Leading Online: An Autoethnography Focused On Leading An Instructional Focus On Student Learning In An Online School

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Sally Ann Lancaster find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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An Instructional Focus On Student Learning

In An Online School

Abstract

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The purpose in writing this autoethnography was to describe, analyze and interpret one leader's experience in leading a group of online teachers. I specifically wanted to identify the characteristics of an online learning environment that triggered teachers to focus on management issues rather than instructional learning issues; that is what conditions should be in place to help teachers manage their online workload effectively to shift teacher discussions from management and metrics to student-centered learning; and finally how to ascertain what to do to better promote a leadership culture to inspire teachers in analyzing the teaching and learning process in the online classroom.

This research was conducted as an autoethnographical exploration. Autoethnography was selected because it is specifically designed to study complex issues and promote self-reflection in daily praxis. It works well in situations where the researcher wants to better understand her role in connection with the culture under study.

A socio-technical framework provided the theoretical lens for the study. It helped focus on the balance between the technical and social issues related to online learning. I looked specifically at how the teachers taught and promoted student growth in the context of this infused technology-based learning system and the extent to which the technical systems and infrastructure supported teachers' daily work.

From my data and the analysis, three findings served as the basis for my recommendations for school leaders and my suggestions for further research: (a) online learning is highly social; (b) human interactions among teachers and students and deliberate support for students is important; and (c) existing policy drives the current management focus.

Further research should be conducted to focus on the impact of state/district policy on student learning with a goal of creating performance-centered metrics of success. Policy decisions should drive student achievement rather than data management decisions such as the number of log-ins. There needs to be a clear and relevant process for the management of compliance issues, but state metrics for program success should first focus on measuring students' progress towards standard.

Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, friends, and colleagues who have patiently supported this work.

Chapter One

I do not know how to be an effective instructional leader in the online environment. I define an effective instructional leader as one who can maintain a focus on student learning that ensures students learn at high levels meaning they can apply their learning to solve problems and answer questions that engage them in critical thinking and further inquiry. Years of collaborative work around developing clear learning targets, aligning formative and summative assessments, and analyzing student work in the traditional school environment have not prepared me to guide conversations with teachers about student learning processes over the internet. Yet, the online school I led was a success as judged by external measures. There were metrics for teacher communication and we closely tracked state funding requirements to ensure compliance with state auditing requirements. Additionally, we had a strong course completion and passing rate. However, our monthly staff meetings lacked energizing discussions about learning. Instead, the discussions focused on the details and mechanics of teaching an online course. We attempted discussions around quantifying learning and differentiating instruction, yet the conversations seemed awkward and stilted. Something was missing. How could I lead my dedicated team to a place where we could have meaningful, rich discussions about student learning in this new environment?

The Research Problem

The apprehension I felt as a leader of an online learning environment was real. The field of online learning is relatively new and the concept of providing instructional leadership in this instructional delivery system has limited research. In an effort to provide additional support to instructional leaders, this dissertation involved research, collaboration, and reflection using an autoethnographic study design (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Muncey, 2010).

This dissertation describes the story of my journey during one semester, as a leader of an online high school. I explain my efforts to facilitate a strong instructional focus on student learning with an experienced group of online teachers. I examine how I, the leader of this study, facilitated the deliberate identification and implementation of best practices in online learning working with this group of teachers. I had a goal that through this study, I could provide insights for other administrators on how they can structure online learning teacher teams to positively impact student learning. It is my hope that my experiences, struggles, and successes give voice to other leaders of online learning programs as they grapple to understand the characteristics of meaningful instruction in an online environment.

In the next section, I provide the context of the problem and justify the rationale for why this study is needed now. I also discuss socio-technical theory as the theoretical lens for the study. I conclude this chapter with the research questions that underpin the purpose of the study.

Context for the Study

Martin Mueller, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services for the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) in Washington State, provided testimony to the Washington State House Education committee (Alternative Education, 2011) on March 15, 2011 His testimony provides a critical context for this research study. Mueller explained the

Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) requirements in Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 392-121-182 (2009) that govern online learning in Washington State. This WAC also authorizes funding to ALE schools and programs distinct from the traditional seat time generator.

Mueller defined ALE's as learning experiences that primarily take place outside of the classroom setting, such as online learning. The central feature of these programs defined in the WAC's is a written student learning plan (WSLP) that describes the courses, learning objective, and how the plan is to be supervised and evaluated. In addition, school board policy must require a WSLP which documents weekly contact and monthly evaluations of progress and interventions for students who are struggling. Annually, school boards must approve each district's ALE program including the staff to student ratio, methods of communication, and the responsibilities of the classroom teacher. All the other state and district requirements such as graduation rate, special education, enrollment and immunization requirements still apply outside of the alternative funding system.

Historically, ALE programs have existed in Washington State since the early 1980's as a result of an administrative rule rather than a statute (Burwell, 2008). The programs, originally called contract based learning, were at the high school level with funding driven by credits earned. Rule revision in 1995 expanded ALE to the K-12 system. A lack of oversight related to the growth in online learning prompted the legislature to request a Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) study (Krell, 2005). That study led to the 2005 passage of Substitute Senate Bill (SSB) 5828 which created a structure for using ALE's as a method of online delivery in Washington State. This legislation attempted to increase district oversight, emphasized the role of the Washington State teachers, eased contact time requirements, simplified enrollment procedures, required participation of students in annual assessments,

required annual program evaluation, and implemented program evaluation guidelines.

Continued growth of ALE programs, primarily in the online arena, led to the reemergence of the same troubling issues identified in the 2000 JLARC report. In 2009, the passage of SSB5410 added further structure to ALE funding of online learning programs. This legislation added new reporting requirements including success rates, completion rates, and the district of physical residence for each student. Districts were required to separately track district expenditures related to ALE's so the state could begin to study cost effectiveness.

Mueller discussed how ALE programs had grown significantly from 20,000 students per year to over 28,000 students per year in the past five years. This growth was primarily in online learning. He stated there are a number of problems inherent with the current rules. For example, liberal choice laws of the state have created tension between districts around funding issues as students transfer freely between districts. In addition, students have been lost in the shuffle as they move back and forth. Transfers between districts can lead to confusion about which district is responsible for ensuring the student re-engages in school and does not become a drop-out. The question of who is responsible if the student drops out has not been clearly addressed.

Additionally, there has been an emergence of large for profit contracted programs that market directly to students. These online providers are not transparent in dealing with students they serve about which district they represent. The for profit providers work with districts to offer online content to large number of students with varying results and low participation rates on state assessments. Mueller expressed concern regarding how well school leaders can measure the effectiveness of an online delivery model when a substantial number of students do not participate in the state-required annual assessments. Mueller's testimony provides the background for why this research is both timely and needed. He explained that as more students

engage in online learning experiences, it is essential for educational leaders to understand the features of quality programs and examine how to ensure student progress. Mueller went on to say that a lack of participation in state assessments, and the few quality criteria that currently exist provide opportunities for students to fall between the cracks as programs compete for funding without emphasizing student success.

Socio-Technical Framework

A socio-technical framework guided this autoethnographic research. Originally conceived at London's Tavistock Institute in the late 1940's as a result of studies of two different coal-mining methods, the socio-technical work system approach depends on the social and technical components becoming directly correlated to produce a given goal state (Trist, 1981). In a socio-technical framework, the technical systems define equipment and processes. The social system consists of grouping of individuals into teams, coordination, control and boundary management, and delegation of responsibility to the work group or the team (Mumford, 2006). Passmore (2001) believed every socio-technical system is embedded in an environment that affects its performance, so the environment and the system must be studied together.

Due to the complex relationships between both the social and the technical systems, Trist (1981) proposed that socio-technical studies need to be carried out at three broad interrelated levels that ranged from micro to macro. He argued that separate approaches to the social and the technical systems of an organization no longer sufficed. Trist (1981) outlined the following levels:

- Primary work systems: These are systems which carry out the set of activities involved in identifiable and bounded subsystems of a whole organization...They have

a recognized purpose which identifies the people and the activities.

- Whole organization systems: This is also known as a self-standing work place. At one limit these would be plants or equivalent self-standing workplaces. At the other, they would be entire corporations or public agencies. They persist by keeping a steady state with their environment.
- Macrosocial systems: These include systems in communities and industrial sectors and institutions operating at the overall level of a society. (p. 11)

Trist (1981) goes on to state:

As historical process of society unfolds, individuals change their values and expectations concerning work roles. This changes the parameters of organizational design. Conversely, changes in technology bring about changes in values, cognitive structures, life styles habits and communication which profoundly alter a society and its chances of survival. Socio-technical phenomena are contextual as well as organizational. (p. 11)

As technical systems evolve and become increasingly complex, they eventually reach a steady state with the social system in which they can accommodate change without disruption (Passmore, 1988). While that steady state is the goal of many leaders, Passmore (2001) warned that as technical systems continue to progress, "Human needs continue to be secondary to technical and economic advancement as measures of the progress of society" (p. 4).

Throughout the course of this study I investigated both the social and technical elements as we strove to create a system that emphasized student learning. The balance of these two elements within the context of the work system, whole organization and the macrosocial system was of specific interest to me as I became familiar with how these two different system's priorities drove agendas, often with competing interests and desired outcomes. The aim of the

socio-technical system's approach was to have different levels within the system work interdependently; this was yet to be achieved.

The socio-technical framework, therefore acted as a guide for this study in several ways; it helped me focus on the balance of the technical and social issues related to online learning. The issues that caused tension would need to be resolved to reach a level of balance to have the online school working at an optimum state. I looked specifically at how the teachers still taught and promoted student growth in the context of this infused technology-based learning system and the extent to which the technical systems and infrastructure supported their daily work.

Another way this framework proved helpful to me was by looking at the three levels proposed by Trist (1981) as different lenses for the study. I saw his primary work level as analogous to the teacher-class interaction, meaning interaction captured in the interplay between the human tasks and technology operating at the classroom level for gaining an understanding of how these two factors can contribute to the instructional focus. For the purposes of this study, I defined the whole organization level as analogous to the school level. Looking through this lens, I viewed how school practices and policies impacted the instructional focus. Finally, the macrosocial system provided another lens to view this study through the system of schools at the state and district levels with varying levels of impact policies have on the classroom through teacher actions and through the context of technology. Analyzing the interaction among all three of these levels provided a broader base of the knowledge in this study for seeing the interdependence between the Socio and technical impacts on the overall system.

Research Questions

Three research questions evolved from my role as a leader of teachers and assisted me in

exploring my praxis as a leader of change and improvements in online learning.

- What characteristics of an online learning environment trigger teachers to focus on management issues rather than learning issues?
- What conditions might be in place to help teachers manage their online workload effectively so they can shift their discussions from management and metrics to student-centered learning?
- As a leader of an online high school, what leadership behaviors need to be undertaken to demonstrate (or inspire) a culture of support to engage teachers in analyzing the teaching and learning process in the online classroom?

It is my belief that a thorough understanding of how principals can influence the online learning environment through a better interface of the socio and technical systems that build integrated systems to support learning can be useful to other online administrators. I also believe my struggles and successes will prove beneficial to other online leaders as they begin to identify and understand what quality instruction looks like in this setting to lead programs to positively impact student achievement. It is time to move beyond thinking about online learning as a delivery method and talking about online delivery as a learning method that involves both the social and technical systems in meaningful systems of work to deliver quality instruction.

Summary

My overall purpose in writing this autoethnography was to describe, analyze and interpret one leader's experience in leading a group of online teachers. In sharing my experiences, I hope that others benefit from my mistakes, successes, reflections and analysis around my journey. I hope to facilitate a shift in conversations about online learning from the delivery system and

metrics for teacher success to a learning centered focus for students.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter one of this autoethnography communicates specific information and details about my journey as a leader of an online school. Autoethnography, which is a qualitative research approach about the experiences of the researcher, provides the methodological framework. I present the research problem and the socio-technical lens to view the issues. I also pose the research questions that guide the study and present the organizational structure for the dissertation.

I review literature in chapter two. I provide a brief history of online learning and explain the rapid growth of online learning that has occurred. I describe quality indicators in online learning and introduce literature relevant to leading in the online environment. I present a brief description of leadership frameworks that provide tools for analyzing leadership during the course of this study. By identifying inherent problems of practice in online learning, I hope to connect my study to those problems noted in the online learning literature.

The autoethnographic methodology chosen for this study is detailed in chapter three. The autoethnography is written in narrative form and conveys my journey as a leader in facilitating a focus on instruction in the online environment. I discuss the design and methodology in depth and explain alternative approaches considered for this study. I discuss the benefits and limitations of the research methodology, the setting and explain the significance of the study.

In chapter four I present the themes that emerged as a result of the data. I describe each theme in detail providing a summary of notes, quotes, and anecdotes that contributed towards the emergence of each theme. Although I found that some of the data points were analytical and

evaluative in nature which is inherent to the autoethnographic process, presentation of the data is the specific goal of this chapter.

In chapter five I present a discussion around the analysis and interpretation of the data. I utilize the data analysis to answer the three questions I posed in the beginning of the study. Additionally, I look through the theoretical framework and explain how I utilized the socio-technical framework to view my work. Finally, I draw conclusions about the study and make recommendations for school leaders and suggestions for further research.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Online learning is expanding at a rapid rate. In Keeping Pace (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011) it was noted that as of late 2011, online and blended learning opportunities existed for at least some students in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. This annual review of online policy and practice goes on to say that there, "are now 30 states with full-time, multi-district schools that enrolled an estimated total of 250,000 students in SY 2010-11, an annual increase of 25%" (Watson et al., 2011, p. 5).

A recent article cites one of the challenges of this rapid growth:

> By almost every educational measure, the Agora Cyber Charter School is failing. Nearly 60 percent of its students are behind grade level in math. Nearly 50 percent trail in reading. A third do not graduate on time. And hundreds of children, from kindergartners to seniors, withdraw within months after they enroll.
>
> By Wall Street standards, though, Agora is a remarkable success that has helped enrich K12 Inc., the publicly traded company that manages the school. And the entire enterprise is paid for by taxpayers. (Saul, 2011, p. A1)

A follow up article in eSchool News (2012) described a lawsuit that was filed on behalf of the K12 Inc. shareholders which stated, "K12 failed to disclose administrative pressure from upper management to pass students, despite poor or nonexistent academic performance, so as to maintain high enrollment levels and continued government funding" (p. 1). It is easy to question whether the rapid growth of online learning has impacted the quality of programs offered and is one indicator that the growth of online learning has presented significant challenges. This

literature review seeks to provide a brief history of online learning along with challenges to program development, quality indicators for online learning, and research into effective leadership of online programs.

Growth of Online Learning

Online learning is a growing trend in K-12 education in the United States. Over the past few years, there has been a significant increase in online learning programs. According to the Allen and Seaman (2011) there were an estimated 6.1 million college students engaged in online courses in the fall of 2010 which was a 560,000 student increase from the previous year. K-12 experienced similar growth. Watson et al. (2011) estimate a total of 1.5 million students were taking one or more online courses in 2010 across the United States. Although they were only a fraction of the nation's 48 million elementary and secondary students, they represented a 47% increase from 2005-2006, and it is a number that is likely to continue to rise rapidly.

Online learning in Washington State experienced an explosion of growth during the 2010-2011 school year with over 16,649 students who took a total of 72,180 online courses (Nelson, 2012). This was a 16.5 percent increase of students from 2009-2010. This is exemplified with the Insight School, offered through the Quillayute School District, which started in September of 2006 and by October of 2010 claimed funding for 2,978 students ("Washington State report card," 2012). Likewise, the Washington Virtual Academy in Steilacoom which also began in September of 2006 claimed funding for 2,593 students in October of 2009 as reported on the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) website. It is interesting to note that the Washington Virtual Academy enrollment dropped the following year with only 1,621 students reported attending in October of 2010 ("Washington

State report card," 2012).

There is a movement to emulate online programs offered in Quillayute and Steilacoom school districts. These districts roughly doubled their total full time equivalent funding (FTE) claims from 2009-2011. These districts contracted with private companies to educate students for a portion of the FTE funding (Burwell, 2008). These third party vendors invested heavily in advertising to recruit students from other districts across the state. Contractors and host districts benefitted financially, but donor districts lost students and funding (Nelson, 2010).

Online learning can be an expensive endeavor in both money and resources. In the rush to join online learning, districts don't often think through the elements necessary to build a successful program as stated below:

> Developing an online or blended program requires a high level of investment to be successful or a willingness to work with an experienced partner. Far too many districts don't seem to recognize the level of investment that is necessary. In August 2011, we heard of a school district that is beginning its planning for an online and blended program to be operational in August 2013. This timing is highly unusual, and remarkable, because it allows the necessary time to plan and create a high quality program. The far more common approach allows just a few months from time of conception to scheduled opening of the virtual online or blended doors. In addition to not allowing for enough time, many of these programs don't allow for the necessary investment of personnel to fully explore all of the critical dimensions of an online school, including teaching, technology, content, student support, and other elements. (Watson et al., 2011, p. 7)

In spite of these barriers, districts have been starting online learning programs utilizing the ALE rules in Washington because these programs have more flexibility in their program

parameters. This is exemplified in the certificated instructional staff (CIS) ratios. Non-ALE districts are expected to maintain a ratio of 46 CIS staff per 1,000 students across the district.

For profit online contractors are not unique to Washington and research indicates this for profit mentality can be problematic. Twigg (2001) stated that, "some believe the majority of institutions are operating distance programs as 'cash cows,' using fewer resources to bring in additional income" (p. 4). Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) claimed:

> The history of distance education teaches us that quality is undermined when business becomes the prevailing model of distance programs. While a market approach to distance education may allow institutions to secure funding and increase revenues, it may bypass academic controls and practices in favor of supply-and-demand opportunities if unchecked. Business models may dissociate, in the name of efficiency, course conception and development from their pedagogical enactment, and in doing so compromise the desirable integrality of the scholarship of teaching. (p. 583)

State Policy Impacts

As districts begin to compete for FTE dollars, the quality of the program and benefits to the student are being called into question. In Washington State lucrative contracts between for profit providers and school districts have resulted in more restrictive rules for programs to try to stop the profiteering in education (Nelson, 2010). Recently there have been legislative efforts to stop the profiteering. During the 2011 legislative session, the Washington State House Budget called for a 20% reduction in ALE funding (Holland, 2011).

The Washington Alternative Learning Association Newsletter (Holland, 2011) quoted Representative Gary Alexander (R-Rochester), ranking minority member of the House Ways and

Means Committee:

> Per-pupil funding for students participating ALE programs, such as online learning and parent partnership programs, is prorated by a factor of 80.1 percent, and payment of parent stipends by school districts and ALE providers to participating families is also prohibited. The prorated funding level reflects the elimination of school-level secretaries, janitors, building and grounds staff, security guards, and other staff from the ALE per student allocation rate. Per-student allocations for technology are doubled to reflect more intensive technology use in the ALE programs. Under current law, ALE students are funded at the same general apportionment rate as students in a traditional bricks and mortar program. (p. 1)

During the 2011 legislative session the policy discussions centered on the amount of funding programs should receive while quality issues were not addressed. The 2010-2011 Washington State Online Learning Report (Nelson, 2012), indicated there were also problematic areas for online learning in the area of state assessment. In 2011, only 64.4% of all K-12 online students who were required to take a state assessment reading took it and passed. This was compared to the overall state average of 69.7%. The results were even lower in math with only 38.1% of online students passing compared to the state average of 58%.

According to Nelson (2012) completion rates of online courses were also low. The State of Washington's definition for the completion rate was, "The percentage of total enrollments where the student was not marked as withdrawn ("W") or no credit ("NC"), and for which the student received a final grade" (Nelson, 2010, p. 58). Statewide 79.1 % of online courses were completed compared to 96.8% of non-online courses offered in the state.

Passing rates were also low for online learning. Nelson (2012) defined passing rate as,

"The percentage of total completions where a student received a 70% or higher grade (A, B, C, or Pass) in a course. It is calculated based on the provider's Washington State enrollments for a given school year" (p. 61). Based on this definition, Nelson reported that only 57.9% of online students passed with a C- or better while 82.9% of the students in traditional courses passed.

Online learning is growing rapidly, but there is evidence to suggest that student success is not keeping pace. Additionally, the rules and guidelines of online learning have struggled to keep up with the rapid expansion. The competition between online providers has intensified with little emphasis on the quality of the learning. The next section of this review will outline research done in the area of quality online learning programs standards.

Online Learning Quality Standards

The literature around what constitutes quality online learning is inconsistent. Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, and Liu (2006) found there has been little agreement on terminology, framework or methodology when conducting research about online learning and few studies follow rigorous designs for quality research. One example is completion rate; some providers include students who fail a course as completing it, while others require a minimum grade to count towards completion. In addition, some providers exclude students who drop from their classes during an initial period while others interpret this time frame differently, allowing for a variety of interpretations for dropping students (Burwell, 2008).

The lack of quality metrics in online programs may cause students to suffer. Dropout rates of 60-79% in online programs are not uncommon (Roblyer, 2006; Roblyer, Davis, Mills, Marshall, & Pape, 2008). In addition, in Washington State, students participate in the standardized assessments at significantly lower rates than other students, yet Washington State

has few laws regulating online learning, leaving the oversight to individual districts (Nelson, 2010). In the annual report on online education in Washington State, Nelson (2011) found after examining online students' achievement data that it is not possible to make conclusive statements about program quality; and despite data quality problems, there appears to be reason for concern about achievement in online school programs and courses. In the subsequent annual report, Nelson (2012) stated, "student achievement is an ongoing concern in the online learning field" (p. 13).

In addition to the lack of reliable metrics, Twigg (2001) stated that, "many of these distance education programs have low (or no) quality standards" (p. 3). Tallent-Runnels et. al (2006) explain, "because online instruction and learning still constitute a relatively new frontier in education, informative theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence addressing some research questions is scarce" (p. 117).

Teaching online presents challenges aside from the integration of technology into the classroom (Quillen, 2010). Ash (2010) explained that the most challenging aspects of online instruction for teachers can be individualizing instruction, creating an engaging and supportive learning classroom, and learning how to communicate with students who are not physically present. Learning how to assess students who are not physically present can be challenging and may result in teachers' over-reliance on data such as log-in attempts and online feedback to evaluate student comprehension.

While quality standards do exist, some programs have become over-reliant on student metrics. Quillen (2010) suggested that online teaching goes beyond integrating technology into the learning environment and requires a large commitment on the part of the instructor to learn to teach in this environment. Lerreamendy-Joerns and Leinhard (2006) argued that the presence of

student-to-student or instructor-to-student interactions alone does not constitute learning. They explained that metrics must go beyond viewing the teacher as a transmitter of information and the student as a passive recipient. While learning management systems can generate numbers, they explained you must have a way of examining the quality of the interaction taking place and that impact of these actions on student learning.

Davis (2010) discussed how in the online classroom every teacher move is logged and documented and the teacher's actions are quite visible. The technology utilized in the online system creates a database in which an immense amount of information can be collected. Davis (2010) further stated, "It's critical to go beyond the statistics" (p. 16). Programs need to look at standards for ensuring learning as well as metrics that ensure the student has logged on.

National standards in online teaching are available from both iNACOL ("National Standards," 2011) and the Southern Regional Education Board (2004). As states seek to ground their online schools in best practices it appears they are standardizing among these two sets of online teaching standards (Davis, 2010). Quality indicators from the International Association for K-12 Online Learning ("National Standards," 2011) suggest effective online teachers should meet twelve performance criteria, with a total of 77 different indicators identified. The iNACOL online teaching metrics focus on gauging teacher effectiveness in the online environment ("National Standards," 2011).

Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhard (2006) said that instructional quality can be defined as, "the effectiveness of teaching or instructional environments in the light of particular learning goals and educational standards" (p. 569). The content of high-quality programs should be systematically designed and clearly communicated, with effective activities that are interactive and offer opportunities for critical thinking related to course objectives (Osika, 2006). With

online learning, technology is inherent to the model, but the focus should be on the pedagogy, not just the tool (Knowlton, 2000).

Osika (2006) pointed out that knowing what students have learned is not as simple a construct as it might appear, but can be made clearer when instructors align courses to standards and have clear measurable learning objectives. Rigor is essential to online courses to ensure students are learning the material and not just advancing through the course (Watson & Gemin, 2008). High quality programs include rigorous assessment and have procedures in place for monitoring students during testing. Some districts even require online students to pass an end of course exam which is a higher standard than students in a face-to-face course (Nelson, 2010).

Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) found that students are affected by the quality of the online learning environment stating, "Students in well-designed and well-implemented online courses learned significantly more and more effectively, than those in online courses where teaching and learning activities were not carefully planned and where the delivery and accessibility were impeded by technology programs" (p.116). Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) went on to challenge online instructors to design their courses in accordance with sound education theories but cautioned that educational researchers need to engage in further research to understand which online features benefit students the most.

An additional attribute online students reported of value are frequent and timely responses to questions (Weiner, 2003). Simultaneous use of a number of teaching and communication tools in online courses enabled group collaboration, one-to-one coaching, oral practice, and other strategies that compensated for the lack of visual cues online (Murphy & Coffin, 2003; Nippard & Murphy, 2007). Many online students value inter-student communication within courses.

Research indicates online courses that have lower dropout rates, higher achievement, and better student satisfaction are those with higher levels of teacher and student interaction. Online design factors can be structured to take advantage of the distance platform and build in a high degree of interactivity (Roblyer et al., 2008). Students are far more likely to succeed if the online courses are highly interactive (Clarke, 2006).

Highly effective teaching is another criteria believed to have a strong impact on student success. Virtual teachers may find they need to provide even more structure than they do in a traditional classroom. Clark (2006) explained successful teachers have good time management skills, strong written communication skills, possess sufficient technological skills, the ability to assess reading and writing comprehension skills and have strong online facilitation skills.

> Especially in an entirely or largely asynchronous environment in which teacher and students do not meet regularly, objectives, policies and expectations should be posted on a class Web site; assignments and deadlines must be outlined in detail; criteria for assessment carefully specified; study guides and other resources provided; guidelines for etiquette established; and details of how and when student can contact the teacher provided. (Clarke, 2006, p.3)

The current literature is limited but growing on criteria for quality standards in the online environment. There continues to be a gap in the literature to guide educational administrators in creating quality online programs. The next section of this review shares the limited research found around leadership in the online environment.

Online Learning and Leadership

Twigg (2001) stated that online learning requires new quality assurance standards

because it is so different than the typical classroom instruction and stated the first leadership challenge was to define the vision and develop a plan for quality standards that lead to effective student learning. Effective instructional leadership in any arena should be one of a driving vision focused on student growth. Leadership is more than ensuring the mechanics are in place for the teacher. Leadership theory around the use of educational technologies is mixed. Applying that information to the online environment is even more challenging.

May and Short (2003) offered a new metaphor to understand the field of online learning in higher education. They discussed gardening in cyberspace where teachers tend the students and facilitate the growth of learning. They addressed the role of administrator as a garden store owner and the teacher as a customer in the supply chain. They explained the relationship as one of mutual benefit where the teachers come back for service and supplies, and thus store owner or principal can cultivate happy customers (teachers).

Technology is a disruptive change that requires the re-culturing of a school or organization (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008). This is a complex task with few models that involve collaborative teacher teams. Kopcha (2008) identified the barriers teachers face when integrating technology which included time, beliefs, access, professional development, and culture. He developed a systems-based model of technology integration that followed a research-based path and culminated in the creation of communities-of-practice. In Kopcha's model, teachers move through four phases of technology adoption towards a goal of using technology to support learning in student-centered ways: (a) initial set-up; (b) teacher preparation; (c) curricular reform; and (d) communities-of-practice.

During each of these phases, Kopcha (2008) proposed a research-based strategy for technology integration that addressed the barriers (time, beliefs, access, professional

development and culture). Kopcha's goal was to go beyond technology use and establish a culture of integration in the learning process. In this framework, teachers model the use of technology and develop teacher led communities-of-practice that use resources available at the school to support and sustain the implementation. Teachers move through the mechanics, systems, culture and curriculum with mentor support. The responsibility to use the technology lies with the teacher as the mentor who slowly releases support to the community of practice. It is worth noting that Kopcha emphasized the importance of going beyond professional development that showed teachers how to use the tools in a student-centered classroom.

Leadership frameworks

Leadership is the focal point of this study; therefore two frameworks for identifying quality instructional leadership are presented to assist in the analysis of leadership skills in this dissertation. Portin, Feldman, and Knapp (2006) authored a research review that provided a framework for measuring the effectiveness of school leaders. They distilled three aspects important to leadership: (a) what the leader brings; (b) leadership practices; and (c) leadership influences on learning. This study also mentioned the difficulty in evaluating leadership in a distributive learning environment when looking at both formal authority and those who jointly assume responsibility.

Another leadership review discussed the importance of assessing learning-centered leadership (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2010). The theory of action of this study was that effective leadership required core components created through key processes. The study defined key processes as high standards, rigorous curriculum, quality instruction, culture of learning, professional behaviors, connection to external behaviors and systematic

performance accountability. While not all of these criteria directly relate to online learning, the basic framework to compare and contrast between traditional and online leadership will be helpful so we can begin to distinguish what is the same and what is different. Both of these models should help analyze the leadership elements of this study.

Summary. The research around online learning is limited. What research that exists is hampered by a lack of common definitions and quality standards. While the research has been lagging, the growth of online learning has been brisk, and concerns about quality remain. Washington state policies have tried to regulate this growth and eliminate some of the perceived profiteering. Online learning standards are not clearly established and the quality of various programs is inconsistent. The lack of clear metrics or metrics that focus only on statistics and not on the learning can cause students to suffer. Initial research, while still limited is beginning to show that the level and quality of the interactions in a class is a predictor of online success.

Leadership arena in this area is complex with little guiding research. There is research that suggests building communities of practices helps teachers implement technology in a more meaningful way. Two leadership frameworks provide clues on what skills and attributes may be necessary for school leaders to successfully lead an online program.

Chapter Three

Design and Methodology

In my 23 years as an educator, I have had many opportunities to impact student achievement. I have enjoyed each of my roles including that of an elementary teacher, teacher-librarian, district technology coordinator, principal of the alternative programs in my district, and

now as principal of a comprehensive high school. Each role presented unique challenges and provided learning and growing opportunities. I feel fortunate to have had this wide range of experience with district support that has provided the opportunity to grow as a leader.

In my former role as principal of Cedar High School I oversaw four programs, including a parent partnership program, an alternative high school, schools for incarcerated youth, and an online high school. Over a six year period, I experienced tremendous success at the alternative high school. Working closely with my staff, we refined our vision, streamlined our systems and structures, and created a model for alternative education in the state. Our professional learning communities engaged in critiques of unit and lesson plans and shared student work as examples of meeting/not meeting standard. It was truly a student-centered learning community with a strong instructional focus at our meetings.

Three years before becoming the principal at Cedar High School, I was hired to start a parent partnership program and an online high school for the East Sound Public Schools. I created structures for the program, hired teachers, recruited students, and was ultimately responsible for the successes and failures of each of these programs. By most measures, the programs were a success. Students made progress, teacher satisfaction was high, parents responded favorably to the program, and the district viewed them as successful. While the online program operated at a financial loss, it had a course completion and passing rate among the highest in the state; other districts looked to our program as a model of success.

I was proud of the work in both programs, but never became fully satisfied with the online program. I hired excellent teachers who worked hard. They had high course completion and passing rates. These teachers willingly did whatever was asked of them and actively contributed towards improvements to the program. With so many positive elements, why was I

so dissatisfied? The source of my dissatisfaction was the difficulty or inability I continued to have to engage teachers in the same rich conversations about student learning and good instruction that teachers have in the face-to-face school. Although we tried to structure conversation about learning, the conversations turned back to the online delivery system, student log-in information, the teachers' actions, or the management of systems required to be in compliance with state policy. At times, I found myself wondering if the online delivery system eliminated the need for strong instructional leadership. I questioned whether an online principal should be more of a system's manager. Since this concept was so diametrically opposed to my core beliefs on the importance of instruction, I knew the answer was "no!" The question remained, "How do I as an instructional leader facilitate a focus on instruction with an experienced group of online teachers?"

This research was conducted as an autoethnographic exploration of my role as a leader in this online learning environment. I selected autoethnography because it is specifically designed to study complex issues and promote self-reflection in daily praxis. It works well in situations where the researcher wants to better understand her role in connection with the culture under study (Chang, 2008).

Autoethnography is an appropriate methodology to employ if the researcher wants to know the stories behind the data. Muncey (2010) states, "your story will emerge out of the juxtaposition of your own experience and outside influences, and the interaction between the two" (p. 10). Autoethnography helps the researcher understand how culture relates to the actions of individual and how change comes about from this reflective and introspective process (Muncey, 2010; Chang, 2008). Understanding complex issues are more than analyzing numbers; autoethnography helps you delve deeper and go beyond the data (numbers) to gain a more

nuanced and comprehensive understanding of what is actually taking place. With autoethnography, stories can be told through artistically constructed writing that attempts to portray an individual's experience in a way that evokes the readers' imagination (Muncey, 2010).

The following chapter discusses autoethnographic research as a tool that is appropriate for studying the nature and implications of leading an online community. The remainder of this chapter discusses how validity, reliability and ethics were addressed. I also describe the benefits and limitations of this type of research and detail how I collected and analyzed data.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach. The goal of qualitative research is to better understand human behavior and experiences and involves an interpretive naturalistic approach to viewing the world. Chang (2008) states that autoethnography follows, "the anthropological and social scientific inquiry approach rather than a descriptive or performative story telling method" (p.46). Chang (2008) defines autoethnography as a method that compares cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details. Ellis (2004) explains "autoethnographies self-consciously explore the interplay of introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation" (p. 38). She goes on to say that autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing that, "displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural aspects of our experiences" (p. 739).

In autoethnography, the researcher is central to the research. Muncey (2010) explained that just as a counselor is a therapist and a client, the autoethnographer is both the researcher and the one being researched. Researchers are both observers and participants of their own

experiences. In an autoethnographic study, you cannot separate who you are from what you do. By specifically addressing the researcher's own experiences and reflective capacity, autoethnography continues the tradition of qualitative research in challenging assumptions about objectivity in research. Autoethnography is specifically designed to study complex issues such as education and brings value to understanding these issues by recognizing the voice of the researcher in the process.

Approaches

There are numerous approaches to autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000) offered a triadic model to explain the complexity of these approaches. They explained that autoethnographies vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), culture (ethno) and on self (auto). Different autoethnographies fall into different places of emphasis along the continuum of these three axes.

Ellis and Bochner (2006) said that autoethnography should be evocative and personal while others refer to it as emotionalized navel gazing (Chang, 2008). Anderson (2006) proposed a method referred to as analytic autoethnography where the emphasis is not about the self; rather it is about searching for understanding of culture and/or society through self. Analytic autoethnography goes through the usual ethnographic research process of data collection, analysis, interpretation and report writing. The ultimate goal of cultural understanding however, underlies the autobiographical experience that has taken place through autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2006) stated that analytic autoethnographers are trying to tame and traditionalize the research form. Clearly, there is tension between these two groups of researchers as they try to defend, clarify and advance this emerging form of qualitative research.

I believe these arguments may represent false dichotomies in which there are aspects to consider in both approaches. The type of autoethnography used depends on the story being told. Some stories call for more evocative and personal approaches while others could benefit from a blend of traditional practices while revealing the personal story. In my mind it appears to be more of an if/when dilemma than the either/or dispute being waged in publications. For the purpose of this research, I determined that an analytic ethnography was most appropriate. While there was a strong and compassionate story to be told about online learning, it lacked the intensely evocative subject matter and connection described by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and more closely aligns with the analytic method discussed by Anderson. Anderson's (2006) analytic autoethnography offers a methodology where the purpose and form deviate noticeably less from traditional approaches to qualitative research found in classical sociology. He argued:

> The kind of self-understanding I am talking about lies at the intersection of biography and society: self-knowledge that comes from understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by-and in turn helping to constitute-the sociocultural context in which we live. (p. 390)

Anderson (2006) listed five key features that make analytic autoethnography unique: "(1) complete member researcher, (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (p. 378).

To that end, I would like to review Anderson's five elements and how each element was addressed in this study. The first is the importance of having CMR status. Anderson (2006) states:

> The autoethnographer is someone who helps to form and reform the constructs he or she

studies. The autoethnographer is a more analytic and self-conscious participant in the conversation than is a typical group member, who may seldom take a particularly abstract or introspective orientation to the conversation and the activities. (p. 382)

Anderson (2006) further explained that engaged dialogue, not detached study, leads to the researchers understanding of the research problem. Having CMR status is not without problems. It is important for researchers to understand the interpretive variations within social groups. Even CMR status offers only a partial view of the culture being studied. It is important that the autoethnographer grasp the need to form and reform the constructs he or she studies since conversations may lead to multiple and contradictory viewpoints.

As the principal of East Sound, I actively engaged in work with the teachers on a daily basis. While some meetings were more formal, other meetings were less formal with multiple interactions each day. The interactions I engaged in with teachers involved thoughts, feelings, belief systems, future plans and actions that served as a guide to our work. I wrote a daily journal about my experiences interacting with this group as well as noted my reflections about these interactions. I worked to be attentive to the conscious thoughts I had while attending to our daily work. My goal was to go about my daily praxis and make notes of what I attended to throughout the day. The journal served as a tool to help me analyze what thoughts and actions I engaged in that emphasized the instructional role as well as the management role of my work. Participating as a CMR provided access to a type of data that would have not been available through other methods.

In addition to journaling, I made field notes throughout the day. Creswell (2008) described field notes as, "Text (words) recorded by a researcher during an observation in a qualitative study" (p. 224). This entailed touch, sight, sound and smell as well as reflections

thoughts and comments I had in the moment. Field notes included notes on meeting agendas, meeting notes or critiques of documents published for the school. Many field notes were hand written, while some were word processed, posted on a content management system discussion board or incorporated electronically through the track changes or comments feature.

Analytic reflexivity is the second element described by Anderson. Anderson explained that this entails, "self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one's actions and perceptions in reference and dialogue with those others" (p. 382). The shift to greater reflexivity on the part of the researcher may lead to a transformation in the, "researcher's own beliefs, actions and sense of self" (p. 383).

Autoethnographies are situated within the personal experiences of the researcher who is a part of the process and the story that is being told. This focus removes the otherwise problematic division between members of the group and the researcher/supervisor role. It eliminates the power differential by focusing on reflective text and field notes instead of individuals. While the reflexive role alleviates the power differential, it was important to remember I was still the direct supervisor of this group. While it felt as if the conversations involved open and trusting dialogue, the power differential could not be completely dismissed. It was important to be aware of this dimension and focus on the realm of reflecting on my own practice.

The identities of participants who are written about in the journals and field notes were strictly protected. The interest in this study was not around individual teacher's thoughts or perspectives, but on the collective focus of the team and the system of support that helped the conversation focus on the learning. My ethical responsibility as a researcher played an important part of this research study. Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was granted and all teachers involved in the East Sound team signed a consent form. Additionally, The East Sound Public

School system also had a policy and procedure dictating procedures that must be followed to conduct research within the district. Full approval of both processes was obtained to collect the data and conduct the research. All participants were clearly informed and aware of the study's purpose and provided with an opportunity to opt out at any time. Data collected were stored in a secure and locked filing cabinet.

An appealing feature of participating in analytic reflexivity during the course of this work was the ability to mutually inform myself as a researcher/leader while contributing to the greater body of knowledge about instructional leadership in online learning. While I believed this study contributes to the knowledge base around online teaching and learning, it also has helped improve my personal reflective practice and informed my work in a positive way.

Narrative visibility of the researcher's self is Anderson's (2006) third element of analytic autoethnography. Anderson explains that:

> A central feature of autoethnography is that the researcher is a highly visible social actor within the written text. The researcher's own feelings and experiences are incorporated into the story and considered as vital data for understanding the social world being observed. (p. 384)

Since the researcher plays a dual role of member and researcher, autoethnography demands visibility of the researcher's thoughts and beliefs and helps build the researcher's personal connection to the culture being studied. Autoethnographers are expected to be participating members of the group. One would not want to shy away from stressful situations or sit on the sidelines to observe the situation. Therefore, it is important that the autoethnographer report on their thoughts actions and feelings and not project those onto the larger group. Anderson (2006) explained that, "they must textually acknowledge and reflexively assess the

way in which their participation reproduces and/or transforms social understandings and relations" (p. 385).

Throughout this research I sought to clearly describe my role in this study as well as my connection to the work through previous experience, my educational philosophy and my belief systems about education. I attempted to outline my personal reflections around situations or observations in a way that is visible and apparent to the reader.

Dialoging with informants beyond the self is the fourth element of analytic autoethnography defined by Anderson (2006). Where evocative autoethnography seeks narrative fidelity with the researcher's subjective experience, analytic autoethnography is grounded in that experiences but reaches beyond. Davies (1999) explains this, "not in terms of self-absorption but rather interrelationships between researcher and others to inform and change social knowledge" (p. 5).

While I felt there were strong communication patterns with my fellow educators, I actively sought feedback after each meeting with an anonymous survey that each participant had the option of submitting or not submitting**.** Teachers completed an electronic exit survey and knew they could not be identified. Teachers were informed that comments could be used in part of the study and had signed research consent forms that granted this permission. Teachers were asked, but not required, to complete the survey. It is meaningful to note that 100% of the teachers present at the given meetings completed the surveys. Information from the surveys was retrievable by date, but not by the participant's identity.

In addition, meeting notes were taken by the East Sound office manager. These provided detailed description of the topics of the meeting and specific conversation to compare with my reflections and viewpoints of what transpired. Electronic discussion boards were used by the

participants to engage in group discussions about relevant issues. These discussions boards were downloaded and saved. While some teachers' names were listed on these online discussions, each teacher had an option of posting anonymously. This protected the teacher's right to participate anonymously and ensured a safe environment. Each teacher's name was removed prior to review of the data along with any other identifiable names in the data. For the purposes of this dissertation the school district name, school name, and the names of the participants other than the researcher have been changed to protect the individuals who were part of this study.

A commitment to theoretical analysis is the fifth element of analytic autoethnography described by Anderson (2006). Some consider the element to be the most different from evocative autoethnography. Anderson states:

> The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal experiences, to provide an 'insider's perspective,' or to evoke emotional resonance with the reader. Rather, the defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. (p. 23)

Creswell (2009) offered an in depth explanation on how to code the data by utilizing a process that allowed the researcher to engage in this step deliberately to ensure a systematic approach for analyzing the textual data. These data were analyzed and approached as outlined in the six-step process. Creswell (2009) outlined this process: (1) organizing and preparing the data, (2) reading through all of the data, (3) begin a detailed, initial analysis with the coding processes, (4) use the coding to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis, (5) deciding how the descriptions and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative, and (6) making interpretations or meaning from the data.

In the first step of this process, I organized and prepared the data by arranging all documents in chronological order. Documents were coded by date. For example, a document created on January second was given the code of 1.2.11. Documents that were dated on the same date would be coded 1.2.22-2 and so forth. Each document described the type of document it was such as meeting notes, agendas, autoethnographic entries, or emails. All documents were organized in this manner during the first step of the coding process.

For the second step of the data coding process I read through the entire collection of data from beginning to end. I sought to get a general sense of the information and to reflect on the meaning. This provided a more comprehensive perspective of the data contained within the collection of evidence prior to any attempt to categorize the data.

The third step of the data coding process involved conducting a detailed analysis that led to coding the data. Data entries were segmented into categories and labeled with a term in an attempt to detect categories that emerged from the data. The specific categories that initially emerged from the data included compliance, content management system, fixes, instruction, learning, parental involvement, policy, and technology glitches.

After the initial categories were analyzed and grouped, I began to look for overarching themes within those categories. I looked for connections across the data to see how they tied together. More general themes began to emerge that encompassed the more specific categories identified earlier. For the purposes of this research data codes were developed only on the basis of emerging information collected during the course of the study. These themes included the following: (1) infrastructure, (2) governance, (3) teaching and learning, and (4) management.

The fourth step of the data coding process involved generating a description of the categories and themes for analysis. I wrote draft descriptions for each category and theme. The

next step involved a color coded scheme created to see if the data clearly aligned with the given categories. Each theme was assigned a color. The data were read through and color coded based on the theme. Data that did not clearly fit to a theme was listed, documented and analyzed. Categories and themes were recoded based on this information before the themes, categories and their definitions were finalized. This process allowed for the maximum number of themes and categories to emerge and be part in the comprehensive data analysis process for data inclusion. It is important to note many documents, notes and autoethnographic comments referenced multiple themes. The final themes, categories and definitions that emerged are listed below.

Infrastructure

- Learning Management System: The delivery system for online content.
- Technology Support: Issues that address problems or complication with computerized equipment or technology.

Governance

- Compliance: Any reference to state laws/rules; includes aspects of system that attempt to address district or state rules.
- Policy: School, district or state rules that guide decision making.
- Promotion: Information about online learning to educate policy makers, educational decision makers, parents and other stakeholders about the implications of online learning policies and options for students.

Teaching and Learning

- Course Layout and Design:
- Formative, Interim, and Summative Assessment: References made directly to student making progress towards standards including both formative and summative

measures. Teachers' effort towards presenting the work to students and leading the students to mastery.

- Student Support: Teacher interaction with the student or parent for the specific purpose of supporting a learning goal/standard.

Management

- Management for Compliance: Time spent tracking student log-ins, participation, email or weekly contact for the purposes of compliance.
- Communication: Teacher interaction with the student or parent for the specific purpose of getting a student to log in or engage in the class or answer questions about grading practices.
- Issue Resolution: The use of East Sound to solve problems such as student scheduling issues, angry parent issues, health and various other issues.

The purpose of the fifth step of the data coding process was to decide how the descriptions and themes would be represented in the qualitative narrative. For the purposes of this autoethnographic dissertation I chose to present a detailed discussion of the themes complete with subthemes and multiple perspectives.

The sixth and final step of the data coding process included making interpretations and drawing meaning from the data. Chapter five includes my reflections and interpretations of the data. I made recommendations for school leaders and suggested additional research in the arena of online learning.

Validity/Reliability/Ethics. To ensure the accuracy of the data coding process, the categories and themes were presented to three separate outside evaluators along with a

subsection of the data set. Each outside evaluator applied the definitions of the categories and themes and coded the data to determine inter-rater reliability.

Qualitative research requires proper procedures are in place to ensure validity and reliability. Validity means that the research employs strategies to check for accuracy while reliability indicates that the researchers approach is consistent across researchers and projects (Creswell, 2009). This is done by setting up detailed protocols and cross-checks. To ensure the validity of this research, findings were triangulated from different sources such as journal entries, emails and anonymous evaluations. I also utilized a cross-check strategy that Cresswell (2009) referred to as intercoder agreement. I employed this method to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings and focused on using descriptive writing to convey the findings in a realistic manner. Additionally, peer review was conducted by my dissertation chair since this study was to satisfy the requirements of a dissertation.

Benefits of Autoethnography. Chang (2008) highlighted three benefits of autoethnography noting that it is a method friendly to researchers and readers; it enhances cultural understanding of self and others and has the potential to transform self and others to motivate them to work towards cross-cultural coalition building. Autoethnography is a vehicle through which researchers come to understand themselves and others. Doing, sharing, and reading autoethnographies can help transform researcher and listeners. While transformation is not a stated outcome of autoethnography, the process and product often stirs and initiates self-reflection that results in personal transformation.

Limitations of autoethnography. There are clear limitations to the autoethnography as

a research method. Muncey (2010) explains that the blurred relationship between the researcher and the researched may lead to problems with reliability and validity. Chang (2008) listed five potential pitfalls that researchers should be aware of and attempt to avoid:

> (a) excessive focus on self in isolation of others; (b) overemphasis on narrative rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (c) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (d) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and (e) inappropriate application of the label autoethnography. (p. 54)

There are several reasons for using an autoethnographic approach for this study. I initially examined an action research approach. This was problematic due to the power differential between the principal-researcher and the teacher-participants. In the democratic action research approach where everyone has equal voice, this could interfere with the validity of the research. An autoethnographic approach was selected to help me gain understanding of my leadership with a quality group of teachers in the online learning environment.

Ethics. As the supervisor of the online teachers, I was initially concerned about the power differential between the teachers and the researcher. However, utilizing autoethnography the traditional dichotomy between researcher and participant is collapsed. That eliminated many of the ethical issues that arise from this differentiation. The power that researchers have traditionally exercised over their participants is muted because the research is reflecting on personal practices, not engaging in judgments about teachers.

Even though participants were not directly interviewed as a course of this study, their consent was obtained as part of the IRB process with the promise of strict confidentiality. None of the participants refused to participate and each one freely shared details of their work.

Ensuring no harm is another ethical practice while conducting this study. While confidentiality was strictly maintained, given the nature of the school, participants may be identifiable. I took care to ensure the issues are presented clearly and fairly.

Setting. The East Sound Public School District is a medium sized school district serving just over 18,900 students in 27 schools. The district is located in central Valleyview County and covers 25 square miles. East Sound Public Schools employ over 2,000 people of whom approximately 970 are classroom teachers. The district has three traditional high schools and one alternative high school. This study took place in the alternative high school where the Online High School is located.

Online learning started in the East Sound Public Schools in January of 2000 with the original goal of providing a credit recovery program for the four most frequently failed courses in the district. From 2003-2011 the program grew to offer 27 individual courses delivered on the Blackboard (r) learning management system. Each of these courses is offered both semesters and during the district summer school program. Nineteen of the courses were developed by the East Sound Public Schools and are clearly articulated with district courses. The other eight courses utilize the Class.com (r) system and have been modified to match district requirements.

All classes were staffed with a certificated teacher hired by the East Sound Public Schools and the class load limits matching those of classroom teachers as specified in the collective bargaining agreement. Seven different individuals teach online classes and one teacher serves as the online lead programmer and course developer. A highly-skilled part-time office manager is also part of the staff. Over the past year there have been over 969 students who have taken 1279 courses in East Sound.

As the principal of the school, I worked directly with the teachers that I supervised. Over a six year period we engaged in multiple discussions about how to ensure a quality learning experience in the online environment. This discussion initially centered on the teacher evaluation process. Most measures for teacher evaluations pointed to management issues around the technology or the frequency of feedback to students. While those measures improved student log-ins and completion of assignments, they did not facilitate the rich discussions around students' progress towards the learning goal. The online learning team had multiple discussions around that fact that the teacher's actions were clearly visible in the online environment while the students' were less so. This began a discussion around how we could make the learning more visible and help us focus on students meeting learning standards.

During the course of the year, the East Sound learning team met twice a month for regularly scheduled meetings. These morning meetings took place on the first and third Wednesday of each month from 7:30-8:15. In addition, the online teacher learning community attempted to meet as a learning community on a weekly basis to continue the work. Those meetings were facilitated by the online representative to the Alternative Program Leadership Team.

Four of the seven teachers shared a common room referred to as the online "Bullpen." This office arrangement allowed for extensive sharing on an informal basis throughout the day. The four teachers in this room demonstrated a close collegial relationship and worked to include the teachers who were housed outside of the bullpen.

This study was closely aligned with the existing work of the East Sound team. The data collected and utilized for this study were closely aligned with the teachers' work. For that purpose, the research was conducted the second semester of the 2010-2011 school year.

Information was gathered during the dates of February 1st- June 27th. No data was collected outside of the normal work activities.

Significance of study. Online learning is a growing and evolving field. As Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) pointed out, few studies exist that focus on instruction and learning online. Informative theoretical frameworks and empirical studies addressing these questions are scarce. We contributed to the growing body of knowledge around online learning by sharing my experiences facilitating a group of experienced online teachers' intentional focus on instruction.

Participating in this autoethnographical study became a personal and professional journey for me as a leader of change. While I considered myself to be a reflective practitioner, the process of engaging in autoethnographic research challenged me to examine deeply held beliefs and other ways of knowing I may not have considered prior to this study. The process was uncomfortable at times but I endeavored to be open and transparent in my interpretations of the information.

Chapter Four

Leading Online

Over the nine years where I created and led the East Sound Public School's Online High School, I was immersed in a variety of rich experiences. This project provided me with the opportunity to deliberately journal my thoughts, gather evidence from notes and reflect on the journey, components and characteristics of leading an online program where teachers manage their workload and strive to maintain a focus on student-centered learning. The intent of this chapter is to present the themes that emerged during a semester of gathering data as a leader of an online school. The chapter presents my reflections, thoughts and personal analysis that occurred throughout the course of this study.

The study findings weave together a discussion around four central themes that emerge from the analysis of journal reflections, meeting minutes, emails and evaluations of team meetings. These themes are: (a) infrastructure; (b) governance; (c.) teaching and learning; and (d) management. I formed each of these themes from the summary of notes, quotations and anecdotes taken directly from the data collected. Based on the thought processes and actions at the time of the data collection, some of the entries are analytical and evaluative in nature inherent to the autoethnography process. In chapter five I analyze the data across findings.

The first theme, infrastructure, was made up of two categories which are the learning management system (LMS) and technology support. A (LMS) is a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, and reporting of online classes for educational purposes. It can be thought of as the container that holds a course and provides the framework for students

to access it. Technology support is defined as the support necessary to address problems or complications with computerized equipment or technology.

The second theme, governance, entailed the compliance and implementation of policy at the local, state or national level. This theme broke into three smaller categories which are compliance, policy and promotion. Compliance included actions taken to ensure laws, rules, and policies at the local and state level are fully met. Policy encompassed any online policy, procedure, rule or law that must be followed by schools. Promotion involved the effort to educate stakeholders about the online programs including the implication of rules and policies.

The third theme, teaching and learning, emerged from notes, reflections and conversations around the learning process. This theme comprised two categories, one of course planning and design, and the second of formative and summative assessments. Course planning and design described the work of developing, organizing, and delivering a class to achieve the highest impact on learning. Formative and summative assessment involved work done around the learning objective, measuring progress towards that learning objective, providing directed feedback and assessing learning.

The final theme, management, was described as time spent organizing, facilitating or communicating tasks for the course not directly linked to learning. This theme broke into three categories of compliance related management, communication, and issue resolution. Compliance related management is any work done for the purposes of complying with the law that does not directly impact learning. Communication involved interactions between the East Sound staff and the student, parents, or the student's home school around tasks such as logging in, and entailed any issues or problems that East Sound was asked to solve.

The next four sections of this chapter present these four themes in depth. I have provided

references, quotations, discussions and anecdotes that explain the importance of each theme. The categories that make up the theme are described in detail.

Infrastructure

Today the program director and I met to discuss the future of online learning. We took a few minutes to dream about what we would like to see with online learning in Washington State. Our dream is to have a statewide common delivery system for online content. This would allow districts to focus on exchanging content that is of high quality, increasing collaboration among districts and diminishing the competition for funding.

A shared delivery system would allow all districts to participate in online learning without each individual district investing extensive resources in the infrastructure or feeling forced to contract out with a third party and losing control of the content. The time we currently spend on infrastructure and support systems, while important, diminishes the time available to focus on student learning. How can we minimize the time spent on the logistics of running the program and focus on the real learning (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, January 24, 2011)?

The journal entry above represents the dissatisfaction of an online learning leader with the distinct role infrastructure played in leading an online school. Infrastructure became a prominent theme during the course of this study. For the purposes of this study, infrastructure is described as the LMS and technology support necessary in hosting an online school. The LMS is the system for delivering online content to the student. It provided the framework for the online course. It also provided the structure and resources necessary to facilitate collaborative interactions in the class. The LMS helped define the culture of an online school just as the brick

and mortar school house hosts the culture of a traditional school.

Technology support was the next category under the infrastructure theme. For the purposes of this study, technology support defined the technical support necessary to address problems or complications with computerized equipment or technology. It encompassed technology issues and glitches that had a programmatic impact on staff, students or the program. The technology support needs could be based on the infrastructure, LMS or the computer use itself.

The following section describes the thoughts, perceptions, and actions around the LMS and technology support for the duration of this study. The contents reflect autoethnographic entries, email text, and personal notes made during the second semester of the 2011 school year around these two categories under the theme of infrastructure.

Learning management system. East Sound's East Sound delivered courseware on a LMS that was highly regarded. Yet, problems with the LMS forced our staff to spend an extensive amount of time supporting and managing the system which was a frustration I noted frequently in my journal entries. We had challenges with our LMS including major technology support issues, proprietary report writing tools that prevented us from adequately harvesting the data stored within the system, and significant price increases.

Our LMS was provided us with significant issues during the course of this study. Based on the advice of our vendor we upgraded our system. This caused significant issues including students being unable to see assignments or submit work and teachers not being able to give feedback to students through the system. The following journal entry captures my feelings at the time:

> Disaster! During the winter break, our tech team implemented the latest Blackboard upgrade. It has been a complete disaster. A conference call with the Blackboard technicians brought acknowledgement of some deep core code bugs that were causing major problems. While BB is working on the problem they have not solved them yet. They did not have an estimated time that they would be fixed. This is a disaster! (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, January 6, 2011)

I discussed this over the phone with our account manager who was empathetic, but did not offer any solutions. After extensive research, I discovered that these were known problems with the upgrades. The company we were working with had not fully tested the upgrades and many of their clients were having issues. I called for a phone conference with the top technicians and account executives. The vendor representative stated, "The best practice in the industry is to test on one system before migrating to the active system" (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, January 6, 2011). I was dissatisfied because the vendor did not recommend this approach when they were talking us through the upgrade. When queried as to which school districts utilized this method, the representative admitted he did not know of any.

I was concerned about this company's lack of understanding of the K-12 markets and the thin margins within which we operated. A journal entry of January 6, 2011 notes, "We don't have the capital or the manpower to support the two systems approach" (Sally Lancaster, personal communication, May 3, 2011). I sent a response back insisting that the company fully and completely test upgrades before releasing.

Dissatisfaction continued to mount in February with no forthcoming solutions from the vendor. Our program director developed compromised solutions and shared those with the teaching staff. This created more work for the teachers in monitoring assignments and increased

their workload. A staff meeting on January 12th was designed to provide a format for teachers to discuss frustrations and brainstorm solutions. The teachers engaged in a positive and proactive conversation around how we could ensure submitted student work was received and teacher feedback was given. We were able to find solutions that made the problem transparent to the student.

After four weeks, the LMS vendor released an upgrade or patch solving the deep core bug issues. The patch was applied and after one difficult and trying month everything began to working smoothly. The teachers expressed great relief about their workload when the program began working correctly.

In late March, the district decided to upgrade the current LMS server based on vendor recommendations. Due to previous history, I took extensive precautions and asked for a sixteen hour window where students could not submit assignments and staff did not provide feedback. After the upgrade, our program director completed a series of functionality checks. The upgrade was successful and the teachers and students were allowed to once again submit work.

These issues made me question our ability to remain with this vendor as indicated in my journal entries. Dissatisfaction with our LMS system ultimately led to the East Sound team exploring other options for delivering content. We considered options such as utilizing an open sourced system, partnering with another district to utilize their LMS, and contracting with a different provider. During the course of this study I worked closely with the online team to study these options.

I found that the current East Sound LMS had major advantages. It had full functionality that included highly interactive capabilities that promoted student engagement. As evidenced by our class content, we were able to structure the delivery of group instruction and set up

collaborative project spaces for students. The courses were purposefully designed to be highly interactive and to provide students with rich and engaging experiences.

The open source system was the first option we explored and was accessible at no cost. While the price tag was attractive, I was concerned that our highly interactive courses would not work well in the open source learning environment. East Sound courses were designed with a high level of interactivity to facilitate student engagement. After extensive testing, it appeared our courses would lose the functionality we had built into our classes. The high degree of staff and student interaction made East Sound unique. I was concerned that more human resources would have to be dedicated to the open source system to get great results. With the budget situation we faced, adding programmers was not feasible.

A district analyst did some checking into the options of the open source system from the perspective of our district's information systems department. Her analysis of those programs was, "While I don't see this option having all the bells and whistles of our current learning management provider, I do think it could be a viable alternative" (Anonymous, email, April 4, 2011). Concerns about the loss of the functionality we were noted for led us to ultimately rule out the open source option.

The option of partnering with another state school district was another option given extensive consideration. The district we explored partnering with had invested extensive resources in their online school and dedicated a robust support team to facilitate a stable delivery system and high quality content. They took a more conservative approach and did not participate in upgrades from their LMS vendor. This district often operated several versions behind the current version, choosing the stability of the system over new features. I noted in my journal that the concept of a partnership to be very attractive because it would free up time for me to focus on

learning while the other district took care of the infrastructure necessary to run the school (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, April 6, 2011).

The other district featured a common course template for all classes which provided a consistent class experience for students. The common template offered consistency and made it easier for end users to navigate, but the East Sound teachers were not impressed. In a written evaluation one teacher referred to it as a cookie cutter approach and expressed concerns about the way the courses were set up. The teacher wrote on her evaluation form, "It restricted my ability to modify the assignments to meet student learning needs" (Anonymous, personal communication, April 26, 2011).

Math instruction was also a great concern in the potential partnership. The other district expressed displeasure with the vendor they purchased their math content vendor from and was engaged in a search for a replacement. This left us without a clear picture of what the math curriculum would look like when math was a vital area for our district. Additionally, their emphasis on a common template did not allow us to modify courses so we could align them to meet our own district standards. This was not acceptable.

When it came time to make decisions about what LMS we would use for the subsequent year, we still had not found a viable alternative solution. To further complicate issues, I accepted a new position for the following year as principal of a comprehensive high school and for the first time since its inception, East Sound would have a new leader. This created additional pressure to find a solution quickly that would be easily implemented during a transition of leadership when the teachers were already uneasy about adjusting to the amount of change. At a meeting held two days after my announcement to leave, the teachers shared their concerns about the change. Teachers were worried. They stated that their biggest fear was that the new

administrator would not be able to see the work. One teacher mentioned the large amount of time it took to follow all of the procedures and stated, "I want to teach, not manage" (S. A. Lancaster, personal notes 3/2/2011).

After all of the research and consideration, I decided to remain with our current vendor for one more year. An agreement was made and the district signed an extension with the company. Soon after the deal was approved we learned that our vendor was purchased by a large conglomerate. I continued to sustain hope that this merger would lead to a better quality product with a greater emphasis on customer satisfaction.

Technology support. Technology support played a major role in the infrastructure theme. The example below illustrated the devastating impact technology issues could have on online learning in the absence of adequate support systems. The problem outlined disrupted teaching for several weeks in a way that drained resources and time away from the focus on learning.

> There are major issues with our technology today! As part of our student learning plan, students must submit a required first assignment before they are given access to the class. This is a required part of registration and must be completed before we can count students for funding purposes. Students who do not complete this step within three days are dropped from our enrollment. It is a critically important step. We did a mass phone call to all students who had not submitted their first assignment. The email and phone system was flooded with responses from students who said they had submitted their assignment. I have no idea what is happening. (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, January 30, 2011)

When this issue appeared, the online team worked closely with the district information systems to see if it could be easily resolved. After several days they were able to track the origin to a new filtering system. Changes were made and we tested the system. The tests indicated that the problem still existed although it was random in nature. One student's form would go through and the next student's form would disappear. This was problematic because that data was needed for compliance of state policies. In my journal I noted that I made a decision to send out the East Sound lead teacher to each of the three comprehensive high schools to have students fill out the forms again and submit them in person (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, February 17, 2011).

We ended up spending six days tracking down the forms from each student. Confusion around our drop policy exacerbated the issue. Our policy required that students who did not complete a required first assignment within three days were dropped from our program. While the drop policy seems extreme, it prevented students from enrolling in online classes without engaging in the work. Setting a high bar for students at the beginning of the term improved our overall course completion and passing rate over the three years that system had been implemented. When the system worked, it was an appropriate high bar to hold students accountable.

When the information systems department finally resolved the issue, they discovered that the IP address of the online server needed to be exempted from filtering. It was good news, but there was not a solution to recover the lost documents. Overall, this technology glitch cost us three weeks of time. During these three weeks all human and system resources were dedicated to correcting the problem hindering our focus on student learning.

Infrastructure, made up of the LMS and technology support, is one component of a

quality online learning program. This section outlined the significant issues and challenges related to the infrastructure at one point in time for one Online High School. It provided quotes and anecdotes highlighting the role infrastructure played in the school.

Governance

Complex policy changes marked the 2011 school year, creating an extensive amount of work for the East Sound team around compliance, policy implementation, and promotion. The multifaceted rules of alternative learning in Washington State were complex to understand and educating stakeholders became a priority. These changes provided for the emergence of the second prominent theme, governance. Categories under the theme of governance broke into compliance, policy, and promotion.

I defined compliance as the actions taken to ensure the terms of the given laws, rules, policies or procedures at the state and district level were fully met. Policy was defined as any law or rule at the federal, state, district or school level that established rules by which the online school must abide. Promotion entailed any action taken to educate consumers, constituents, policy makers or legislators about online learning and the impact of potential decisions on programs. The following section describes the thoughts, perceptions, and actions around the governance theme involving policy, compliance and promotion for the duration of the study.

Compliance. East Sound is known for being a program with high integrity and the intent was to remain compliant in all areas. However, the complexities and ambiguities of the current policy requirements made it difficult to predict how the rules would be interpreted. When our program received news of an audit January 11th, I was confident but concerned. Several other

programs had been audited and fined significant amounts of money (Krell, 2005). Based on previous findings in other districts, my anxiety about how East Sound would fare was high as indicated in the following journal entry.

I received the stressful news today that East Sound is being audited. While I think we should be fine, the complexities of the ALE laws worry me. I have worked hard to maintain a program of high integrity that is in compliance with the rules. The broad interpretation of the rules can be disconcerting. To begin the process, I faxed the required district policies and procedures to the auditor today who ironically is named Lucky. I sent him copies of our student learning plan (SLP) and our required board approval. My fingers are crossed for positive results (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, January 11, 2011).

East Sound is a fairly unique program. The majority of our students are simultaneously enrolled in a comprehensive high school within our district. These students took one or more classes in the face-to face setting using East Sound to supplement or fill out their schedule. Almost all of our students maintained a physical connection to our school district. Our district had the home high school collect the full-time equivalent (FTE) funding for each student and then utilized an internal process to split the funding among the programs that served them.

To start the audit process I was asked to submit to the auditor our board policies and procedures, a sample SLP, and minutes from when the school board gave annual approval of the alternative learning experience program. I sent a total of twenty-four pages of documentation to the auditor as part of this initial request.

Throughout the process, the auditor called frequently and asked clarifying questions about how online learning worked in the East Sound Public Schools. He struggled to grasp the fact that our students attended our local district and took physical classes even while they

benefitted from taking East Sound courses. He presented me with a list of twenty students and requested all records related to their enrollment. I instructed our online staff to gather and submit the information.

The SLP became a focal point for the state auditor. Online learning falls under the alternative learning Washington Administrative Code (WAC) which required an SLP be in place prior to counting any student for funding purposes. The SLP requirements included a statement of understanding which is a form stating that the student and parents understood they were enrolled in a public school program and were not being homeschooled.

In our audit results, the auditor made several recommendations, but there were no findings. This is significant because findings can result in monetary penalties and increased scrutiny for a district. It was noted that we had several statements of understandings that had been signed by the student and not the parent. This was problematic for the auditor. While I grasped the importance of being fully compliant, tracking these forms down for every student was always difficult and felt somewhat unnecessary to the parent when our enrollment drew from students who were already registered in our public school system. Unlike many other statewide programs, we were not recruiting students from the privately homeschooled population.

Our students maintained active enrollment in their local public high school. The online course was offered by their high school counselor and they signed up through the school. It created a high level of confusion when we asked parents to complete additional enrollment information and they had a difficult time understanding why they were being asked to sign a statement understanding that they were not homeschooling. Some parents were resistant to what they perceived to be unnecessary paperwork. This factored into the forms being hard to obtain, but necessary to collect. This took time away from our learning-centered focus.

Another recommendation from the auditor was the acceptance date of the SLP. Our goal was to maintain all of the documents electronically. When the instructor received the SLP, the instructor forwarded it to a central repository. According to program policy, the date the SLP was forwarded became the official acceptance date. This was unacceptable, according to the auditor. He stated the SLP needed to be signed and dated by each instructor.

Policy. The second semester of the 2010-2011 school year was marked by intense political scrutiny for online programs. The State of Washington was facing a major budget crisis. Online programs under the alternative umbrella faced enhanced scrutiny. Some programs independently targeted homeschool students or recruited FTE from throughout the state enticing potential students with free internet access, or paying up to $1,600 in educational expenses to entice families to enroll (Mueller, 2011). It was easy to see that policy makers could view online as a potential source of budget reduction. The journal entry below outlines some of my thoughts during this process.

I received word today that the state is considering reducing the amount of alternative funding by 20%. I realize the state is facing a significant budget crisis and I know there are programs out there abusing the system. My concern is the broad brush stroke the state is taking indicting ALL of these programs instead of going after the programs that are abusing the system. This penalizes programs such as East Sound that are focused on providing quality educational experiences to their own students. I'm not sure if our program can survive this cut (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, April 5, 2011).

Intense recruiting practices by private providers who contracted with school districts also posed a problem. This created dissension among online providers. As the principal of one of the

largest programs in the state said in an email dated April 14, "There is a fine line between predatory recruiting and providing information. I believe this line has been crossed by many programs bringing great scrutiny to our ALE world." He goes on to state:

> I find it offensive just in general when any public school does things to "get around the rules" and that seems to be happening a lot these days to the point of being criminal in my mind. In fact even with the new ALE WAC which we have developed I have already heard rumors of how some programs plan to get around the rules or bypass the true intent of the rule itself. (Anonymous school principal, email communication, April 14, 2011)

The legislature continued to debate ideas for improving the quality control of online learning. One of the measures presented would have required a one hour face-to-face component for every student engaged in online. I applauded the concept, but found the assumption that underpinned the recommendation flawed. The proposed rule did not factor in an exception for programs such as ours where students attended a comprehensive high school for a portion of the day. They did get face-to-face time which allowed us to provide more comprehensive academic support through on-site visits. Additionally, the parent and family had counseling support and a personal connection to his/her home high school. To have those students attend a one hour face-to-face meeting would have been an unnecessary burden. An email on May 25th to Senator Nick Harper (D-Everett) expressed gratitude that he reached out and requested information about how potential legislation would impact the East Sound Program.

When the dust settled, the legislature decided on a 0.10 to 0.20 funding reduction for all alternative learning programs. Programs with face-to-face components would get the lesser reduction. In a May 25th journal entry I wrote, "It looks like the bill will be sent to the governor for signing. I am disheartened that in the end, it came down to money without regard to the

quality of the learning experience."

Promotion. Promotion was another category to emerge under the theme of compliance. Promotion was defined as program advocacy conducted to deepen the understanding of online learning for various stakeholders. Online learning presents a new paradigm in learning. Many policy makers, school staff and other stakeholders have no experience with online learning, yet hold preconceived notions about what it entails. This section explains how the role of promotion or educating people about what online learning should be emerged during the course of this study.

> I spoke with Chris Ingalls from King 5 News today. He had received a call from a concerned parent about one of the predatory online schools. Chris asked a lot of questions about for profit schools and those schools whose goal is to serve the local community. It sounds like he is going to do a big story on online learning. When he asked if I had any specific reservations about that I told him, I was apprehensive about people labeling all online programs the same. There is a qualitative difference in programs. The genre is still too new and different for many people to understand that. I don't believe we have a common understanding of what a quality online experience looks like. We need to educate stakeholders about best practices in online learning and explain what a quality online learning experience looks like. (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, May 13, 2011)

Educating stakeholders about online learning was important at the school, district, state and national level. I took a deliberate approach when working with the online staff to develop speaking points to ensure we were sending a consistent message to all of our stakeholders. We

employed this consistent messaging was when we conducted our annual State of the School Review (SOSR) for the district leadership team.

We wanted the high stakes audience to engage in the process. District cabinet members were teamed up with online teachers. The teachers provided an overview of the expectations of online learners and showed them what similarities existed between online and the traditional classroom. We wanted the cabinet to understand that students were still expected to attend class on a daily basis, albeit virtually. We wanted them to know that students were still expected to reach set standards and demonstrate their learning through their work (S.A. Lancaster, personal communication, February 7, 2011).

Each teacher provided a tour of the classroom to the participants. They provided examples of actual student work and explained how that work demonstrated learning. They also provided examples of student growth that emphasized the visible nature of the teaching and learning process in the online environment. This individualized SOSR presentation was well received by the district leadership team as noted by the comments of their feedback form. In my journal I noted that our superintendent referred to our online program as, "perhaps, the best online school in the state" (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, March 28, 2011).

I spoke at another promotional event on the value of online learning. I asked the East Sound program director to join me for this presentation. We planned out a pro-con approach to present to this audience of parents and educators. The program director started with an opening statement explaining a myth of online learning. I then spoke to the reality of online learning and addressed what questions parents should ask when considering online learning options. We emphasized the value of programs that provide interactivity, educational support and content clearly aligned to standards. I was able to explain the importance of understanding the difference

between completion rates and passing rates. I also provided attendees with a list of questions to ask a course provider prior to signing up for any online program.

When the alternative learning laws came under the spotlight during the legislative season, both the program director and I were in high demand as legislators asked questions to educate themselves about online learning. The program director spoke to the State Senate and I participated in an informational session with the State House of Representatives. Additionally, I received emails from a local state senator who wanted some feedback on how our program worked and how it might be impacted by potential legislation.

During the course of this study, the online team engaged in an international promotion of our program. A delegation from the Air and Correspondence High School in Seoul, Korea contacted me about visiting our program. These educators were specifically interested in the development of courses and teacher student interactions.

Governance played a major role in guiding the decisions and actions of East Sound during the course of this study. This section outlined the conditions that led to governance becoming a major theme. The changing political arena forced complex policy changes that led compliance issues, policy decisions, and promotional needs to have a major impact on the online learning program during the course of this study.

Teaching and Learning

I currently run three different programs including one online program. With my teachers who teach in the face-to-face setting, we have established high functioning professional learning communities. Teachers are collaborating on essential questions, ensuring their lessons align with their objectives and developing common formative and summative assessments. They bring

samples of high, medium, and low student work to share and then discuss how they can improve teaching to impact student learning.

I have tried to implement the same type of structure in the online arena without success. The teachers struggle with this concept. I find most of the time in our online meetings is spent talking about how to motivate students to log in, how to track participation and how to account for all the ALE auditing requirements. This is a group of high performing, caring teachers. What can I do to bring a sharper focus to student learning in our daily work (S. A. Lancaster personal communication, January 16, 2011)?

This journal entry encapsulates the challenge I felt as a leader of an online high school to maintain a clear focus on the teaching and learning process. The desire to focus on this area and the difficulty in doing so led teaching and learning to emerge from the data as the third prominent theme. This theme was made up of three subcategories which include course planning and design and formative and summative assessments.

Course planning and design. I discovered that designing online courses that work in a clear and consistent manner for students can be difficult. Course planning and design became a focus of our team during the course of this study. The difficulty with the design was grounded in the fact that our courses were developed over a nine year time frame. I believe each course represented the best thinking at the time on how to structure an online class, yet they lacked consistency in set up and design.

Today at the East Sound staff meeting we engaged in a discussion of learning objectives at the front of each learning unit and whether they were listed in measurable student friendly terms. In many cases, standards were listed, but not the specific learning objectives. The

standards were broad and not measurable and were located in a variety of places. We discussed the importance of having clear objectives using friendly language so students understand what they should learn as a result of the lesson in a consistent location in each course (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, February 2, 2011).

During the course of this research project, I wanted East Sound teachers to dive deeply into their content and look at the course layout with fresh eyes. I wanted them to analyze whether students clearly understood what they were meant to learn as a result of their lessons. I wanted them to drive the revision of the course layout to make learning more visible and to have a consistent set-up throughout our program.

To meet this goal, two teachers set up a Biology course as a sample. This was the newest East Sound course and was built from scratch utilizing the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) standards and common criteria our online teachers had proposed. The course is set up so it has daily and weekly assignments. I was not able to be at the meeting due to a sudden illness.

I read the teacher evaluations of the meeting and discussed them with the program director. Feedback indicated the teachers had a significant amount of resistance to the layout. The basic fear seemed to be that a lesson a day would provide them with an excessive amount of work for teachers to correct. One teacher indicated in an anonymous survey on March 2, 2011 that the course "felt very lockstep and did not adhere to the nature of online learning." Another teacher stated, "I am still struggling with the challenge of requiring daily work, in a class where many students don't log in daily" (Anonymous, evaluation form, March 2, 2011).

Shortly after this meeting I read Instructional Rounds by City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Tietel (2009) and found a description of learning conversations that resonated with me. "Don't

go to the table to defend your position, go to the table to hear and understand mine. My job is to hear and understand yours" (p. 2). That quote gave me renewed focus and energy. I needed to understand the concerns of the teachers so we could address them and move forward.

The next time we met on March 30, I decided to revisit the concept with teachers. I started with the entry task of how we could structure our classes to eliminate students submitting a large amount of work at the very last minute. We discussed using automated approaches for formative work so the teacher had more time to spend on summative assessments. We also discussed scaffolding assignments. Using this approach, students could not submit a final assignment until they had submitted and received feedback on a draft or completed work that demonstrated progress towards mastery.

After this conversation, I asked the teachers to brainstorm ways we could structure a more formal lesson on a daily approach and preserve the teacher's ability to correct assignments and keep up with the workload. Specific feedback obtained from teachers on that day included general agreement with the concept that we needed to have a standardized framework that included the big unit idea, standards, learning objectives, a learning activity, feedback and an assessment of the learning. One teacher still had questions about how the standards framework could be incorporated into the course's pre-existing design. Another noted that the most important concept in determining a consistent layout was to ensure that student learning was maintained in a clear and consistent way.

Formative and summative assessment. The graphic represented in Figure 1, drove the focus on formative and summative assessments for our online learning team during this study. I initially asked every teacher to select one unit from a course they wanted to focus on for the

semester. I led them through a series of activities where we identified the student learning outcome and looked for clear alignment between the outcomes, the instruction, the formative assessment and finally, the summative assessment (see Figure 1).

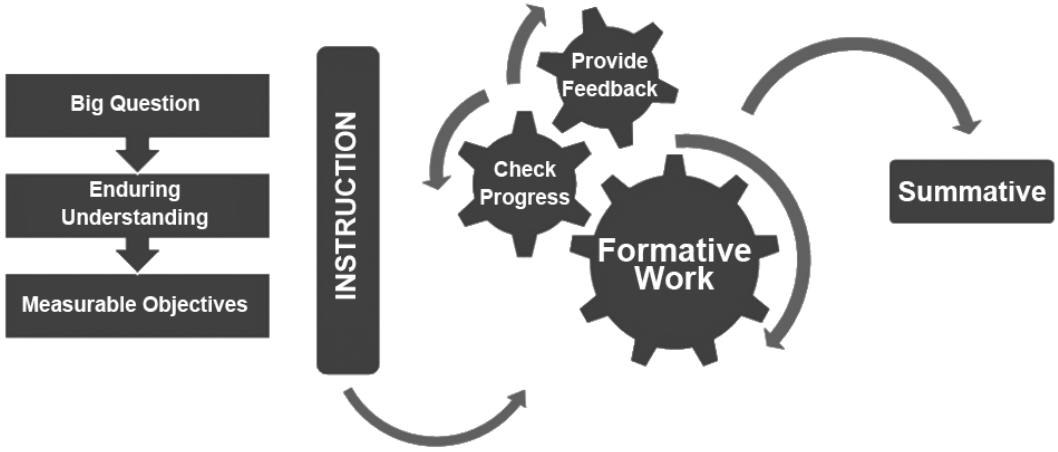

Figure 1. Online Teaching and Learning Flowchart

I established a peer review for each step of the process. This led to some focused conversations about learning. Teachers began to ask each other candidly about how the assignment related to the objective and whether the objectives were too narrow or too broad. During an evaluation of the meeting one teacher even said, "This task helped me focus on my content. I had not looked at my content in a long time and I think I need to revise it" (Anonymous, meeting evaluation, March 30, 2011).

After going through a peer review of learning objectives, another teacher stated, "I have too many GLE's in my weekly plan. I need to focus more on what the students will learn, than on what students do" (Anonymous, evaluation feedback, March 30, 2011). I felt the continuing collaboration and examination of our courses would have a positive impact on student learning our program as a whole.

I continued these activities with mixed results. At a March 11th staff meeting teachers analyzed the levels of questioning in their assignments. The teachers engaged in a peer review to actively evaluate the level of questioning in each assignment. They worked hard on the task and thoughtfully analyzed their own lesson. However, when it came time to do the peer review the feedback focused on the mechanics. They asked questions of each other like, "How are you going to post it? And "is it going to be a discussion board?" There was not a single item of feedback or a question that relayed back to the content or the student learning (S. A. Lancaster, March 11, 2011).

I persisted with my focus on student learning. May 4th I requested that teachers select an assessment and bring in a sample of a piece of student work that demonstrated the student had met the objective and a sample of student work that was not yet at standard. The teachers were apprehensive according to one representative of the group who came to my office and asked for clarification of the task. This prompted me to send out the following email:

> While it might sound intimidating, it should really be a low stress task. It might be helpful to just think about, "How do I know the student has learned?" We are going to use the process to help build a model for evaluating the student work in a collaborative way. I want it to be a meaningful activity for you, so be ready to talk about what would be helpful feedback for you as the teacher of the class. Let me know if you have any questions. I know you have a lot to do, so focus on the meaningful parts. (Sally Lancaster, email communication, May 3, 2011)

This email exemplified the difficult balance between pushing the agenda forward while striving for teacher commitment. As indicated in my journal entry of on May 3, 2011, I was clearly nervous about the meeting. After the meeting, I expressed relief in my journal that the

meeting went well. I asked each teacher to go around and say what they were walking away with from the meeting. One teacher indicated a positive perspective towards looking at the objective and the assignment to analyze the extent to which the collected work met the objective. Another teacher noted that their task did not have the same clear language in the objective and they needed to refine it so it would be clearer to the student. Clarity was the focus of another teacher who came to a realization the he needed to add exemplars to his work. He stated, "The student responses aren't giving me what I want, but I haven't been clear with the students about what I want" (Anonymous, evaluation feedback, May 4, 2011).

It was becoming routine during meetings for a teacher to present objectives and share student work to obtain peer feedback. I watched the discussion drive back into the content and saw teachers engaging in rich discussions around learning and how to better meet the learning needs of the students. As my journal entry indicated, "It was exciting to hear the level of engagement and the teachers exchanging best practices information with each other" (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, April 27, 2011).

We continued these course reviews during the remainder of the year with good results. The teachers became more comfortable with the task and started to give each other feedback based on student work for what could help make the assignment/instruction even clearer. They started looking forward to the bi-monthly meetings.

Management

> I spent some time diffusing teachers today. They were really frustrated with some new additions to the student learning plan (SLP) along with issues we have had in tracking attendance and progress. They feel like they are spending all of their time managing data

> and not any time on the teaching. I know that does not feel very good to the teachers. I keep wondering how we can make the management less visible and the learning more so. (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, February 15, 2011)

Management was the fourth and final theme that emerged from the data during the course of this research. Management played an extensive role in the work at East Sound during the course of this study. For the purposes of this study, I defined management as time spent directing, organizing or facilitating tasks not directly connected to learning. The theme of management broke into three distinct categories--management of compliance, communication, and issue resolution.

I defined compliance related management as any work done for the purposes of complying with the law that does not directly impact learning. Communication involved interactions between the East Sound staff and the student, parents, or the student's home school around tasks such as logging into the computer. Issue resolution entailed any issues or problems that East Sound was asked to solve from parents, the school or from the district. This section will discuss some of the processes and procedures utilized at East Sound that made compliance related issues a category under the management theme.

Management of compliance. The management of compliance related issues dominated the conversations around online learning. WAC requirements played a role in necessitating this. Compliance with the rules became a key conversation among online leaders whenever they met. This is exemplified by the discussion below:

> I put forth the idea to one of my colleagues of hosting a conference on best practices for online teachers. She was enthusiastic and immediately started talking about the metrics

> of online teaching and started discussing teacher response times, student tracking and managing the ALE requirements. I tried to talk about formative and summative assessment and she directed the conversation back to compliance. Sometimes I think I'm crazy because no one else seems to want to have the discussion of ensuring learning in the online environment. (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, April 27, 2011)

I was able to experience the importance of attending to state requirements when our program was audited. Managing the tracking and archiving two-way weekly communication for each student as well as monthly assessments of progress was a difficult and time consuming task.

The management of the student learning plan process was made up of multiple components. First, teachers had to make sure each student had a signed SLP prior to entering our program. The SLP had to include many items such as course start and end dates, minimum weekly hours required on the part of the student, the way weekly contact would be measured, the way monthly progress would be assessed and a signed statement of understanding.

Once the SLP was in place, teachers had to manage the documentation and archive the required weekly two-way communication and the monthly assessment of progress. If the student was not meeting monthly progress two months in a row, the Full Time Equivalent (FTE) had to be adjusted for funding purposes. Adjusting the FTE required documentation of how many hours the student had been engaged in online learning activities over the previous two months. This information was also tracked, documented and archived.

I found the amount of tracking to be difficult. These were not typical systems utilized by our district, so all of our tracking systems had to be developed by the East Sound personnel. Our office manager described the process we used in response to another district's query about how we handled student tracking. Her email provides an accurate synopsis of our process and

described the complex nature of this work.

We have 450 students taking classes from 4 high schools within our district. We have developed a relational database to track progress. Teachers fill out on weekly contact and monthly progress. The database provides us with great reports. We use a check box to log attendance, or note whether the teacher saw them at the onsite visit. Our teachers visit each high school once per week. They are required to call home if the student has not logged in during the past week.

To assess monthly progress, teachers rate performance with a 1; which means no progress; a 2, which means they made a little progress, but need to pick up the pace; or a 3, which is great progress. Teachers are required to phone home for all 1's and requested to phone home on all level 2 students. We may drop students if they have more than two months with no progress.

Progress reports are sent monthly to parents and counselor via email. All emails are copied to an online archive. We have parents and students who seem unaffected by whatever we do. We have lots of documentation and communication to show our efforts towards engaging them. Teachers put a lot of work into trying to keep students on track during the semester (Online staff, email communication, February 15, 2011).

I found the teachers worked hard to fulfill these requirements, yet felt there was tension and resentment about the amount of time it took. This was exemplified in an email from a teacher that stated,

Do we really need ALE/Progress & percent numbers now? There are LOTS of boxes to check on the Microsoft Access. Might it be better to just wait until the end of the month when the ALE report to the state is due to document ALE/Percent numbers (Online staff, personal communication February 15, 2011)?

I found the semester transition was the most difficult time for teachers with high standards for course start-up and close-out. The start-up procedures ensured all teacher information was put into the classes, calendars were updated with assignment due dates and teachers had prepared multiple daily announcements and discussion boards that were preloaded and ready to go. We had clearly established metrics for this and the teachers worked hard to follow them.

The semester close out was even more intense. Teachers had to verify student grades within our LMS, transfer those to the district grading system and then archive all communication. When this was completed class had to be closed-out or saved as a way of archiving all of the student information. The close-out procedures had been condensed into a 16 page how-to manual. I estimated it took about an hour to close out each class and some teachers taught up to twelve classes. I understood why teachers found this process to be tedious and stressful.

Communication. Student and parent communication was another emerging category under management. Email is a primary form of communication in the online learning environment. The vast amount of effort put into communication contributed towards the selection of this a category. Communication encompassed emails pertaining to enrollment, logistics of the course, log-in issues, support, or other concerns. It included communication to students as well as parents and guardians.

> We are spending a lot of time on parent reaction right now. We have some parents who are suddenly flabbergasted that their child didn't pass first semester in spite of several phone calls per week, repeated emails and requests to work face to face with the student. (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication February 3, 2011)

Most communication related to the teaching and learning aspect of a course was conducted within the course itself. Students engaged in instant messaging sessions or discussion boards with the teacher and often with other students. Email was a form of communication most frequently utilized when students were not logging in or were having some difficulty. Teachers handled most of the emails on their own. Each email correspondence was copied to an online email so it could be tracked and archived. I was typically not copied on individual emails unless there was a noteworthy celebration or an issue to resolve.

I found that many parents were actively involved in online courses. In an online class, every interaction and instruction is visible. Parents were able to actively help their child and see all of the teacher directions, comments and instruction. I was pleased with the active engagement, but occasionally found that the parent expectations could be unrealistic. It was not unusual to receive an email from a parent that demanded the teacher respond immediately to an email sent a short time ago. Students would send an email to the teacher in the evening and before 7:00 am the next day, there were parents who would be emailing me saying, "The teacher never responded." I tried my best to de-escalate the parent and serve as a buffer between the teacher and the parent's demand for immediate gratification as shown in the following email:

> There is not a time on the due date so you may submit up to midnight. The teacher is out of the office and likely won't respond until Monday. As a rule our online teachers respond to written work within three days of when the work is submitted. This provides them with adequate time to read and respond to the assignment. If, after that time, you have any concerns or questions about the grade, please set up an appointment with me and I would be happy to sit down with you, your student and the teacher to review his work. (S. A. Lancaster, personal communication, February 4, 2011)

This type of correspondence was typical. A positive aspect of online learning was that all of the correspondence and documentation were archived. We could track virtually every interaction through our system. Seeing the documentation and realizing we really cared about the student helped calm parents.

At times, non-participation required us to drop a student from our enrollment. This is exemplified in a letter I sent to a student who had been exited from our program and the parent was demanding re-entry.

> The Online High School program in the East Sound Public Schools is a school of choice. As an alternative learning program, students must remain in compliance with our guidelines to ensure continued enrollment – this includes making progress and completing work. This letter is to inform you that your student has been dropped from the East Sound program as outlined during our meeting on February 4, due to the following reasons: 1) did not log-in daily. 2) Did not complete assignments. 3) Failure to communicate. Per agreement student needed to pass three classes during the extension. This condition was not met. Please contact your home high school counselor immediately to make arrangements for enrollment to ensure you have a credit-earning option to stay on track to graduate. (S. A. Lancaster personal communication, March 3, 2011)

Issue resolution. The final category under the management theme involved issue resolution. East Sound was a learning alternative. It became a resource for students without other options. Counselors would turn to East Sound when they did not know what else to do. Our staff spent many hours trying to help students resolve these complex and difficult issues.

The leadership in the East Sound Public Schools demanded a high quality program that fostered a high degree of success for students. While many programs actively recruited students to their online program, our emphasis on success led us to rules that guided student enrollment to ensure that success. For example, East Sound did not accept full time students into the program unless they had successfully completed an online course prior to full time enrollment. There were multiple requests for exceptions to this rule for many reasons such as medical exemptions, high level athletes or students with social anxiety. When this occurred, I could allow students to enroll in one class and finish it as quickly as they could to qualify for full-time online enrollment.

This approach allowed students access, but provided them with some baseline criteria to ensure success. This rule was enacted out of necessity. Previously, I had allowed full time enrollment without prior online success. Many students struggled with the difficulty of managing six classes simultaneously and our success rate was low. It was not my goal to enroll as many students as possible, but to enroll students who displayed evidence they would be successful in the online environment.

The East Sound teachers embraced their students' academic success as well as their circumstances. I enrolled one student who entered a foster home and was four months pregnant. When she gave birth, the East Sound teachers put the baby's picture up and sent the student flowers. They were all present when she graduated in June. Another online student broke her leg while participating in a ropes course with her church and had to have surgery. The East Sound teachers put together a creative get well study package to help her finish out the semester.

With all the support we offered, it was clear that East Sound did not work for everyone. I worked hard with the East Sound team to help find a successful transition plan for each student. As one email from a parent indicated:

> It is time to start thinking about the best course for our daughter for the upcoming school year. By the end of the semester she should pass every class. She is not enjoying on-line as much as she thought she would. She is missing getting out and interacting with people. She feels she is up to attending classes but does not want to return to her home school as a super senior. (Parent, email communication, June 6, 2011)

It was important that students enrolling in East Sound were successful. It was also important that students who found it was not a good fit for their learning style were supported with a transition plan to keep them on-track to graduate.

Conclusion

This chapter provides information about the themes of infrastructure, governance, teaching and learning, and management. It describes the data from which those themes emerge and provides quotes and anecdotes that reflect those themes. I attempted to convey the thoughts, feelings, and actions during the course of the semester that contributed to these themes playing a role in East Sound.

Chapter Five

Discussion

I had the distinct honor and privilege of creating and leading an online high school for nine years. The online leadership journey provided me with the opportunity to learn first-hand the importance of strong educational systems, the difficult process of change, and the importance of quality education no matter what the delivery system. This study provided me with an opportunity to thoughtfully reflect and analyze on some barriers that exist when implementing an online school and what conditions need to be in place to support learning. It provided me with an opportunity to analyze leadership behaviors that promote a learner-centered focus.

I approached this study with a desire to learn what online program characteristics caused teachers to focus on management issues, what conditions needed to be in place for teachers to shift their focus towards learning, and how leadership behaviors inspired teachers to engage in a learner-centered classroom in the online environment. This chapter discusses the implications of the research findings as well as provides suggestions for future research studies. I answered the research questions by interpreting and analyzing information from across the themes represented in the data. I explained findings through the socio-technical theoretical framework lens to make the connections among the technical, social, and systems perspectives.

Characteristics of a Management Focused Online Environment

The first question I posed for the purpose of this study was, "What characteristics of an online learning environment cause teachers to focus on management issues rather than learning

issues?" I looked across the major themes to find the issues that forced a management-centered focus and distracted teachers and me away from the learning environment. I found topics that facilitated a strong management focus under the themes of infrastructure, governance, teaching and learning, and management. I will explain how these themes supported a management focus in this section.

I found infrastructure to be a pervasive management-centered theme that served as a major distracter from a focus on learning. I faced difficulties with our LMS upgrade and technical support concerns caused a large amount of time to be spent trying to solve these problems. It was easy to see LMS questions dominated the agenda without leaving room for discussions around student learning. A LMS is an expensive and difficult endeavor for any district attempting to enter into the highly competitive field of online learning. Frustrations with the total cost of ownership, weak infrastructure and lacking the resources to commit the technology support required to adequately implement a LMS causes some districts to outsource their online schools to third party vendors.

As a district and a program committed to serving well our own students, the East Sound online program worked to provide a LMS that allowed for seamless access to high quality content. It was challenging at best to find one at an affordable price that offered teachers a variety of tools for interacting with students and engaging them in class discussions.

I worked extensively with the East Sound team to investigate alternative solutions to our LMS issues. In my mind, I felt a properly functioning LMS should be seamless and transparent. It should deliver content to the student in a functional manner. I believed our LMS dominated our online agenda and distracted both time and resources from the critical learning elements on which I wanted to focus.

I found it interesting that one category under the teaching and learning theme, the category of course design, also created a management-focused system. I was surprised at this finding since I believed the focus would be on teaching and learning. As I studied this contradiction, I realized that the role of planning plays more of a management role with online coursework than it does in traditional instruction. Planning is an important aspect of preparation for a traditional course lesson, with extensive amounts of time utilized in deciding how to deliver the lesson in an impactful manner. Most online courses are prepared and planned in advance by curriculum designers with each course offering alternative paths for remediation or enrichment. Individual lesson planning by the teacher did not require an extensive focus. I felt the lack of need for additional planning should provide teachers with additional time to focus on learning, but I found that teachers were most comfortable discussing the layout or navigation of their courses.

On several occasions, I became frustrated with the peer review activities I had established. Teacher feedback centered on the course set-up and not input on essential student learning matters. The teachers focused on logistics such as where items would be posted or whether the item should be a discussion board. Distracted by logistics, teachers were unable to direct their feedback to the learning goal. I struggled with my inability to structure a conversation that maintained a focus on student learning. I reminded myself of the important role content design issues played in the teachers' daily classroom experience. I needed to find ways to structure the conversation in a manner that acknowledged the importance of content management while bringing the conversation directly back to student learning.

When these conversations were not structured effectively to purposefully focus on learning and achievement, the teachers reverted to discussing the logistics and layout of the

course. I believe the fact our courses were created over time, without using a common template or design, led to a stronger focus on layout and structure of the course and diminished the team's ability to focus on learning.

I was unsatisfied with the larger role that governance played in the work of the online team throughout this study. It was easy for me to see that governance could dominate the work of an online school with policy driving management. This study was conducted during a time of diminishing public resources and intense scrutiny of alternative education. I felt the political system was being driven by financial needs and accountability. While I believed that there were good intentions behind most of the legislation and rules, the end result appeared to have a negative impact on student learning. The metrics for measuring and holding programs accountable became a checklist of items such as: were these forms filled out correctly, did they have the right verbiage, and were the necessary timelines met for funding purposes?

The pressure of the audit conducted during this timeframe served as an example of how policy requirements prioritized tangible items such as log-in times, tracking and compliance. When the auditing process was completed, I was relieved to learn that the auditor's findings resulted in minimal recommendations. There were no monetary penalties, yet I continued to be frustrated by the fact that both recommendations were items that would take many work hours to complete without any impact on student learning. State compliance is important for auditing purposes and program integrity, but the requirements appeared to take away from the learning process.

My sentiments about the nature of these requirements along with my perception that they were less than effective were echoed by the principal of one of the largest programs in the state when he discussed what he referred to as predatory recruiting and programs working to "get

around the rules" or "bypass the true intent of the rule itself" (anonymous principal, personal communication, April 14, 2011). I found this principal's email direct and to the point. He clearly understood the difference between districts serving students enrolled in their own district versus those who enrolled students from across the state.

I echoed his belief that some programs try to work within the law to offer a quality program to their students while other programs aggressively recruited students across the state seemingly without concern of student success. I felt as if my colleague acknowledged the elephant in the living room. It was clear that the legislature was trying to get more accountability in the alternative learning laws governing online learning. I spoke with several legislators about this struggle as they worked to find ways to keep programs from using predatory recruiting practices without regard to student success. I saw firsthand how challenging this was when many apparent solutions had a negative impact on quality programs.

I realize that developing performance based metrics that measure student progress and fund progress based on student success are controversial and difficult. I grew increasingly more concerned as the attempt to regulate some of the profiteering driven by large corporations offering online learning through small districts created additional compliance metrics for districts such as ours working to offer high quality programs. I began to question the long term viability of a learning-centered program in this environment.

I found time spent on promotion became more important as the role of governance escalated. By promotion I mean sharing information about online learning to educate policy makers, educational decision makers, parents and other stakeholders about the implications of online learning policies and learning options for students. Legislators were asking questions about the impacts of potential legislation and wanted to be educated about the way online

programs operated and the impacts of potential legislation. I engaged in multiple conversations with state and local officials as well as with school staff on potential impacts.

Online learning is a relatively new delivery system with many misconceptions about how it works. I understood promotion and education about the realities, pitfalls and potential of online learning was essential to create a more accurate perception of the role online schools could play in education. I felt as if successful promotion efforts could lead to a long term focus on learning-centered metrics in online learning. However, the realities of the political arena had for-profit providers lobbying for rules that benefitted their profitability. These conflicting interests clouded the messages legislatures heard.

Management was the final barrier that impacted a learning-centered focus with online learning. Compliance issues required extensive management. It was difficult for me to understand how some of the state requirements mattered, yet procedures dictated the need to spend a lot of time engaging in compliance-related tasks, tasks which forced teachers and school staff into managing that data.

Technology related issues required extensive management time throughout the course of this study. I struggled with several technology issues that drew time away from learning. I found that the lack of integration between our online management systems and district student information systems created the need for extensive data management which required secretarial support and dedicated teacher time.

I also found our program was inundated with students that the comprehensive schools did not know how to serve. By virtue of being a different learning option, we were asked to solve problems no one else knew how to solve. This was an exciting and valuable opportunity, but I found that each of these cases consumed more time managing the needs of individual students

than our limited resources provided.

Conditions That Shift Focus From Management and Metrics to Student-Centered Learning

The second question I posed at the beginning of this study was, "What conditions might be in place to help teachers manage their online workload effectively so they can shift their discussions from management and metrics to student-centered learning?" This question is the antithesis of the first question in the study and begins to look at negating the effects of the barriers posed by the management focus.

I found the conditions that facilitated a focus on student-centered learning were under the themes of infrastructure, governance, teaching and learning, and management. As I explained in the previous section, infrastructure caused a focus on management issues. I will attempt to explain how optimizing conditions in these areas will cause a shift from management and metrics to student centered learning management.

I believe that infrastructure should be a transparent part of an online school and would be the first factor that leads to a student-centered focus in online learning. Just as a classroom teacher has limited involvement with the maintenance of a facility and the tracking of student funding, online teachers need to have their online facility or LMS managed well so they can focus on learning. Online teachers should be able to manage the content and provide technological support to students and staff without it taking up their time. Throughout the course of this study, I found that when the infrastructure was working properly, teachers were able to focus more of their efforts, attention and conversation on student-centered learning.

A student-centered focus on governance related policies is a second condition that needs

to be in place to facilitate a learning focus. At this point in time, compliance related policy drives logistics, metrics and management without impact on student achievement. I feel it is essential to find a way to have policies emphasize student learning while holding schools accountable for judicious management policies. Until state policies have clear measures for student success and moves to a performance related system that rewards programs with high standards and success rates, I fear that an emphasis on management is inevitable.

I found a third condition that needs to be in place to provide a student-centered focus is one of clarity around course layout and design. An important first step is being clear about the course layout and design to create a consistent learning experience for the end user. Just as students benefit from consistent clear expectations in the comprehensive environment, they will benefit from clear layout of expectations in the online environment. I discovered that our course development which took place over eight years created inconsistencies and focused teacher discussions around common formatting which led to differing opinions. I believe resolving these issues up front would have eliminated the need for these discussions.

I felt it would have been beneficial to have clear guidelines for teachers about the modification and restructuring of assignments and courses. Teachers needed to be able to make necessary modifications to their courses to facilitate remediation and intervention to support the academic success of their learners. However, guidance on what changes were okay to make and which changes should not be made at the teacher level would have limited the need for teachers to focus on this issue. Engaging teachers in the course set-up and design to help them understand the student learning experience and ensure the experience aligned with the intended outcomes would have provided a common focus and an opportunity to discuss the parameters for changes.

Establishing clear tracking tools and systems that manage student accountability piece is

the fourth condition that I found to be important in maintaining a student-centered learning focus. Managing the extensive technology needs and policy requirements was impactful to teacher time. Systems need to be established and managed in a way that teachers can meet the various tracking requirements without overly taxing their time. I believe these clear systems would allow teachers to free up their time to focus their conversation on the student learning pieces.

I recommend that districts put time, energy and effort at the inception of a program by ensuring the LMS is integrated with their existing student information system. Information in the system should be accessible through report writing software and transferrable to state reporting systems so teachers do not need to spend endless hours tracking, entering, and managing data. Building systems up front allows teachers to focus on the teaching aspect.

Leadership Behaviors That Inspire a Culture of Learning and Support

The final question I posed for the purposes of this study was, "As a leader of an online high school, what leadership behaviors need to be undertaken to demonstrate (or inspire) a culture of support to engage teachers in analyzing the teaching and learning process in the online classroom?" Through this research I found four key leadership areas that would serve to inspire a culture of support focused on the teaching and learning process. These areas are as follows:

- Have a clear and consistent message about online learning include a clear definition of the program, members' roles, and responsibilities. This message should be consistent among policymakers and stakeholders.
- Structure report outs and professional conversations that focus on learning metrics.
- Provide outlets for problem solving/stress relief when problems do occur.
- Remove barriers such as funding, infrastructure and formatting from the teachers'

roles.

I believe a key element to creating a culture of support is having a clear and consistent message about online learning. As Twigg (2001) stated, “Online learning requires new, separate quality assurance standards” because it different” (p. 3). Twigg suggests the first leadership challenge is to define the vision and develop a plan for quality standards that lead to effective student learning.

Throughout the duration of this study, I found myself spending time crafting messages for various stakeholders, policymakers and teachers. At times it felt as if the online program I led was going through an identity crisis while trying to keep up with the rapid pace of change. I believe some of these growing pains could be attributed to a young program still finding itself in a changing political arena, or a new medium for educational delivery, which is still being optimized.

Promoting evidenced-based best practices in online learning played a large role in the leadership activities during the second semester of the 2011 school year. Online learning is still relatively new. Many decision makers have limited familiarity with online learning and desire to learn more. I felt as if it was my responsibility to ensure parents had the information they needed to choose the correct learning options for their students, and district decisions makers and state legislators had the current information they needed to make good decisions about learning options.

Regardless of the reason, the lack of clarity about the program and clearly defined roles and expectations were impediments to progress. I believe all programs would benefit from crafting a clear and consistent message about the philosophy behind their online learning program, taking the time to define the roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder, including:

(a) who makes the decisions around the infrastructure; (b) who provides technology support; and (c) who manages the content. Having a clear vision and purpose around these elements would serve to strengthen any online program.

The second leadership behavior that I found essential is to focus report outs, with professional conversations and accountability measures on the learning itself. It was my responsibility to keep teachers focused on the learning. The lead teacher and I often used a phrase, "Inspect what you expect." If I expect a teacher to be focused on learning, what metrics and accountability tools am I looking for? If I want teachers to focus on learning, I need to inspect or look at how teachers are evaluating whether or not learning has taken place as well as re-teaching students who need additional interventions or instruction.

The conversations around the frequency or duration of student log-ins and how we tracked that information, while necessary at times, led to a management-focused environment. Only when I intentionally added activities and criteria where teachers compared and analyzed student work, did teachers spend focused time discussing student learning. I would advocate effective leaders in the online environment know how to minimize the management barriers and demonstrates the ability to focus and emphasize collaborative discussion where teachers share learning targets and identify students' progress towards the stated target around student-centered learning topics.

This is noted in Kopcha's (2008) model on supporting technology integration. Where teachers move through four phases of technology adoption towards a goal of using technology to support learning in student-centered ways: (a) initial set-up; (b) teacher preparation; (c) curricular reform; and (d) communities-of-practice. I feel that as an effective leader of online learning I needed to move my teachers beyond the set-up and preparation into curricular reform

and building student-centered communities-of-practice.

The leader's influence on learning was identified by Portin et. al (2006) in the frameworks for identifying quality instructional leadership. They distilled three aspects important to leadership: (a) what the leader brings; (b) leadership practices; and (c) leadership influences on learning. This concept is supported by Goldring et al. (2010) who found effective leadership requires core components created through key processes such as high standards, rigorous curriculum, quality instruction, culture of learning, professional behaviors, connection to external behaviors and systematic performance accountability.

The third leadership behavior I identified to support a focus on teaching and learning is being able to recognize impending issues and provide pressure relief and support to teachers when they do occur. With the newness and unpredictability of online learning, it is inevitable that some problems will occur and it is important to provide an outlet to diffuse the tension. I believe this was exemplified by the staff meeting where I provided a format for teachers to discuss frustrations and brainstorm solutions. This was a cathartic process designed to provide the East Sound teachers with some pressure relief while coming up with practical answers.

The fourth leadership behavior I found to be essential in promoting a student-centered learning environment involved the removal of barriers such as funding, infrastructure and formatting from the teacher's role. Teachers are hired for their expertise with instructional content and their ability to build relationships with students to get them to achieve to high levels. Online learning, when not properly supported, can cause teachers to spend time managing infrastructure and technology issues, tracking student log-ins and contacts for funding purposes, and managing the layout of a pre-existing class. All of these elements take away from the finite time available and distract from the teacher's ability to focus on the learning environment. I

believe a strong instructional leader in the online environment must work towards actively eliminating these barriers so that teachers can successfully focus on learning.

Socio-Technical Systems Framework

I sought to view this data through the lens of the socio-technical framework. As Passmore (2001) stated, every socio-technical system (STS) is embedded in an environment that affects the way it behaves and you need to look at the system and environment together. When analyzing the data through the socio-technical lens, I found discrepancies between the socio or human aspect and the technical aspect caused the balance of the focus between learning and management to shift. I could clearly see that in order to provide proper balance between these two areas, one must harness the strengths and abilities of the technology to ease the workload so that the human system or socio part of STS could be more focused on the learning and relationship aspects.

Learning needs should be driving what the technology does and how it performs. Initially, teachers have had to conform to the limitations of the technology as online learning developed. It has taken time to find the proper balance between the technology system itself and the use of technology to ease the teacher workload and allow the student centered-focus—in other words, create a functional system overall.

I believe a balance can be provided with a transparent LMS system that is supported in a way that can utilize technology to manage policy related reports and requirements, as well as monitor skills based assessments and practice towards learning. All districts have a student information system to collect and report data to the state. A learning management system should connect seamlessly to a district's student information system so that students are added or

dropped from both systems without redundant work. The school administrator should have the ability to pull reports that provide information about student access and time on task without requiring teachers to track that data.

Technology should be optimized for students' learning. Students should have the ability to take automatically graded quizzes where they can check their learning, and the opportunity to engage in interactive games where they can develop basic knowledge and comprehension. Utilizing the technology for this purpose allows the teacher to spend more time providing individualized and personalized feedback in developing student higher order thinking skills and ensuring students understand the more rigorous content.

I found that students also needed a proper balance of technology and human interaction. Highly effective technical systems can only work if the student chooses to log onto the system and be engaged. I discovered that not all students make ideal online learners. Many needed additional human interaction for motivation and support. I directed online teachers to make multiple phone calls and once a week teachers visited the students' home high school to provide support. I believe that building in procedures to increase the human touch when students struggle is a key to success in the online environment. The powers of technology are great, but technology online does not ensure quality teaching and learning.

Trist (1981) proposed three levels of looking at the socio-technical framework. These were the primary work level, the whole organization level and the macrosocial level. I saw the primary work level equivalent to the teacher and class interaction. During this phase there needs to be a clear balance between the socio-technical systems. An overreliance on the technology can impact students' willingness to engage while an overreliance on the human system can impact the capacity and time available to focus on learning.

The whole organization level equates to the school itself. At this level, the technology should be supporting the teacher. A proper balance can be met when teachers can direct, manipulate and harness the technology to minimize their management workload. This frees up the teacher to focus on the aspects of student learning and engagement that increase achievement.

The macrosocial system is the third level in which to view the framework. This would be the system of schools at the state and district level. I found at this level the socio-technical system was somewhat confusing. Ambiguous and confusing guidelines at the state level led to districts implementing a wide-variety of online systems. These systems vary from being completely computer assisted, to heavily teacher directed. I found this led to varying levels of impact on the classroom through teacher actions and through the context of technology. It also makes it difficult for districts to share and learn from each other because of the wide philosophical and technical differences.

Viewing these systems through the socio-technical lens has allowed me to understand the importance of balance between the two systems (see Figure 2). Without a proper balance it will be impossible to keep a student-centered focus on the work (see Figure 3).

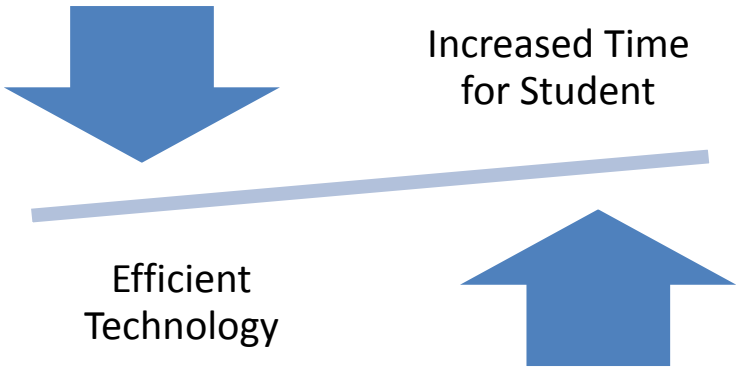

Figure 2. Efficient Technology Provides Greater Time for Students

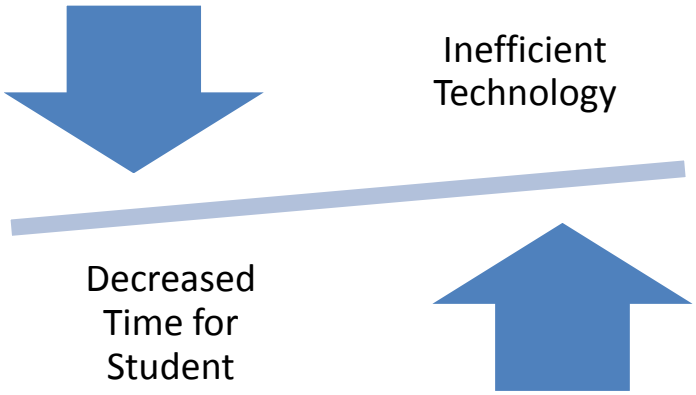

Figure 3. Inefficient Technology Impedes Time for Students

This framework also provides a glimpse into the disjointed nature of online learning at the state level. I am beginning to realize that just as a principal needs a clear mission and vision to lead a learning-centered focus in their school, our state needs a clear mission and vision for the role online learning will play in our future. Without it, we may be driven by the technical systems instead of using the system to maximize student learning.

Recommendations and Suggestions

As a former leader of an online school, I have truly enjoyed this autoethnographic journey. Looking deeply across the data to find emerging themes has helped me understand the barriers that negatively impact student learning, the conditions that support student learning and the leadership behaviors necessary to provide a student-centered focus. From that data and the analysis, I end with five findings that are the basis for my recommendations for school leaders: (a) leaders need a strong vision for a quality online program; (b) online learning is highly social; (c) human interactions and support for students is essential; (d) policy drives a management focus; and (e) online training is needed for school leaders.

Suggestions for School Leaders

As online learning continues to expand, I believe that school leaders have a moral responsibility to provide the highest level of education possible to the students they serve. This requires a strong vision and a clear understanding of what quality learning looks like in the online environment. I suggest that school leaders take the time to develop a learning-centered focus around online learning before they begin offering such options.

Throughout this study, I heard the perception that online learning is isolated and does not require collaboration. The data from this study suggests that online learning is a highly social event that is enriched when students and teachers engage in collaborative activities. I propose the concept that the structure of online learning actually creates a greater need for providing access to the social aspect of the learning. Just as online students need to collaborate and engage in rich discussions, I believe it is essential for teachers to come together and actively discuss student learning and suggest school leaders work to provide such opportunities.

The format and delivery of this collaboration may look different than it does in a traditional school. However, there needs to be the same level of engagement around formative assessments that provide checks for understanding, quality teacher feedback and the summative assessments that ensure learning has actually taken place.

My third suggestion is that online leaders ensure they are providing human contact and daily check-ins with students as necessary. Even in the online environment it is important that the teacher and student develop trust and the student understands that the teacher cares about their learning. Providing students with opportunities to interact with the teacher as well as other students gives them motivation for logging in and continuing the work.

It takes a very self-directed and motivated student to sit down at the computer every day

and engage in an online class. Many students fail because they lack that self-direction and self-discipline. I believe it is the teacher's role to engage with the student by providing the support, encouragement and structure to successfully complete the course. I suggest that online teachers find a way to make a personal contact with the students so they are more willing to engage.

School leaders are important to the future of quality education. They need to have a clear vision about what quality online learning looks like. Additionally, school leaders need to foster collaborative opportunities for teachers to focus on learning and support options that connect students at a personal level so they are more likely to engage in the content.

Suggestions for Further Research

Finally, I conclude my dissertation with three suggestions for future research. First, I feel it is important to develop common definitions, procedures, and measure for quality online learning. The lack of common definitions creates a large gap in the literature. Schools and third party vendors are moving forward without quality metrics and a generation of learners is at risk.

My second suggestion is to formulate online learning policies that lead to performance based metrics instead of the management metrics that currently exist in Washington State. I believe that the current metrics and the required focus on management inhibit the potential of meaningful online learning. Therefore, future studies should address how existing measures of online learning and corresponding management and structural procedures impede student achievement. I suggest further research be done on the impact of state/district policy on student learning with a goal of creating performance centered metrics of success. We need to explore ways that policy decisions can drive student achievement rather than data management. There needs to be a clear and relevant process for the management of compliance issues, and state

metrics for program success should first focus on measuring students' progress towards standard.

I realize it is not easy to create policy that focuses on student learning. I would like to recommend that additional work be done to study state policy around online learning and to develop systemic measures for accurately tracking and reporting student success in online learning. It promises to be a difficult but meaningful task.

Finally, I suggest that school leadership programs need to include training requirements to address the changes in this growing trend. Understanding how online learning is impacting teachers and learners and will continue to impact education in the future is a complex but worthy task. Universities and colleges should begin preparing school leaders for the online learning challenge.

Online learning holds great promise for the future of education. Technology allows us to move forward with new innovations at a rapid rate and deliver information in a meaningful way. I am not proposing that we limit the opportunities for online learning. I am proposing that we keep learning in the forefront of our minds as we continue to explore the opportunities of this new delivery system.

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