or course outline challenges. She stated that "the first [challenge] was my own learning curve in terms of the technology because I had been used to classrooms" and the other concerned the availability of technical support for problems that arose during the evening class period when no such support was available,

I teach in the evenings and tech support is closed in the evenings, so I, yeah I could not say to students, "ok, take a ten minute break I'm going to contact tech services and see what I can do to resolve this", because they weren't available. When I first started there was somebody there who was a staff member there who was knowledgeable about Adobe Connect. He was there the first class, so that was helpful but when I ran into technical difficulties or things I just didn't know about, there wasn't any. I couldn't say just take a break and I'll find out about this, um, in one of my grad classes there was a student who knew a fair amount about it because she had taken all of her tech courses online, and in undergrad courses it's less likely to get that kind of expertise, and so it was frustrating not to have support available.

When asked whether she felt that it should be part of the university's policies to have someone available at all times when courses are being held in the evenings, she responded that it would be,

...very helpful because there would be students who would say 'I can't log in, I can't seem to get this,' and I couldn't, I couldn't call tech services" due to that fact that this level of support was not available during the evening class periods. In the past when this occurred, there were students that would miss a whole class because of technical issues.

This professor felt that "somehow having some accessibility as a policy, having some accessibility of tech support for students and teachers in the evenings would certainly be helpful" for classes that are in session during the evenings. Another professor was generally concerned about the students' attitudes towards learning online and their ability to give this mode of

learning the priority it needed within their course load. He was concerned about “what students would think about the [online] modality” and had the perception “that we had laptops everywhere” and so this could “be a really easy transition for the students” who were moving into the online learning modality,

In terms of [students’] time management, in terms of their participation, it definitely was not. It became the back burner course where they were up front and center every week, they saw their professor in all these other courses, and this course became an afterthought. And so trying to set up the policies to ensure that this course got as much attention as it should on a weekly basis, I think was the one of the major challenges.

The professor who had the most experience with online courses said that “policy seems too big and too embedded a change.” She felt that introducing guidelines was more effective than a push for a stream of “policy language” in a course outline. In her classes she implements a policy of having certain “redundancies” with regards to information accessible for the students, but she felt that given the design of her course platform, there was no avoiding this aspect of having set policies in her course,

In the end, you can have policy instituted, but other people that have taught the same group of students have not needed to do this. The only reason why I instituted the redundancy and the abundance of information everywhere is because the three people teaching the same course and the students have a very very hard time figuring out who to ask what for. My colleague who teaches in the same program, she’s had no problems with them in that regard because she’s the only one teaching it.

This same professor had the challenge of dealing with policy clarity regarding her response time to email from students. She stated that she would always “strive to respond to their e-mails in a timely manner within a 48 hour period” but that the students’ expectations were a challenge and “students would send [her] multiple e-mails within a three-hour window saying, ‘you responded when I e-mailed you before’, oh my goodness, I’ve been waiting all this time.” The professor would in turn remind the students of the policy in “the course outline [that] says two days” were

required for the professor to respond, and in this anecdotal instance “one of those days was Friday night.”

### **Availability of course outline at registration**

Some universities make course outlines available to students prior to registration to allow for the opportunity for planning and preparation. All of the participants were asked to share their thoughts on whether the course outline should be made available at the time of registration, so as to allow students an opportunity to review policy expectations in advance of enrolling in a class. Of the six professors interviewed for this study only one thought that this was a bad idea; all other thought that it was a good idea to make the course outline available at registration. One professor stated that it was a good idea, but that it should be made clear in advance that the posted outline could be amended in the first few weeks of class. Another professor in support of this, without hesitation said,

That’s a great idea actually, and make sure that it’s clear because it isn’t in my first class outline about technological requirements, but that makes a lot of sense to make sure that the technology requirements are part of the course outline and a little bit more information about a synchronous session, like an Adobe Connect course. Yeah that would probably be very helpful, I think many students come in not quite sure what to expect because most of their classes have been in class [face-to-face].

The lone dissenting opinion on this issue was expressed here by one professor,

I think they have access to the University calendar, which has a lot of the policies. I’m not sure they need the course outline at the point of registration, and they do have a drop date that’s well into the course. So they can attend for several sessions and still drop the course and get their money back. For example, for the Fall courses our courses are only due to the Dean in August, where the students have registered long before that, so I don’t think that is necessary.

Another professor, thought it was a good idea, but felt there was a need for caution for professors in general, should there be a policy or requirement for making the course outline available at registration. This professor shared anecdotally that,

Well, I noticed this last time that I taught this course, and that was just the January to April 2012, that some students had gone on - over the Christmas holidays I guess - had gone on to [the learning management system] and seen the course syllabus. I had not anticipated that anyone would do that; I don't recall that anyone had been able to see it in the past. So people were downloading an older version of the syllabus because I hadn't updated it yet. I wasn't aware that anyone would be able to see it, but I had made some changes and because I hadn't uploaded the newest syllabus, people came to the first class with a certain set of expectations about readings or assignments from this older version of the syllabus. Bottom line, I guess we have to be consistent about that so professors know when a syllabus is going to be made available so that they can be sure to have the latest version uploaded.

In spite of her reason for giving a caution on this, this professor saw the merits of doing this and went on to say that,

I think there are all kinds of good reasons for having the course outline available before the first class, maybe even before decisions are made about what an individual student might be planning to enroll in. Everything from 'What are the assignments like?' to 'What are the policy expectations?' to 'How much reading is there?' So I would say, absolutely there is value in having a course outline made available two to three weeks before the registration period begins, and if it was going to be made available at any other time, it could be just made explicit to the student that what you see if you go online to look may be an old version of the syllabus so please check the date. The student should definitely be instructed that if they download a course syllabus outside the recommended time period that they should not depend upon the new course outline looking exactly like the one they download.

Another professor in agreement with making course outline available prior to registration said that that it would be better to allow students to be able to make the choice ahead of time, instead of having to go through the "drop and changes" during the first weeks of a class,

The more information students have when they're making a choice or a decision, particularly if they're going to be choosing between a modality and they haven't experienced different modalities before. Having that extra information to make a more educated decision is just going to save the drop and changes that happen during the first few weeks of the course.

One professor went as far to not only say that "I think it is a good idea if the course outline actually had policies in them" and continued to express that "I think the problem with an online

course is that it should have the ability to be treated as a distance education course” and spoke about that fact the students could also construct knowledge away from the class when “all the information is released at once and you can go at your own pace”

### **Course outline covering all policy scenarios**

The articulations of policies in course outlines may assist in alleviating problems in the online class room experience. But policy, as expressed by one professor, is meant to be a general guide,

Policy is the general standard for most cases, it cannot cover all possible cases. If it did, the document would be huge and no one would ever read it, it would be so massive. Once in your career, you may have a violent incident in your school or a transgendered kid in your school. Do you need to have it as a policy when it may never happen? I think a policy document needs to have general, broad statements, and within that there’s professional judgment. Otherwise it paints you into a corner and I think you have less flexibility. It should be a guiding document, not a Bible.

Another professor when asked her thoughts on whether course outline policy scenarios can cover it all, said that “I am skeptical about any attempt to create” a course outline meant to cover all policy scenarios. She went on to say that,

The kinds of human behaviour, whether online or not, is a function of a number of variables and more combinations of variables than could ever be covered in a policy. You know, everything from someone using the [Adobe Connect] general meeting room to talk to their cousin in Australia to someone using the same room to engage in some highly inappropriate conversation with someone else in the program. There are just as many possible inappropriate uses of online technology as there are types of human beings. So I can’t imagine how any policy could cover all of that, except to use very general and broad terms such as ‘the university has an expectation that students behave in a professional manner online that reflects well on the university’ or something that’s so broad as to actually end up being completely open to interpretation.

This professor continued to support her position, discussing possible scenarios that could arise, and how difficult it would be to accommodate for these in a defined course outline policy,

I can't really imagine that a course policy could cover all scenarios. Thinking of the kinds of topics our class deals with - ... – something really disturbing could happen. For example, in our unit on gender identity, someone could be presenting on that topic and say, 'I brought along with me tonight in my classroom my cousin who has just had surgical reassignment of his or her gender and is going to talk to you about it'. Then someone else in the course could express some distaste or some value judgment because of his or her personal history or perspective or world view or whatever. There'd be no way to anticipate that. Or the cousin who was brought along to be a speaker could have some kind of public breakdown in the classroom.

She went on to suggest that general guidelines would be more useful and effective, providing examples of broad language that could be used as guidelines for a class setting such as hers,

So other than 'Be respectful at all times' and 'Consult the Professor about any guests that you would like to have as part of your presentation', I don't know how else to cover that, and even if that was in writing, it doesn't prevent things happening. People's individual world views or religious perspectives infiltrate the arguments in my course all the time – by arguments I mean scholarly arguments, not contentious arguments... so the potential for feelings to be hurt or people to strongly disagree based on their own world views is very, very high. I don't know how you could possibly cover that in a policy document, I think it's much more dependent upon the type of climate that the teacher establishes, implicitly rather than explicitly.

Another professor considered that any attempt to cover all policy scenarios in a course outline would be difficult because it is "a very official process to change your course outline." Making changes was not something easily done, as "it's not something I can just do because I think it might work better, it takes, you know, a fair number of steps to change a course outline. So, you can't experiment with it very easily." Another professor pointed out that any attempt to cover all policy scenarios would make the course outline very difficult to read,

I mean my course outline policies have stabilized at this point because now the course has been offered six or seven times, so they're pretty stable now. But, I think generally there's always going to be those exception cases that come up. Whether that's because you had a whole bunch of activities planned and that's the day that the network stops working or that the server goes down or that something else happens. And to put a comprehensive set of policies into a course outline, it starts to get to be too confusing for students to even bother to read. So keeping it simple, and having the key important policies, and then knowing that you need a

certain amount of flexibility. I think that's usually the way that I like to go, just to keep that open.

Another professor cited an extensive course outline with full policy and assignment details; but did not consider this something she would want to do,

So for example, one of my colleagues that teaches a class face-to-face, his course outline is extensive, I think it runs about twenty pages. But the problem is, because he has every single assignment and every single rubric, every single everything, and I think, while very comprehensive, what happens if you decide to ditch assignment one? And you want to re-work it? Do you then have to re-work your whole course outline? I'm not sure what level of changes you can make to a course outline that you can do it independently and what you have to bounce back to the faculty council.

Another professor succinctly stated: "I think it's in the nature of human reality that we can't anticipate everything, situations change and individual people have individual needs, the requirements have to adapt to that". Thus he did not feel that a course outline could or should cover all policy scenarios. This professor went on to explain that "the course outline is meant to be a contract between the student and the faculty member about what's expected in the course." Just as with any other contract, he said that "you try to list the requirements in the contract but the human understanding is that there has to be room" for interpretation, adjustment and negotiation. He added "I actually have done that....negotiate assignments" and thought that "the course outline really is a contract that [often] serves....the faculty member better than the other party and yet it's there for the protection of that other party." He finished on this aspect by saying that "sometimes you have to do something other than what was stated."

### **Assessment**

The theme of "assessment" was raised often and was particularly relevant in the area of students' use of technology with assignments and presentations in the Adobe Connect class room

environment. One professor considered the problem of grading effectively and efficiently for students making presentations in video format,

So for those students that did a video – and everyone had the option to do that assignment – however if they chose an alternate assignment modality they also had to work with others who were doing that modality to make up the rubric that I was going to use. So each group of students made up a different one, and made up their own assessment tool. We talked about that, it's something we struggled with through the course, that I still at the end have to be able to evaluate you by giving a grade. So if you're going to choose this option, then you need to also be part of creating the rubric, and it's still going to count for 30% of your mark, or 40% of your mark. You need to take ownership of what you feel is a quality product if you're going to produce something that's original.

It was clear for this professor that “student input was very big, in terms of designing the rubric,” and to make it work efficiently and effectively “they did it in the break-out rooms collaboratively with their peers.” The use of peer assessment, and the evolution of effective and efficient online assessment was seen as something that would “evolve[ ] as the online community evolves, because it has to be a sense of trust.” One professor went on to say that “if I give you this assignment, which ended up being a lot more work than writing an essay for them, then you have to trust that I'm still going to evaluate it fairly.” When an alternate mode of presenting an assignment is used, the quality and standard of the work product is import and must be relevant; “it's still going to be to a certain standard, that it still has to tie in the literature, it has to do all the same kinds of things that a paper would do.” This professor explained that in her class the introduction of a different way of assessment as a result of allowing students to present their assignments in different ways, occurred with a number of steps,

But I was thinking, you know, it's not about the grade, it's that the amount of learning that happened because I changed that policy was huge. So the mark was something that happened at the end; it was not the most important part of the learning process. Where if I'd sat them down and said ‘Nope, everybody do an essay, this is the standard for what we're doing’, we would never have had that rich environment. Never. And it would never have changed this community; because they were helping each other - out of class time – make these movies.

Another professor teaching a different class, when asked about the assessment aspect of the course and if it changed midstream said that,

The presentation assignment was the only assignment that at one point I insisted be done collaboratively, so the assessment was not problematic. It simply went from being a group mark for two or three people on a presentation to an individual mark for a presentation, if it was being done by a single individual. So the weighting of the assignment remained the same: it was simply a matter of evaluating the quality of the content of the presentation and the quality of the discussion that was facilitated as a result of the presentation.

This professor discussing situations where assessment was “not problematic” stated further that “I was doing it the same way whether it was one person or two people or in one case three people.”

### **Technological Backdrop**

This section of my research study illustrates the various technological situations encountered as professors made their transitions. The follow section looks at how all students could have an equal footing with the different types of technology. Additionally, this section examines some of the technological difficulties experienced by the professors.

### **Technology requirements**

In initial interviews with professors, the matter of technology hardware and the functionality of the internet bandwidth came up naturally. For this reason, in later interviews professors were asked whether they thought that there should be a policy that informed students as to what type of computer, headset, and web camera they should purchase to participate in their synchronous online course. One professor felt strongly that,

I think it might help to have those minimum requirement standards up there and not admitting people until they can show that they have those minimum requirements. But that’s a bit exclusionary, right? We’re going to be limiting access that way. I don’t have an answer to the Adobe issues; we’ve been working

with the Teaching and Learning Center, they don't have an answer, nobody seems to have an answer at this point.

One professor added that the head of the department was looking into this issue and that discussions were already underway on technological requirements for all students as a matter of policy,

[the department head] was coming up with some very specific guidelines, not necessarily brand names, but 'You need this level internet access, this level of equipment, to make this work.' So there's a minimum requirement that's now going to be in the Grad Handbook that students must do. Now we don't have the overlay to follow through and say, for sure, do they have it or not, but those specific parameters are being put in place. Because it ruins the learning experience for everybody, not just the one student.

Some professors considered it a good idea to instruct students by way of a policy on the specific hardware and internet requirements essential for being successful in the online courses being held in Adobe Connect. One professor interviewed was quite emphatic that this ought to be included in the graduate program policies,

I think that's an excellent point. Somewhere, either on the grad program page, on the Faculty of Education site, or in the grad studies handbook, there is a general, broad description of hardware requirements, internet speed, recommendations for a headset and external mike. And I think that you're absolutely right, that can't be said enough. That is one of the most demoralizing components of online teaching – it's really the only demoralizing component of online teaching – the issue of someone not having a headset, the issue of someone using a portable internet stick and going in and out of connectivity. I think it's a faculty policy, but I don't think it is sufficiently entrenched and I don't know whether students are completely aware of it and choosing to disregard it - though I don't know why they would do that - but I think it wouldn't hurt to have that policy in a course outline even if it exists elsewhere.

One professor felt that such a policy was important, but that there was no backing by the administration in support of enforcing this policy. This professor has not attempted to introduce this as an course outline policy, but instead makes a general announcement before the class has

started, and feels that at times the students “hide behind the technology issues” as a way of avoiding the need to participate in class and also meet other class requirements,

I have said that in an announcement before the class started that you need to have wired internet, microphone, a headset and a camera. But I don't have any backing, I don't have any, anything that says “no you can't take the course if you don't have this”, and many of them are trying to do it from work or doing it from wherever, and they don't always have cameras and they don't always have the microphones working, and so their technology issues get in the way a lot, um, and some hide behind technology issues I believe, but I'm not sure, but I understand the question. Or [ ] some kind of policy that says they are responsible for having access to adequate technology, you know that, which includes you know, if they're taking online courses that they, like Adobe Connect courses, synchronous courses online, that they have to, that one of the criteria for engagement is the use of microphones and cameras or something like that would be very helpful actually. I'm not sure, the devil is always in the details, not quite sure how that would work, but if you're going to take a course like that you need to ensure that you have, this and that maybe they can be made available or something like that.

One professor did not feel that the enforcement of a computer make or model was necessary, that headsets should perhaps be mandated, but that insisting on the make and model of the headset was not necessary, but at the very least a guideline should be provided to the students as to the bandwidth strengths that would be optimal for being a part of the learning environment,

I don't think the make or the model of the laptop matters. I think pretty much anything that's on the market now can do what it needs to do. We have, in our faculty of [ ], we have students that do it from their I-phone and from their tablets. So I mean most technology now can handle the bandwidth and the requirements in terms of processing. The one thing that I think everyone needs to require is the headset microphones. Because if students don't have those and don't understand, and they have the open mikes, you get all kinds of feedback and it's a horrible experience. So I think headset microphones have to be mandated. I don't think it matters what kind. I think it just matters that there is one. And then, for the most part, I think giving a general guideline as to what the expectation is in terms of bandwidth and these types of things is helpful to students, to make a selection in terms of where they want to be when they participate. But for the most part, very few students are having issues with those, at least in our region.

Another professor was very emphatic in responding to the question of mandatory technological specifications, and felt that such a policy would be certainly prohibitive in the context that

technology was always changing. Therefore the introduction or enforcement of any mandatory requirements of technology would not be productive. This professor felt instead that showing the students how to run a bandwidth test and explaining the reason behind doing so would be a more effective way to go, and she did this by way of a demonstrative video using Camtasia,

Technology changes so fast, who knows whether Logitech will go out of business within the next three years. HP stopped making computers and laptops, so if that was the minimum requirement, we'd be up the creek. I think technology changes so much.....I'm afraid that you go through the trouble of making policy and then technology changes. I think if you run the bandwidth test that also covers the internet equipment and the internet connectivity because it measures upload and download speed. So I think that's going to be a smarter way to do it. It will also tell you if your computer is capable of connecting in the first place. The thing that I did this year that helped make the internet connect session run so much smoother is that I actually did a short little recording, a Camtasia \_\_ recording. So I took the screen as it was going to be presented class and I said, oh you know, this is what the screen looks like, if you want to go to chat, this is what you do. For the odd occasion when you want to speak, this is what you need to do, so I think that actually helped.

She explained that she made the importance of bandwidth tests clear to her students. Along with the bandwidth tests, they also needed to have internet access in the place where they study,

I think in the first year that I taught in the [ ] program,,.... some of these students were actually going to their kids' daycares to access the internet, because they did not have internet access at home and also when I did the recording, even if you didn't come to class and you listened to the recordings, whether it be on Camtasia or whatever, you needed a minimum bandwidth and those students did not have that. They'd say, oh, I need to get to the library, and I'm like, ya, but you really can't access the port for you to stick in the headphones at the library computer, so how are you going to listen, you can't turn up the volume, so how are you going to listen to the lectures or the conversation or the discussion. So I don't know if that constitutes a policy, but I've just made sure that they do have internet access that's not dial-up.

For the most part, the overall consensus seemed to be that an informational guide for the students on optimal hardware requirements would certainly prove useful, and that a policy worded loosely enough could prove to be helpful for an effective online class room experience,

I have recommended we did do that at the University of [ ], we said they must be working with a Windows based machine that it must have a particular chip, that it must have a certain amount of memory, that it must have a microphone but that requirement in that time was really necessary for a lot of reasons that in that certain time and in that location we had a fair number of students who wanted to take the course with Apple computers rather than Windows based computers and at that point in time the technology just didn't work well with those environments.

This professor continued to say that in this current era “almost all machines that you can get unless you're working with a five or six year old machine are likely to be able to handle the technology.” As a consequence to this, he felt that,

It is important for the university to make clear to people now that they need to have a fairly up-to-date computer with a video camera that works and a microphone that works but I think specifying the exact details of the requirements is probably not as necessary as it once was but I do think it's important that students know that they gotta have the technology on their desk in order to get value out of the course. I also think it's really important for the faculty to understand that when you're working with technology like these that it is incumbent on you to provide the students with alternative ways of learning..... There's a body of information out there... by students in the course that every student can get access to even if they have great difficulty, even if they never show up in class they have access to all of that information, they have access to all of the recordings of the course, I've been getting most of those recordings up online. They also have an extensive body of reading and an extensive list of bookmarks.

This professor created alternative ways of communication. Along with participating in the online session, contacting him by email, and other redundancies in the system of the learning platform; he feels are aspects that are “a necessity for a successful online course.” As such, he feels that “it would be useful to have a statement about the technology requirements” but he also thinks that “it's even more important for the faculty to be prepared to deal with technological difficulties to provide a variety of alternative ways to get access to course content.”

### **Fairness and effectiveness with technology**

Following on the discussion of technological requirements, all interviews followed through with the question of how the professor handled the aspect of fairness in the classroom.

This question centred on technological usage and the appearance of “advantage” in the class when one student had a higher level of technological aptitude and tools over another. It was a difficult question for most of the professors. In a number of responses, the matter of student assessment also emerged naturally. Fairness was discussed in the sense that if one student’s assignment had more “technological bells and whistles” over another, how can the grading aspect be scaled to ensure fair and consistent assessment of the students’ work product. One professor’s way of addressing this issue was to start by keeping an open dialogue with her students. She interpreted the question as being one for assessment and fairness within the use of the technology more so than the use of the technology in their work product. She spoke primarily of this in the context of group work and assessment within the technological environment of Adobe Connect,

Keeping an open dialogue and clear communications, clear expectations that are negotiable within reason and that there’s a certain level of responsibility and freedom that go together hand in hand. I think the other piece is that when you’re giving a mark for participation in an online class you have to really be aware of English Second Language learners, and those students who are just naturally less talkative. Because you can judge their engagement in a face-to-face environment, but it’s harder when they say nothing online. I had an experience with one student who was just a very quiet student - I was told beforehand that she was very quiet – and she wrote about it in her final portfolio, how she felt that her language wasn’t as competent, and that she wasn’t as confident. So I find that challenging in terms of evaluating participation. Also, how can you fairly evaluate participation when you can’t possibly be in every break out room? In a face-to-face classroom, when I have my four work groups, I can have my radar on and sort travel around more easily hearing conversations. Whereas popping into the middle of a conversation in a break out room, and then completely leaving and being out of it. I think that’s a lot more difficult to gauge participation level, so I think what you have to do to make it equitable is to have peer assessment and self-assessment.

The professor who used group work via Adobe Connect felt that the fairness aspect within the technology, was easily addressed by utilizing peer assessment and having the students themselves participate in the design of the rubric for assessment,

Really, each group designed their own rubric for participation and all four groups did it differently: some used pass-fail, others designed an elaborate chart. So I think they know who's engaged or not. And some people will talk very freely in a break out room, but not in the large group. The ESL student said 'I feel much more comfortable presenting my assignment in a small group, I would never do that in a large group.' You can't fault someone for that, right? So it makes sense to have peer assessment and self-assessment, and to use things like private chat. If you see someone is not participating, maybe there's something going on, maybe they're dealing with their children or their dogs or some other thing that has happened. Perhaps they're not feeling well that day.....there are things you cannot assess since you can't see their body language; you can't see their facial expressions.

One professor spoke anecdotally of his experience with technological disparity within his class,

So on only two occasions have I taught [a] course where there were people in the course for whom this was their very, very first online class. So for the most part, I have had students who have gained some degree of confidence using the technology in other classes before they've come to me. Most students like to get their required courses out of the way before they take a course in a cluster that's not required. I haven't really had to deal very often with anyone who has absolutely no idea how to lead the class through a particular discussion or presentation. But I've certainly had individuals who were much more highly competent than others. I have one part of the assessment piece of the presentation – one component of the rubric – says something like 'effective use of technology in presenting the content of your seminar.'

This professor continued to expound on the range of technological capability and aptitude amongst her students, then naturally evolved into the area of rubric and assessment with the use of technology. She explained how she allocated marks for the student being assessed while giving a presentation in the Adobe Connect classroom,

That's only one component, one criterion, in the somewhere between five and eight criteria I use to evaluate an assignment. I certainly would not deduct marks because someone was hesitant or asked for assistance – and that has happened often – you know, something like 'Oops [professor name], where did that pod go, can you bring it back for me?' I would not deduct marks for that. But where that confidence with technology really tends to show up is in the ways they were able to engage their peers' attention, or the ways that they were able to solicit input from their peers in discussion groups. So if they put people in break-out rooms and knew how to assign note-pods to each break-out room with specific questions on each note-pod in each break-out room – that's where I could evaluate them,

not just on technology for the sake of technology, but on what it allowed them to accomplish. That grade would show up in another criterion on the rubric as well.

One professor had much to say on the “fairness with technology” discussion,

As an example, if someone was leading a seminar and said ‘Does anybody have any input they want to offer on this particular topic?’ and waited ten seconds, but nobody offered any opinions or questions, then they simply moved on. Then that would indicate to me that they were lacking some strategies for engaging their students and soliciting student input. But what I would remark upon is the student who recognized that people are often more comfortable talking in small groups than in large groups and had planned for that, by arranging the break-out rooms where people could speak to groups of three or four and allowing for a note-pod to be taken. So that when one representative from each break-out room was reporting back to the main meeting room, they would have this written piece of text from which they could draw to frame whatever argument they were going to make when they rejoined the main meeting room.

This professor continued to say that “in most ways they used technology to show what they inherently knew about good pedagogy.” Additionally, this professor further informs that there are alternatives and “there are low-tech ways around that as well, but not ones that are as effective as the use of break-out rooms.” By way of clarification she said “I guess what I’m saying is that I did not evaluate technology in terms of great window-dressing or sound effects or bells and whistles. I evaluated how well it was used from a pedagogical perspective.”

Another example I can think of is that one student, when she did her presentation, just brought up the whiteboard screen and said to everyone, ‘Grab the text button and write the first thing that comes into your mind when I say....’ and I’ve forgotten the example, but perhaps it was something like ‘bullying’. So then she had this whiteboard filled with eighteen different kneejerk responses to the word ‘bullying’. That’s fairly low-tech, but it required her to think, ‘Here I’ve got this whiteboard to create a hook to start my seminar on bullying’. So that’s what I was grading, not just tech savvy so to speak.

I just thought of another quick example: if somebody used the polling tool – you know how you can use a polling tool in Adobe Connect – and maybe asked some interesting questions (or some not so interesting questions), then displayed the results but that was it. Then they never referred back to the poll data, never said something like ‘You know how at the beginning of the class only 40% of us believed homophobia was an issue in elementary school classrooms, but now that we’ve had this seminar I wonder if those numbers would change?’ My point is

that I didn't have a checklist for 'Did they use the polling tool?', 'Did they use a web tour?', 'Did they use break-out rooms?' If they used one of the features but it didn't have make any pedagogical sense or they didn't tie in what they were doing to a larger context, then I wouldn't have said 'Hooray, they used the polling tool! That shows technological interest or savvy.'

Sometimes it wasn't just technological aptitude and capability that arose as a challenge with the "fairness with technology" issue; other times it was that students were shy and uncomfortable with doing presentations, and this compounded with the technological inaptitude was something given special consideration by one professor,

I have them make presentations and they can work either individually or in a group, but they still have to hand in... for instance, if two people work together to create an online resource, then they have, the two of them have to create two online resources, so it's no less work to do it in a group than it is to do it singly. Ok, I had one student saying that she was very, very shy about making presentations and I said if you can do it on Camtasia beforehand, or if you can't figure out Camtasia or bring somebody to help you then I will open up an Adobe Connect room and we'll do it, you know, with you as presenter and we'll tape it from there. So, sometimes I have to help them work around their, um, lack of experience in certain technical areas, including my own because I'm not good enough at Camtasia to help somebody else, I usually get help myself [laughs] you know, so some of it is my own technical limitations.

Peer reviewed assessment was very common amongst the professors, when assessing student's content knowledge within the use of the technology. One professor felt that too many "bells and whistles" at times are an indicator of a lack of substance in the content area,

Yeah, so the students record them. Then I have peer reviews that are done. And I have rubric for the students so that they can do the peer reviews and I can take those into consideration as well as my own assessment. And so the rubric has, and all the students know ahead of time, there's 10% for use of technology, creativity, whatever you want to put into that bucket, and then they have 15% for professionalism of the presentation and style and editing and those types of components. And then the rest is based on content. And so when they have that specified rubric and they all know ahead of time what those mixes are, that helps the students then figure out do they want to spend more time and effort on content? Or do they want to add those bells and whistles and make it quite entertaining, which some of them do. But usually the ones that are overly entertaining, that means they're having trouble with the content piece.

Allowing the student to record their presentations in lieu of presenting live in class was a consistent way for accommodating students that had difficulty with the technology, or discomfort with a live presentation. Another professor also always gave them the option to record, and would not penalize a student regardless of the choice taken for submitting the assignment,

But I always give them a choice to record. So they have one last week and another during this week and it's always either you can present it in class or you can record it and submit it as a recording and it's entirely up to them. I don't penalize them either way because again, there is a time management issue and a scheduling issue.

With regards to the assessment piece subject to how a student may choose to submit an assignment, this professor focused primarily on the content more so than the technological creativity,

.....it depends whether or not I stated that specific thing in the rubric, whether I got some marks for creativity or whatever. Most of the time I don't, so what I want is I want clarity and I want conciseness and they are only ten minute talks so sometimes they beg and listen and lead you astray. I have given, just a different example, with the talk that was due last week, some of the students did a fantastic job visually, creatively, whatever, while other students thought they did a boring PowerPoint which I disagreed because PowerPoint was quite sufficient and other students didn't prepare a visual aid so they just talked. One of my students had the camera on himself and he was recording it, and I'm like oh my goodness, you wasted so much energy doing that [ ] it has no value except being able to look at his face. So I don't penalize that because I have that in my rubric. Maybe next year I will, but then again.... That's not the crux of the course. The crux of the course is not how tech-savvy and how beautiful you can be online.

Another professor believed in being very liberal with assessing students in the technological environment. He felt that because this was an online environment, it was more important for the students to be participating and sharing their learning, and so he actually didn't not guide this aspect of his course by way of rubric because he was, "afraid that the rubric would impose penalties" on the students to do more than he wanted them to do beyond sharing in the online

classroom. The professor stated that he would tell his student that “the objective for me, of the presentation has to be with sharing your own learning with your class” and he believed that this was “particularly important in an online course because students sometimes don’t get the opportunity to talk to one another and they generally are extremely happy about what they hear from their colleagues.” He went on to say that “the opportunity to learn from others learning is usually really something” and this brought out great experiences for him in his classroom. This professor’s policy with regards to the “fairness with technology discussion” was that he “let the students know that in general the marks for the presentations, as long as you do it, are going to be quite good; they may not be perfect but I’m not going to fail a presentation.” In doing it this way he was able to alleviate the anxiety for his students “so that they can be relaxed.”

### **Having a back-up plan for when the technology fails**

One professor was a strong advocate that the professor should have a backup plan for instances of technological failures,

I do think it is important that student have access to other methods of contact faculty when the technology fails, I don’t know that I think that a policy would be necessary to make that happen I think it would be a voluntary practice.

He felt that in teaching in an online environment that it was important to make availability for the possibility for telephone contact, in addition to an alternative for the face-to-face contact, along with the online structure. Another processor felt that “There have to be at least two back-up plans, where people can go and continue class when something happens, because there isn’t going to be a perfect technology.” The technological capabilities is one thing, but “We have to remember that we’re still the human beings using the technology, it’s not using us,” and this professor’s conviction is that “We can’t flail around in despair and say, ‘Oh, Adobe doesn’t work, life’s over!’” In setting up a backup plan, the professor should be mindful that “There are

a million things out there to use, so [the professor needs] to make people aware that there's a variety of platforms." One professor went as far as saying that "I think part of the answer [for dealing with technological difficulties] is allowing students to choose the modes that work best for them." She felt that having a back-up plan with different options was essential: "if Adobe shuts us down, where are we going to go? Are we going to go to Google Docs, are we going to go to Twitter, are we going to do a conference? You know, like we just did [when Adobe Connect crashed during our interview, we had to revert to my back up plan of doing the interview by phone]. You had a back-up plan for your interview today."

### **Synchronous and a-synchronous settings**

One professor taught at a local college and a local university. This experience gave her insight into the different ways of approaching the different online models. She compared one synchronous school with another asynchronous school,

Yes, it was very different. I felt that [the college] blended courses such that it really depends on the motivation and discipline of the learner. I think it only works for a certain type of learner who can stay focused. I would find in the face-to-face sessions that some of them had done the work, some of them had not done the work. Whereas at least in [the university] you're sort of in a synchronous face-to-face space...you can still pick up on whether somebody's done the readings or if they're just hiding in the background. There's another layer of management there. I also feel that with the chat box in the side, that's where all the side jokes and the inside jokes happen, which doesn't happen when you're just logging on a posting to Web CT. I hate reading those and I hate giving them as assignments because I feel like people just churn them out, which is what I did. I was not engaged by that kind of learning.

This professor had a lesser preference for the asynchronous because "we teach according to what we know works for us and have to challenge ourselves to find what works for other types of learners." The engagement piece she sees as a concern because she "thinks it's really very hard to be engaged by asynchronous learning, such as 'Check out this PowerPoint' or 'Check out this

video and then we'll come back and talk about it' or 'Post your thoughts in WebCT'. It's not as interactive at all as I would like a class to be"

### **Policy categories**

#### **Mandatory university policies**

The participants were all asked to talk about any policies that were mandated by their university in context to their online learning classroom. One professor stated that,

The same ones that apply face-to-face, like plagiarism, all the regulations and rules, everything that is in the regular the university calendar applies to online learning. Privacy policies, harassment policies, anything that's in the regular policies and procedures, just assume that it goes into the online environment as well.

Another participant was only aware of a few such policies, and that most guidance or requirements on this level came out of formal and informal department meetings,

The policies that are mandated by the University – the ones that I'm aware of – have to do with number of hours of instruction, number of courses required for the degree, at what point a thesis or a project can be begun... Those are the only policies that I'm aware of, and I don't believe that other than that there are specific policies about how to conduct your course. There tend to be both formal and informal discussions. The formal discussions occur at grad program meetings where there's some sharing. But other than that in order to get feedback around best practices it's soliciting colleagues whose opinions you value, or colleagues you know have at least as much experience as you teaching a course online. So, some formal, but probably more informal discussions.

Another professor had no knowledge about any mandatory university policies, she was "embarrassed to say that [she didn't] know," and: "it might be stuff that I just intuitively know, but I can't remember reading policies about my performance as a teacher online." The student teacher ratio was a concern and was noted as a university policy, which was required as expressed by one professor,

The only policy we have is actually more around class size and scheduling, than it is around what the course has to do. So in terms of the creativity that we have, in

terms of which tools we use, and those types of things, that isn't mandated other than we have to use our learning management system. But the university restricts the class size for our online courses to 35 students. And that's just so that there can be a level of engagement that makes sense.

Students' attendance requirements seemed to an unclear policy requirement of the university,

As far as I'm concerned, we're not taking attendance in our face-to-face classes, and we don't really care whether they come to class or not. We should have the same attitude in an online environment. So if a student enrolls and doesn't come, why should it be our responsibility to chase after them.

Another professor felt that he ought to be aware of mandatory policies, but admitted he was unaware: "I should be aware of the policies but the truth is I don't really pay a lot of attention."

He admits that he would "read the policies" and try to "incorporate them into [his] thinking."

This professor felt that he would "more likely to be demanding of [himself] than the university or the faculty policies might be" and so he basically self regulates himself on the general policy matters.

### **Challenging the institutional policies required by the university**

In the interviews I also talked with the participants about university policies they were aware of that they felt were difficult, unnecessary, and even challenging,

I don't think so at this point. The university is growing fast and there's certainly academic freedom. I'm not sure about this new [degree] program because I think they're being fairly prescriptive in terms of the way they want the courses. So I'm not sure if I can follow through with that the way they asking for because of my teaching style. But other than that, I don't think there are any policies I think are unreasonable.

Another participant had more of a personal philosophical dilemma regarding challenges for her with respect to university policies. It was more a matter of personal adjustment for her than anything else,

Oh, ok, well my background is secondary school and I only began teaching at the universities after a number of years in secondary schools, so teaching is, so the challenges of teaching were clear to me and something that I'd experienced and

so, I think if there was a challenge for me it was that I was an administrator in high school, I, most of my teaching was to adults and it was informal teaching, it was professional development, and so I find it a little bit of an adjustment to be back to marks and deadlines and the structure of a university which is six times variable output, do you know what I mean by that? Um, if you want somebody to learn something and you need them to learn it then you've got variable time. You know, like some people will take ten hours and some people will take 30 hours to learn the same thing, so you give the people 30 hours who need it. If you have six times variable output, that's the way all the schools are organized, so a credit in university or high school is 110 hours of work and at the end of that you pass or fail. I'm much more comfortable with, let's work on this until you get it right [laughs]. So the adjustment for me was going back to the very structured credit policies. You have to finish this in these seven weeks or you're a failure. So that's not so much a teaching dilemma as a philosophical dilemma.

This professor went on to explain that “what constitutes a blended course or an online course in my faculty is different than what they offer in [another department]” and this is also “different than what they offer in [another department].” In short as things stood on university policies, she felt that it “meets the needs of our students and the types of courses that we're offering.”

### **Guidance for best practices within online learning settings**

After talking about transition challenges in so many different contexts, it was natural to ask about what type of guidance was received by each individual as they evolved into this new way of teaching students. One professor said that “the summer before I started my first teaching, my first class, there were sort of online tutorial sessions to help us get acquainted with Adobe Connect, which was very helpful.” She additionally reminded me of an earlier disclosure about that the university basically “had someone available for my first class, that kind of hung around and sat in the class” and was available to assist with any difficulties that arose with using the technology. Another professor didn't have much to offer on best practices available from his university, but mentioned that he and his colleagues “looked at some of the research out of the University of Central Florida”, a university with a track record of offering online courses. This professor stated “mostly we were trying it out with our student population. We all have laptops

here. That's the unique thing about our university--it's the laptop campus. So we were hoping that tech-savvyness would make the transition to online easier.” One professor said she availed herself of the services of “people at the Teaching and Learning Centre” at her university, as well as using “newsletters from a group called Teaching Faculty or Faculty Focus” and she also “subscribe[d] to a lot of newsfeeds.” The professor that had the most teaching experience in both the face-to-face and online settings stated that initially,

My biggest resources, my biggest influence were colleagues who had already taught in an online environment including one who was willing to come in with me on first days that I would teach my first class and the students already knew her. I had extensive discussion with her about how to work [the technology], she made the course outline with me and made suggestions. She pointed out to me for example the need to ask everybody – to greet everybody by name and ask everybody periodically if they had questions.

The participants often went off script, ranging beyond the scripted questions for the interview. Here are some areas which they discussed concerning their transitions to the online setting. The themes below are not presented in any particular order. Insofar as possible they are placed in a coherent relation to each other.

### **Managing student expectations**

With regards to managing students’ expectations of the course and the professor, one participant stated,

I think that they expect me to be an expert [laughs]. I’m an expert in the subject matter but not in the technology. So, I think that I have to make that clear right away. Sort of less so then the first time I taught, but I have to make that clear that I’m not an expert at this technology. So I actually assign students to remind me to record, remind me if they, you know, if I’ve forgotten to activate microphones or something like that [laughs] so I encourage them that if things, you know, if you can’t hear me or whatever to make sure that they call me on it, you know, that sometimes I do something wrong or I forget to make an adjustment to a setting or something.

Another professor was asked about her use of the course outline to manage student expectations in the asynchronous discussion components of her course,

Well, so in the course outline, I added some extra components in terms of course expectations, in terms of participation, increased the participation element. So in my in-class, I may have had 5 or 10% for participation. Because I would see the students and they were used to having to participate in face-to-face discussions. When I moved online, that participation got really jumbled. And a lot of them thought that just adding an “I agree” counted as participation when we were doing online chats and those kinds of things. And so really defining what participation meant and what a contribution should be, I had to put some examples around those within the course outline so that that was much more clarified for them.

One professor had experience as a student in the online setting and so was quite empathetic and able to relate to students’ expectations. She too had experience with being unfamiliar with the technological features of Adobe Connect. Her expectations “of her students and experience as a Master’s student” helped her to adjust to the needs of the students in her class who were unfamiliar with this type of learning platform. This professor saw her advantage with “knowing how comfortable [she was] with technology compared to what the average comfort level of my students was” and she made significant accommodations to adjust to her students’ needs and expectations.

### **Policies and age demographics**

One professor was asked whether or not she saw a difference with teaching for a different age group say undergraduates as opposed to graduate students.

That’s a really good point, and that was actually running through my head when I was answering. Yes, absolutely. The vast majority of my grad students have been practicing teachers or professionals in some particular area; they weren’t 22-year-old graduates fresh out of an undergraduate degree. So, you’re right, on my part there was a lot of expectation that people kept up and that people would behave as professional, mature adults. I didn’t have the need to make explicit my expectations – e.g. if I see your name in the attendance list that means you’re engaged, and if you’ve left the room for any reason please indicate that you’re away – I never felt the need to make such policies explicit because I was dealing

for the most part with students who were anywhere from their late 20's to their 50's, and there was just a level of professionalism that was understood.

Given the above disclosure, this professor felt “that probably, at an undergraduate level, those were some things that I would have been more proactive about” in contrast to dealings with her graduate students.

### **Netiquette policy**

One professor thought that it would be a good idea to have a netiquette policy in the course outline for any online course,

It might help to have a policy of netiquette, e.g. if someone's host in the class, don't [adjust] the screen because it ruins it for everybody. That's part of the learning environment, that's part of learning online, there's an additional learning curve.

The difference she points out is that in a face-to-face setting, students learn socially to get along, and also you learn the class characters and their respective roles in the class room. This professor feels that in the online classroom this dynamic can be used to everyone's advantage,

In a face-to-face environment you learn socially to get along, you learn who the characters are in the class and the roles they play. So in the online environment, you have not only 25 different learning styles, you have 25 different levels of technical ability. You don't know who is really good with tech, or who isn't. It might be an idea to have students self-identify, who has more expertise with technology and maybe buddy them up with someone who's not as technical.

In short, she does not “know if [the above approach] would help”, and feels that she would not “want to have any of that in policies” and instead feels that this is more on the order of a teaching strategy.

### **Summary of Findings**

This section summarizes the findings from the six interviews with professors who recently transitioned from teaching in the face-to-face to the online modality. The participants mentioned policies that were already implemented in their courses as well as policies that they

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were considering for implementation in future classes. A few policies were also mentioned with regards to mandatory requirements of the university. The key findings from the interviews are listed below:

### Course policies implemented:

1. The final exam component must be taken in a face-to-face environment.
2. Group work is a mandatory requirement as part of the final grade determination.
3. All class sessions will be recorded and made available to all students in the class.
4. Students' decision to view the recording of a class does not substitute for being present in class.
5. The professor in all class sessions will have periodic intervals for breaks.
6. Students absent from class sessions who have reviewed the recorded sessions will get an opportunity to participate in discussions via WebCT.
7. Students are allowed to re-write assignments subject to certain criteria as given by the professor.
8. Students will be informed of the professor's response time to emails received from students.
9. Students are allowed to submit assignments in alternate formats (e.g. video recording/video essay) other than the traditional essay type.
10. Students are required to do peer review assessments and also required to assist with the design of the rubric for these peer review assessments.

### Course policies being considered (and desired),

1. Students need to be respectful and mindful of the discussion topics that take place in the Adobe Connect chat box as they can be a distraction from the professor and other students.
2. A technical support person must be available to assist professors during the evening class sessions for any technical issues that could arise in the Adobe Connect classroom.

3. Professors must list the technological requirements for attending online classes via Adobe Connect.
4. Professors must establish a backup plan for instances when the technology of Adobe Connect fails to work as expected.
5. Professors must inform students of a netiquette policy with regards to behaviour in the Adobe Connect classroom.

In reviewing the six course outline policies received by the participants in this study, I found the following policies. The course outlines received were from the most recent classes taught by each participant.

Course outline policies found in different course outlines were as follows:

1. Final grades may be adjusted to conform to program or Faculty grade distribution profiles.
2. Students are expected to post reflections and responses to colleagues in WebCT on 6 (out of possible 11) class topics.
3. Most assignments will be returned in class within a time frame suitable for the professor to mark a large number of submissions.
4. Students who receive a grade of C or lower on an assignment are eligible one time only to re-write the assignment making use of the feedback provided on the first attempt to improve their grade. The due date for the re-write will be negotiated between the student and the professor.
5. A negotiated late assignment is an assignment that has been handed in late, but with the permission of the professor. The professor and student, through discussion, have mutually agreed on the time/extension and penalty (if applicable) that the student will receive to hand in the assignment.
6. The professor will consider individually, rare extenuating circumstances, which may cause an assignment to be late. The student must provide documentation to validate the extenuating circumstance, which might include hospitalization, death of family member or significant other. It will be at the professor's discretion to work out the extension in this situation.

7. [University] and faculty members reserve the right to use electronic means to detect and help prevent plagiarism. Students agree that by taking this course all assignments are subject to submission for textual similarity review to Turnitin.com. Assignments submitted to Turnitin.com will be included as source documents in Turnitin.com's restricted access database solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism in such documents for five academic years.
8. If, for any reason, a student misses an in class assignment or test (including a midterm test) for a legitimate reason and can provide appropriate documentation within five (5) days, s/he will not be penalized. Legitimate reasons are illness or death in the family and appropriate documentation is an original [University] Medical Statement signed by your health care provider or a photocopy of a death certificate respectively. Once the documentation has been proven valid it is the responsibility of the student to negotiate alternative arrangements with the course professor and set a new deadline for completion.
9. If a group assignment is handed in late, all members of the group will be penalized. If one student is found to be guilty of plagiarism or cheating, the entire group will receive the same penalty as determined by the instructor. As a group you are responsible for all group projects and assignments. The only difference in group members' marks on group assignments will be based on the peer evaluation done at the end of the term.

In summary, of the six course outlines reviewed, three of them had a section for policies clearly identified containing policy and procedural items. There were three course outlines received that had no policy section included; and where very little instructions or guidance given to the students with regards to class policies.

### **Chapter Five: Document Analysis of Course Outlines**

In my analysis of the course outlines received from the six participants in my study, I found that not all course outlines had a section just for policies. I reviewed these course outlines for any policies that were relevant for professors' transitions from the tradition to the online setting. Three of the course outlines had a section for policies marked with a clearly defined section heading. These sections had some policies that were reflected in the data collection, but

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the contents of these sections were sparse in contrast to the formal and informal online policy details that came out in the interviews. The policy language found in the course outlines I received were mostly specific to the university with regards to general matters, and less so for specific matters as it relates to the online experience and the related transitions for professors and students.

## **Chapter Six: Discussion**

Within this discussion section, key theories related to online learning, policies and technology are reviewed, and discussed relative to the findings of this study. First, with respect to learning in the online modality, Anderson's (2004) position that an effective model of the online experience contains segments where the experience is assessment-centered and community-centered, was consistently reflected throughout the data in the study. The findings of this study also indicate that a sense of community and belonging do and can exist in the online learning setting. All the professors interviewed utilized group work and "in class presentations" in their synchronous Adobe Connect classrooms, and found these to be effective ways for the students to build community, network, and learn from each other. The learning from each other was evident not only in the literature, as Anderson talks about a "learner centered" and "knowledge centered" (2004, p. 35) learning experience, but it was clearly evident in the data. The data showed that students were able to figure out and learn new content and technological capabilities to share not only with other students but also with the professor. This sharing came out in the data where one professor referred to it as "lateral learning" where the learning did not come from the professor but between the students themselves.

The social component of learning is discussed in the literature because it could be absent or present in the online learning environment, regardless of whether it is synchronous or asynchronous. Vygotsky (1978) teaches us that the ability to build knowledge in a social setting is important for learning. Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) emphasize its importance for a higher educational learning experience. There was no doubt that this social component of learning was evident and consistently noted throughout the data synthesized for this study. The participants in the study all spoke about the use of break out groups in the Adobe Connect classroom, and also

that they encourage students to work amongst themselves outside of the online classroom. In the study there was evidence of a few instances where students found group activity difficult due to life schedules, but in the overall it was frequently and productively used in the online teaching experiences of the participants in this study.

In reality however, challenges of life schedules with regards to face-to-face classroom collaboration has always been difficult to coordinate as well, but in the online environment, this difficulty is notably supported by the technology. Individuals in the face-to-face or even the online classroom are able to use the technology to connect and collaborate when their schedules make it difficult for them to synchronize meetings on a regular basis. This ability to use the technology to augment the classroom experience (traditional or otherwise) is a notable reference made in the literature by Chickering and Erhmann (1996) who state that the technological innovations that we have at our disposal are certainly great tools for facilitating advancement of the “Principles of Good Practice ” (p. 1) in higher education.

Kennewell (2001) refers to these as affordances of technology which allow us to have many options for collaboration beyond the limitations of geography and time constraints. The technology that exists has, in fact, allowed students and professors to have more options for meetings and discussion. In contrast, in the past when the only option was to do so face-to-face, there were challenges of being able to meet face-to-face due to geographical distance, adult learners’ other responsibilities, and the fact that quite often in a face-to-face setting in higher education, it is rare to find students being able to stay back after a classroom session to meet with professors, because they invariably need to rush off to take care of family, and /or the personal and work matters of their lives.

Similarly, Ladd (2012) notes that, now that we have this technology, which is growing and changing so rapidly, the challenge for higher education professionals is to harness and manage the technology in ways in which we take advantage of opportunities to create communities. Not all technologies that already exist or are currently evolving, will be consistently conducive to all the paradigms of educational policy development and pedagogical perspectives for the best learning approaches in higher education. The findings of this study indicate that when professors are making the transition to a new, synchronous, online setting they may not initially be aware of all of the benefits or affordances of the technology, but gradually begin to enjoy the online teaching and build strategies such as tech support and back-up plans.

Another finding of the study illustrates that range of students' facility with technology also makes it difficult for professors' to make transitions to the online setting. For instance, one professor interviewed spoke about something basic as an experience with a student that was unable to make the distinction between a distance learning model and a synchronous online learning model. This is perhaps something that could be looked as a policy analysis and development piece by the university, so that students are clear regarding the differences before registering for the different online course offerings that are arising within universities and colleges.

Related to this, is the policy issue of whether or not course outlines should be available to students prior to their registration for a class. The general consensus coming out of this study is that providing the course to students in advance of registration can only help to make online transitions easier for everyone (professors and students alike). The findings of this study would suggest that a university that adopts a policy of explaining its online offerings (such as the distinction between distance learning versus online learning) while at the same time making

course outlines available to student prior to registration, is an institution that is better poised for the online transitional evolution.

Based on the findings of this study, and others (e.g., Wallace, 2007) policy analysis and development is clearly an area in which universities need to set priorities and to which they should give attention as they develop more online learning opportunities for their students. The findings of this study show that there is a strong potential for the use of technology and how it can augment learning in the online setting. The findings, as well as the literature review, show that policy development is lagging behind this vision, and also shows that policy development for online courses is not high on the agenda by universities in general.

Levin (2007) clarifies for us that it is essential to have rules and procedures to govern human behaviour, and it is clear that all the technological capabilities now at our disposal in education will give rise to different challenges. The need for new policies to replace technologically outdated policies is one of the keys to a smooth and effective online classroom experience. It is very clear in the literature (e.g., Levin, 2007; Wallace, 2007) and from this study that universities need to have a stronger and more defined focus on educational policy for the management of the online learning environment. While there is some attention given to it at present, the areas of focus are quite inconsistent amongst professors and universities in general.

Reviewing the literature on online learning and the findings of this study, the themes were quite consistent in both; there were no elements of the literature that were found to be inconsistent with the data. Further to this discovery, the data brought out more information beyond the scope of the literature review such as the professors' personal views about teaching online and the various circumstances they encountered. One thing that is clear and the strongest theme for the literature and the data study, is that it is a difficult and challenging evolution for a

professor to transition from the face-to-face to the online class room setting. Wingard (2004) illustrates this well and points out that a number of adjustments need to be made with regards to the teaching approach, and that there needs to be a significant amount of technical training and support to ensure that a professor has the guidance needed for this type of transition. This finding emerged clearly in the study as professors struggled with the different multi-tasking skills required for teaching in a synchronous, online setting such as Adobe Connect.

Related to this, one professor in the study pointed out that it was important to ensure that all students in the class were allotted equal time for speaking in the synchronous Adobe Connect setting. The inability to read body cues and reactions, even in Adobe Connect synchronous sessions where the video image of each student is small, is a distinct transitional challenge. Multi tasking by way of verbal cues during class sessions, along with Chat Box written cues and responses, and initiating verbal feedback from the students are ways of dealing with the challenge of students' attention. In addition to this, findings from the data suggest that a policy for students who participate too much or even too little is helpful for an online course. It is worth noting that this could be viewed as a part of policy development by the university. There were a number of policy discussions that occurred throughout this study, where it was not clear whether a policy matter would be best served as an institutional policy versus a course outline policy.

Interviews with professors at the chosen university confirmed that there are certainly numerous policy challenges with respect to a transition into an online learning setting. In spite of the transitional challenges, the professors who had this transitional experience grew to love and enjoy the new way of teaching that came with the online modality.

Another finding from the study was that professors often made accommodations for students who were unable to attend Adobe Connect class sessions. Professors recorded class sessions for students who were unable to be present, for instance due to work obligations. There were no course outline or institutional policies in place for these situations. Throughout this study, it was a loosely discussed arrangement between the professors and their students for making the availability of class recordings for one reason or another. This issue speaks to the community and social component aspects of learning that are required for higher education and in particular in the online setting. The issue also speaks to the matter of policy analysis and development which appears to be required more and more by universities as a whole. Not being present for Adobe Connect sessions could be seen as a not being in line with the paradigm of the social context of learning, but on the other hand, it could also be viewed as a backup option when individual Adobe Connect failures arise. At the very least, universities need to make this a priority and look at what would be best for professors and students, and analyze all the related aspects of this towards implementing institutional policies that serve best for this online transitional experience for all involved. Certainly, once policy concerns like these become higher on the agenda of universities, they will bring about different policy implementations that are specific to each respective institution.

Another item for policy analysis and development that came out throughout the findings of this study was regarding course outlines and how they are developed for the online transition. While likely looking at the possibility of making technical support available at all times to professors as a standard institutional policy, universities could also look at an instructional design policy that would afford all professors who are transitioning to have guidance with course outline development vis-à-vis an instructional and or technical professional/consultant. The

professors who were interviewed in this study all stated that having a technical support available for all class sessions would have proven helpful for professors transitioning. The professors who were interviewed were also using course outlines from previous face-to-face classes. These course outlines were never designed for the online classroom, and professors in this study consistently had to set aside their original course outlines and just evolve on a week-by-week basis throughout their courses. A number of professors interviewed found that the only way to endure this transitional challenge was to maintain an open dialogue with their students, and in so doing, as matters arose they would adjust their course outlines to accommodate for different situations that arose from class experiences and through student feedback. Based on this study, it would be helpful for professors to have significant time prior to the online transition with an instructional design professional, to ensure that their course outline not only satisfies the needs of their subject area within the technological capabilities, but is in sync with institutional policies and expectations of the university being served.

In summary, the findings of this study confirmed a significant number of positions from the literature, such as the view that the transition to synchronous, online teaching is a significant adjustment. This study also confirms that there is room for both formal and informal policy development to support students and professors in this change.

## Chapter Seven: Findings

The findings of this study identified four areas that were important enough to the professors interviewed to be mentioned extensively in the data. These four areas were: *transitions to online teaching; policy categories; and course outlines; and technology*. There were common links with all four areas in the review of the literature for this study and the data collected. According to the data, then transitions were certainly a challenge, but able to be overcome over time was some professor adjustments to their teaching approach, along with a slow evolution of policy development as the professors gain more experience in the online learning environment. The data further provided a number of policy categories that were already working for professors in their transitions, and other categories that needed to be developed and eventually implemented to ensure improvement and efficiency in the online classroom. The course outlines discussed in the interviews and those reviewed by way of document analysis, were sparse in comparison to the detail that came out of the data collection. A few course outlines did not have a defined policy section, and failed to give a clear idea to students on important policies and procedure that could be helpful in the online environment. The data collection identified a number of essential policy areas, but they were quite often informally introduced in the day to day interactions of the online classroom. Technology was the fourth and final area coming out of the data collection. There were no immediate fixes for a number of the challenges experienced in this area, and the data collection showed a full appreciation for the technology and how it augmented professor/student interactions. While this appreciation existed, professors did share that until the technology was full stabilized, it was imperative for professors to have a backup plan for such instances when Adobe Connect failures occurred.

A professor transitioning from the traditional to the online learning model quickly appreciates the importance of establishing relevant policies as they embark on the journey of facilitating learning for a group of students. As an example of this, consider the professor in an online environment who quickly finds themselves inundated with a plethora of emails posing questions that could be easily addressed with a clear detailed online course policy guideline. Quite often, an online course policy is something that continuously evolves with more experience and with the evolution of technological features in our online learning environments. It is a reality that there are few “references to the subject of course policies in the e-learning literature” (Waterhouse & Rogers, 2004, p. 28). Professors developing courses for the online platform are realizing that “formulating e-learning policies is a task well worth undertaking” and “the use of [relevant] e-learning policies will save [administrative] time in the long run” by simplifying course administration (p. 28).

There has been much growth in the online learning world, and time ahead will reveal additional growth in all areas of e-learning, but “despite the growth in the use of educational technologies, university policies often reflect an institutional assumption that professors, students and instruction are [occurring] on campus” (Wallace, 2007, p. 88). In spite of the limited literature resources available for e-learning policies, it is clear that well defined policies go a long way toward maintaining an efficient and productive online platform for both student and professors.

## **Chapter Eight: Recommendations**

Based on the review of the literature and the findings of this study, a few recommendations will be reported in this section. It is certainly evident that the codes of conduct and policy guidelines are markedly different in the traditional environment as compared to the online environment. This was found to be true across all of the literature review and the data collection. The need for chat box behavior policy in an online classroom is certainly not a policy that is necessary in the traditional environment. Since there are so many differences with regards to “the daily activities of living” (Chickering & Erhmann, 1996) in the online environment versus the traditional environment, it is a matter of due course that universities should focus more on the development of policies that are relevant for the online modality. Technological challenges will never go away; hardware and software systems are problematic at times and universities should allocate resources to ensure that professors teaching in the online setting have continuous technological support and training to alleviate some of the frustrations experience by students as well as professors. Course outlines are a contract (an agreement) between the professor and the student. As such, universities after spending time with policy development, and making relevant conclusions, should stipulate mandatory and optional course outline policies required for the drafting and administrative approval of course outlines used by professors. A final policy that I would recommend is that universities should introduce prerequisite requirements for individuals that are not able to demonstrate extensive experience with the use of a computer and basic technological skills. Students with limited technological and computer background should be required to take basic courses to get them up to speed on the machinations of a computer and the software that will be used in throughout their educational journey in the online environment of their program of choice. My personal experience as an online student as well as

information coming out of the data collection is that students with low aptitudes with the technology often “hide behind” the excuse of “technological failures” as a means for their inaptitude, inexperience and inability to operate the essentials of a computer system and simple technological maneuverings. This excuse appeared to be used at times to avoid participating in Adobe Connect class sessions as well as meeting other course requirements. The evidence for this last recommendation came out more in the data collection, than it did in the literature review.

## **Chapter Nine: Conclusions**

The sample size for this study consisted of six participants instead of eight as was initially intended. This sample size of six participants could be recognized as a limitation within this study; nonetheless the data collected was quite extensive to allow for significant findings and recommendations as shared earlier in this paper. Another recognizable limitation that could be observed is that all the professors came from the same university. This may not be a limitation for the identified university itself, but may be considered a limitation that this study is not representative of a greater spread of universities in a given geographical area. The research questions were thoughtfully drafted and the feedback coming out of the data collection was enough that it could be used by any academic institution looking to add or improve its online offerings to students attending at any academic institution regardless of which learning management system or web conferring selected for use by a given institution.

**Research question 1:** How do professors create working policies for the online environment?

There was enough evidence that professors were still struggling with the identification and development of policies that are necessary for the online classroom. There was enough evidence to illustrate that professors and universities were still struggling with what policies should be introduced by the professor and what policies should be introduced by the institution (the university).

**Research question 2:** How do professors deal with instances of potential or perceived policy absences or mismatches with their individual course outline and general institutional policies?

Based on the discussion with the participants of this study, there was enough evidence to illustrate that there were some policy mismatches with the course outline and general institutional policies. Professors in general at this institution would for the most part “throw out

their course outline” and re-invent policies as the course evolved on a day to day basis. This was generally done without a checks and balances system where the university was involved with this progressive re-invention efforts. The individual changes in policy made by the professors were necessary, but the university as a whole did not seem to be growing out of this experience at the same rate and time with the professors. This “mismatch” was noted across the data collection, and some recommendations for university adjustments were mentioned earlier in the representative section of this paper. There is a need for additional research concerning policy development in the online modality. There is small body of literature that is directed to this area, and it is difficult to find literature that focus solely on policy development and policy deficiency in the online environment in context to professors’ transitions to the online environment. Ongoing professional development of professors transitioning to the online modality is necessary along with a focus on policy development for this area.

## Appendix A

### Online Course Policy Writing Tips

The following tips from the literature reviewed gives guidance with regards to writing effective online policies for your classrooms:

1. **Be relevant.** Ensure that your policies for your course are relevant to the online platform. As an example, a policy that discusses how an assignment should be printed for submission is not a relevant policy.
2. **Seek Feedback.** Soliciting feedback from students at the end of a course and during a course is a great way to develop new policies, reinforce existing policies and build new policies.
3. **Check conflicts.** Review and compare course policy with the university's (or college's) policies to ensure that there are no conflicts. Some policies "might best be formulated at the institutional level rather than at the level of individual courses" (Waterhouse & Rogers, 2004, p. 38).
4. **Assess delivery.** If this is a course that is moving from the traditional to online platform, it is important to ensure that policy wording is clear. The current literature indicates that "policies such as these often fail[ ] to provide clear and sufficient guidelines for the online activity" (Wallace, 2007, p. 90)

5. **Address conduct.** “Traditional classroom codes of conduct do not necessarily cover the range of student conduct that is possible in cyberspace” (Traina, Doctor & Bean, 2005, p. 2). It has been noted that e-learning growth is happening at such a significant rate and yet educators often continue to “maintain traditional codes of conduct” (Traina, Doctor & Bean, 2005, p. 2).

**Appendix B**

The following survey questions were provided to each participant:

<b>Survey Questions</b>
Are you presently teaching an online course?
How many years have you been teaching online courses?
How many online courses have you taught?
In your opinion, are online courses easier to teach than traditional courses?
Which do you prefer teaching, online or traditional courses?

The following interview questions were provided to participants prior to the 60 minute interview:

<b>Interview Questions</b>
What were some of the transitions that were required for you as you went from a traditional setting to an online setting? How much has your approach changed to online teaching since this first course?
In your transition to the online teaching modality, please elaborate as to whether or not you were able to carry over your brick and mortar course outline into your online classroom. If changes had to be made, please elaborate as to the progression involved with implementing these changes.
Looking at the course outline you shared with me, what was the origin of that course outline? Did you write it yourself, or was it handed on to you by someone who may have previously taught your course?
Please share anecdotally as to different situations that have arisen that caused you to be faced with the need to revise your policies as stated in your course outline.
Have you ever had any of your course outline policies challenged by a student and how did you address this situation?

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How do you gauge fairness and effectiveness with regards to technology related policies stemming from daily class interaction time between yourself and your students?

Given your experiences, in your opinion should the course outline be available to students at the time of their registration for a respective class, to allow students to have an opportunity to review policy expectations in advance of enrolling in a class?

What were your three biggest challenges with your policy implementation as you moved into the online modality?

With regards to these three challenges, explain how you were able to proactively use your course outline to manage student expectations and keep a fair and reasonable balance of expectations between your students and yourself.

With respect to online learning, what policies are you aware of that are mandated by your university? For example, when you were setting priorities for yourself, with regards to how often you respond to student emails, where did you get your guidance from around best practices?

Are there any aspects of online policy that you find challenging?

Share your thoughts and experiences as to whether or not you feel that a course outline policy can cover all scenarios that will likely arise throughout your course .

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