The Experience of Computer Supported Cooperative Learning Using Weblogs in the University Classroom: a phenomenological case study

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Abstract

The primary goal of this case study is to capture and depict the experiences of six American university students with Computer Supported Cooperative Learning (CSCL) using weblogs in a course that combined face-to-face (f2f) with online interaction. The most unique aspect of the course was that the online portion was completely open to the public. An adaptation of Clark Moustakas’ phenomenological research methodology was employed to gather, analyze, and present the data. The main issues emerging from this inquiry suggest that the authenticity and sense of ownership provided by running a weblog taps into a learner’s intrinsic motivation and encourages deep, reflective, autonomous learning strategies. Although initially engendering a sense of exposure and feelings of anxiety, the completely public nature of the weblog may spark a process of self-examination, cause insight into the way identity is constructed online, and give learners direct experience with learning outside the confines of the formal institution. Other emergent issues include the nature of communication and cooperation on weblogs; the importance of commitment, compromise, and self-accountability in the cooperative process; and that blended learning environments may present significant obstacles for learners with a strong preference for f2f interaction.
For Zachary
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Preface

The East Asia Center – February 2003

Nestled in a quiet residential neighborhood on the slopes behind Kyoto’s famed Golden Temple lies the East Asia Center. From the front it appears to be just another small house on the block, but as you approach the doorway, a hand-painted turquoise sign reading ‘Friends World College’ suggests a much different reality inside. Sliding open the front door reveals a dozen pairs of shoes scattered on the concrete below a wooden rack of mailboxes, each labeled with a different name in black felt tip. The faint smell of moldy tatami and old books arises as you enter. You take off your shoes and step up onto the creaky wooden floor, which gives slightly under your weight, leaving the immediate impression that this house is ‘used’. Indeed, a quick glance into the room on your left reveals a well-scratched coffee table next to a worn-out couch, upon which rests a laptop covered in duct tape, a coffee-stained copy of the Kansai Time Out, and the remains of someone’s snack from the night before. A mangy black cat sits drooling in the corner under a faded Buddhist tankha hanging neatly on the wall. Following the sound of muffled voices takes you past a brightly lit kitchen/office and up a steep flight of stairs, each step so narrow that it forces you to lift your heel and walk on the balls of your feet. At the top you are greeted by a large black and white print of two indigenous Lao women on the wall and a traditional Japanese sliding door on the right, behind which come the sounds of laughter and awkwardly spoken Japanese. Quietly you turn to your left and navigate your way past several overflowing bookshelves to another set of partially open sliding doors guarding the computer room. Peering in, you see a whole row of boxy Power Macs from the mid-nineties perched atop a long rickety folding table whose front panel is peeling off. A young woman sits listening to an MP3 while peering intently
into her newly purchased Power Book, for which she has created space by pushing back one of the heavy monitors and setting its grimy keyboard on top. Curiously, she has unplugged the blue LAN cable from the back of one of the old desktops and has inserted it into her own shiny device, happily rendering the aging monstrosity temporarily out of service. Noticing your presence, she turns her head, gives you a warm smile, looks you in the eye, and gestures to the computers, “Hey, know any museums that might want these?”

**How this project came into being**

In the fall of 2002, I was asked to become the interim academic coordinator, beginning in the winter term of 2003 for the East Asia Center (EAC), part of Long Island University’s Friends World Program. Originally founded by the Quakers in 1965, Friends World gives students the opportunity to experience a global education, with centers in China, Japan, India, England, Costa Rica, and the United States. Based firmly upon the principles of experiential learning, it enables students to combine first-hand experience of diverse cultures with the critical study of academic disciplines related to real world problems (Friends World Program, 2000).

Thumbing through the East Asia Center’s collection of recent student portfolios, I was impressed by the rich variety of unique learning experiences documented within. I thought to myself, “shouldn’t such material be shared with others, rather than having it sit on a lonely shelf collecting dust?” Shortly after, an informal meeting with some of the students confirmed this sentiment. Another problematic issue that arose in our encounter was the mild sense of futility that some of the students expressed with their writing assignments from the previous term, such as having to compose and revise thirty short papers under strict
academic standards, all of which ended up in the lonely portfolio at the end of the term along with work from other studies. While they agreed that the rigor of the experience benefited their academic writing, it wasn’t necessarily an enjoyable endeavour. I sat and listened to them passionately explain to me in detail their learning experiences with the previous semester. It was fascinating!

Seeing how eager this particular group of learners was to share what they had to say, I thought to myself, “Why not introduce them to a tool that would allow them publish their writings and share their thoughts with others back home? Doing so would lend a bit of authenticity to their work and they could receive feedback from someone other than just their academic advisor.” Thus the decision to use weblogs in the upcoming term was made.

Similar to online journals, weblogs allow users to type directly into the browser and publish to the internet with the click of the mouse. Furthermore, weblogs allow readers to respond what was posted via comment features, enabling interactive communication to take place. ‘They’re easy, fun, and the students will love them’, so I imagined.

One of the duties of my new position was to facilitate a course at the center. Being a student of networked cooperative learning myself and having experienced first-hand its benefits and challenges, I decided that it would be an appropriate framework around which to build the course. Learners would be introduced to a simple action research based methodology and asked to examine an individual topic of interest, document the process in the weblog, and actively take part in the projects of others by cooperatively participating in both online and face-to-face discussions; all of which made for a very unique learning event. And given how fascinating it was for me to listen to the learners describe their experiences with the previous
term, I decided to focus my research on their experiences with the specific course I was planning, especially pertaining to the use weblogs in the context of a computer supported cooperative learning environment. The attempt to capture these experiences and depict them in this dissertation is what I set out to do.

**Introduction**

The report which follows describes a case study that lies somewhere between what Stake (1995) might call *intrinsic* and *instrumental*. It is intrinsic to the extent that it focuses on the experience of a particular group of learners jointly taking part in a unique learning event. Yet due to the complexity of the case, I have chosen to hone in on those aspects of the experience that most pertain to my own recent studies, namely computer supported cooperative learning (CSCL) and the use weblogs in education. In doing so, the case study becomes instrumental towards better understanding how people experience these elements of online learning.

In order to fully appreciate the context and meaning of the learners’ experience, it is first necessary to examine the rationale behind the course design, which involves a closer look at its key elements: cooperative learning and weblogs. In the first section of chapter 1, I will explain why I took an approach to course design closely based on the principles of CSCL, fully defining the key issues and drawing the reader’s attention to the pertinent literature. I will then turn my attention in section 2 to weblogs, providing a definition and discussing their history, features, and current use in society, especially in the field of education; showing how weblogs make an ideal tool for use in constructivist, cooperative approaches to learning. In section 3, I will present a detailed description how the course was structured, discussing its
strengths and weaknesses, and then in light of the preceding review, make theoretical projections of the kind of experience we might expect the learners to have.

In chapter 2, I will expose the danger of making such theoretical projections in a qualitative inquiry and argue how that danger necessitates the approach that I chose towards capturing each learner’s experience with the course. Based largely on Moustakas’ interpretation of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology in his book *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994), I will explain the methodology, showing precisely how it relates to my epistemological stance, and how I adapted it to meet my needs. I will then share how I dealt with several ethical issues that arose, and then proceed to explain clearly how the research data was generated and analyzed to answer my research question: *What are these particular learners’ experiences with CSCL using weblogs in a classroom setting combining f2f and online interaction?*

The third chapter of this dissertation will be where I present the results of the phenomenological inquiry, which will consist of descriptions from each of the six learners, followed by a composite description of what this learning event was like. In the fourth chapter, I will highlight and critically examine the major issues emerging from the study, taking care to discuss these issues in light of the current body of relevant literature. In the fifth and final chapter, I will conclude by reviewing the main thesis, and then proceed to show how the results of might be of interest to others by suggesting avenues for further research.
Chapter 1 – The Literature Review

1.1 – Why Cooperative Learning?

Social Theories of Learning

This research and the theories which inspired it all rest upon the view that knowledge is not absolute; it’s not ‘out there to be found’, gathered, stored, and used like a commodity; but rather it is actively and continuously being constructed in the mind of each individual. When people interact socially they affect one another to the extent that meaning becomes shared; knowledge is co-constructed and situated in the context of the interaction.

‘Knowledge is a process of knowing in which we engage with our reality, and through dialogue with others and with ourselves we give meaning to the world’ (McConnell 2000, p143). Indeed, the socially oriented theories of learning called constructivism and the research efforts on situated cognition support these views.

Of particular interest is Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory of learning, which asserts that cognitive development is embedded in the context of social relationships. One of his best known and most influential contributions to the field of cognitive psychology grew out of his studies on children; something called the Zone of Proximal Development (Zoped), which he defined as:

[…] the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving, and the level of potential development as
determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (1978, p86, emphasis mine)

Although Vygotsky was referring to the process of learning resulting from the social interaction between the adult and child, I believe the concept can also be applied to any group of adults, each of whom share different backgrounds and qualities of expertise. In such a case, the ‘adult–child’ relationship would be analogous to that of the ‘expert-novice’.

When two people interact, meaning is negotiated in a shared affective space created in the Zoped, what Goldstein (1999) calls the interrelational level. Co-construction of knowledge takes place in the Zoped and is situated in the context created at the interrelational level.

**Cooperative Learning – A definition**

In general terms, learning is cooperative when it involves a group of people working together on a particular issue or task and it arises from collaborative interaction between participants. Research has shown that cooperative learning has benefits over and beyond those of more traditional models, which tend to be more individualistic and competitive; among these are higher levels achievement and greater productivity (Johnson and Johnson 1994), as well as outcomes that are generally not considered academic, such as increased competence in working with others, self-confidence, and personal insight (McConnell 2000). Conceptions and practice of cooperative learning are varied amongst educators, but my own view of cooperative learning is heavily influenced by work of David McConnell, who proposes a more open, unstructured model; one that involves issue-based learning with minimal teacher control, where learners moderate themselves, set their own learning goals, and negotiate meaning. Peer and self assessment are used and the rewards are mostly intrinsic. Such a self-determined approach encourages autonomous, deep learning strategies (2000).
Cooperative learning at the EAC

I decided upon a cooperative learning model for the course at the EAC for two main reasons. The first is that I believe it makes a nice match for the type of experiential educational practices that regularly occur in the Friends World community. The learners are used to having a high degree of freedom to decide on topics and methods of study, where self-designed, independent experiential learning projects are often carried in addition to organized courses. Self-evaluation is also employed along with written evaluations from the advisor or learning facilitator – there are no grades. Might cooperative learning be easier to implement in a community or institution whose educational practices are based on such experiential learning practices?

The second reason for choosing a cooperative approach results from my direct experience of taking part in online cooperative learning groups as part of the Sheffield University MEd in E-Learning. My experience with CSCL in the course workshops was a largely positive and successful one, which inspired me to attempt implementing a similar structure in the EAC course. Before taking a closer look at the resulting course design, let us first turn our attention to weblogs.

1.2 – Weblogs

Weblogs defined

In its broadest sense, a weblog (or ‘blog’ for short) is simply a webpage that consists of frequent textual entries organized in a reverse chronological order. Surprisingly perhaps, the
first weblog was the very first website on the internet, built by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN (Winer 2002); yet it was not until 1997 that the term ‘weblog’ was first coined (Paquet 2002). The concept had remained relatively obscure until weblog software made its first appearance in July of 1999 (Blood 2000), greatly improving the ease of web publishing by allowing users to create their posts directly in the browser and immediately publish with the click of the mouse. Along with this came features allowing posts to be automatically archived, hyperlinks to other documents to be easily created, and comment features enabling readers to respond to any given author’s postings.

Suddenly publishing content on the internet became simple, accessible, and interactive; inspiring myriad uses throughout society, most saliently in the form of personal online journals, knowledge management in business and institutional settings, and for the distribution and discussion of news and ideas amongst journalists, writers, and intellectuals. Weblogs have also recently begun to have an impact on the field of education, as evidenced by the recent foundation of the Educational Bloggers Network (EBN), currently composed of more than 120 members, most of whom are educators who blog (edu-bloggers) and who research and promote the use weblogs in all areas of education. Not surprisingly, much of the dialogue and collaboration taking place in that community is via weblogs.

New Developments
Recently, several new developments in web publishing technology have added a new dimension to the communicative capabilities of weblogs: RSS, aggregators, and trackback; all of which serve to challenge the understandable but somewhat mistaken view that weblogs are a linear form of online communication. RSS or ‘Really Simple Syndication’ allows the
steam of posts to a weblog to be syndicated or subscribed to by a reader. An aggregator is a piece of software allowing a reader to collect, view, archive, and organize all subscriptions onto a single browser page, eliminating the need to visit the URL of each and every blog to read the latest postings. And because each posting has its own unique URL, it can be hyper-linked to relevant postings, the creation of which is automatically indicated by the trackback feature. For example, if I make a posting on my blog about what I ate for lunch and a blogger in Italy decided to write about it on his blog, his posting would immediately be indicated on my blog along with a link to his full message, so that other readers could also follow and/or participate in the interaction. This removes the necessity of visiting another blog to leave comments in response to a posting, and effectively creates a trackable, more reticular textural network of human communication.

**Suitability of weblogs for cooperative learning**

As a learning tool, the weblog may be ideal for use in constructivist learning models, by encouraging autonomous, deep, and reflective learning strategies; what Sebastian Fiedler (2003) calls a ‘reflective conversational tool for self-organized learning’. At the beginning, a weblog is an empty space, necessitating that content be fully constructed by the learner, a process which involves a certain degree of independent decision making and self-managed learning. While doing so, the type of projection and externalization of mind necessary for self-reflection is taking place. Also, the interactive features of the weblog are well-suited for communication and collaboration; the open dialogue with others allowing the learner to be exposed to a variety of ‘experts’, enabling him or her to examine a problematic issue from different perspectives. Furthermore, the fact that each posting is chronologically displayed and archived makes the historical record of personal knowledge construction and dialogue
with others available for further scrutiny, also encouraging reflection. Ultimately, the co-construction of knowledge that occurs through archived discourse on weblogs gives learners an opportunity to confront the reality of their ‘personal learning myths’ (Fiedler 2003), to recognize their patterns of cultural and cognitive conditioning, to widen their ‘cognitive perspective’ (Peters 1973, in Elliot 2001), and to realize the extent to which relationships with others are constructed in the mind (Turkle 1995); encouraging a shift towards Chia’s concept of ‘openness’ leading to the ‘awareness of ignorance’ (1981). Clearly then, the weblog seems suitable as the primary means of online communication in the type of open, negotiated cooperative learning structure to be employed in the EAC course.

1.3 – The EAC Cooperative Blogging Course

Course Design

The course took place in the spring term of 2003, from Jan 26th to May 16th, and consisted of six learners, three males and two females, with a third female loosely participating in the online portion. Each learner was given an empty weblog and shown how to use its software (Manila from Userland, Inc.) to make postings, reply to others, and make simple changes in both the site structure and cosmetic appearance of their blog. A main site was set up to aggregate postings and to explain to the public what was happening. Each weblog contained links to the others, and the tutor took part in discussions on all six weblogs (See Fig. 3.1).

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1 One of the female participants was not an official member of the course, but rather she started a blog about five weeks into the term and joined the online discussions as an outside participant. She did not take part in the f2f meetings or the collaborative evaluations.
From the outset, the learning goals and outcomes of the course were left undefined. Learners were introduced to basic action research methodology and were encouraged to choose a topic of study – be it personal or some part of their social reality – that they would like to understand better and change. The benefits of cooperative learning were also discussed in class, especially the importance of following the progress of each other online and responding to postings. In addition, learners were strongly encouraged to enlist the participation of friends and family back home in the United States. It was understood from the beginning that the record of their textural interaction on the blog would be completely available to the general public, including their end of term assessments consisting of self, peer, and tutor evaluations based on criteria suggested by the tutor. The plan was to meet face-to-face (f2f) twice a week for the first half of the term, and reduce that to once a week as the course progressed. The content and direction of f2f meetings were democratically negotiated by all participants.
An examination of the course as described above reveals a model of cooperative learning similar to McConnell’s version as described in chapter 1. Listed below are its main features of pertinence to this study:

- **Lack of structure.** Similar to what Shefler (2000) calls ‘indisciplinary education’, where learning occurs in the relative absence of discipline or the kinds of power relationships that exist between teachers and students; the relatively unstructured and open, negotiated setting of both the f2f meetings and the online interaction encourages participants to take control over their own learning and become more competent at learning to work with one another.

- **Content and outcomes undefined.** Being given an empty weblog and asked to carry out an undefined learning project causes learners to take an introspective look at what is important to them; motivation for the projects are intrinsic, which encourages deep learning strategies.

- **The combination of f2f and online interaction.** Often termed ‘blended learning’ by instructional designers, one of the benefits of computer-supported cooperation is that it provides continuity in between f2f meetings and creates an archive of student activity to support further study and review (van Boxel et al 2001). Also, the existence of two communicative modes could serve to provide learners who normally exhibit silent tendencies in a f2f environment with an alternate means of expression.

- **Collaborative assessment.** Although self and tutor/advisor evaluation are common employed in the Friends World Program, for most of the learners, this was to be their first experience with formal peer evaluation. Research suggests that collaborative assessment helps participants to develop competence in assessment abilities and
extend their normal processes of learning, both of which are lifelong learning skills (McConnell 2002)

- **Completely public nature of the learning environment.** One of the most unique and intriguing aspects of this course is its entirely public nature. Using weblogs to conduct the online portion and to post evaluations exposes the learners to public scrutiny. By receiving feedback from a diverse array of individuals, aspects of their learning that are blind, hidden, or unconscious can be brought into the open and made clear. (McConnell 2000)

- **The use of a weblogs to conduct the online portion of the course.** Because the appearance of weblogs is a recent phenomena, relatively little formal research has been done on their use in education, or in any field for that matter. A great deal of rich intellectual discourse on weblogs and other forms of dynamic web publishing is beginning to emerge, much of which is happening, of course, via networks of bloggers.

**Questions to Consider**

Ideally, such a course as this would allow the learners to tap into their natural curiosity and intrinsic power of motivation, enabling them to develop their analytical and creative skills, and to become more autonomous, self-aware, knowledgeable, and socially-adjusted people. In practice however, the success of the learning event hinges on numerous issues. The relative lack of structure, content, and undefined outcomes calls upon the learners to decide for themselves what is to be learned and how to go about it. Such a model approaches Pedler’s (1981) concept of ‘liberating structure’ in his ideal learning community where learners are given freedom to decide upon their own learning goals. While this type of open,
undefined environment makes personally significant and self-directed learning possible, could it not also cause inhibiting levels of anxiety, antipathy, or despair to arise in those learners not fully accustomed to being given such degrees of freedom? With collaborative assessment, openness is crucial its success (McConnell 2002), but to what extent would the extreme openness of this particular course affect the learners’ views of each other? Collaborative assessment can be a highly emotional process (Asensio et al 2000), and as Boud et al (1999) report, formal peer evaluation can inhibit cooperation if the learners see it as pitting themselves against one another, instilling a sense of competition in the group (Felder and Brent 1994 in Palloff and Pratt 1999). This furthermore raises the question of to what extent does the completely public nature of the course affect all aspects the learners’ behaviour. Might it also cause inhibiting emotions to arise, such as fear or anxiety, or even competitive behaviour? Boud (2001) suggests that self-exploration and critical reflection in journal writing can be inhibiting when undertaken in an environment involving the scrutiny of others. Another important issue to consider is the patterns and balance of interaction between the two modes of communication: f2f and online. As much as blended learning could enrich the quality of communication for some, might others find the opposite to be true, especially if they have a strong preference for one or the other mode? Also, what is communication via weblogs like? Does it enable the cooperative process or inhibit it? Is it truly an ideal tool for encouraging autonomous, deep, reflective learning practices, or does it in some way have the opposite effect? Finally, to what extent will the role of gender and prior experience with computers towards computers have on this particular group of learners? Studies show that although women tend to participate quantitatively less in online discussions, they contribute more ‘interactive messages than men’ (Barrett and Lally 1999); yet are more likely to demonstrate computer anxiety (Nass et al 1995). Men are also likely to
be more confident using technology and to claim higher levels of previous experience with computers (Yates 2001). What effects will this have on the interactive dynamics of our particular group, being that it is composed of both genders?

Posing such questions highlights the potential weaknesses of the course design while reminding us of the complexity of human interaction. In our quest to capture and depict the learners’ experience with this course, the question of how to deal with this complexity arises. In the following section, I will attempt to answer this, while arguing that the research methodology I have chosen is most fitting for the task.
Chapter 2 – Research Methodology

2.1 – Moustakas’ phenomenological method: an adaptation toward triangulation

Why a phenomenological approach?

We might predict that the course design as outlined above would, in theory, result in a cooperative, non-competitive environment that fosters deep learning strategies while encouraging the participants to become more autonomous learners. Yet to go searching for such evidence is a dangerous endeavour, for in our attempt to find something specific, we might very well miss evidence to the contrary, or even something completely new. The act of aiming at an object causes that which surrounds the target to become blurred. For example, if we set out to find evidence of learner autonomy, we may indeed encounter it; but doing so necessitates us gauging the evidence against a personally defined notion of what is and isn’t ‘autonomy’, discarding that which doesn’t suit our purposes. This is a grave error in my view, for that which is discarded could indeed be a valuable treasure. Furthermore, the very evidence upon which we base our claims is inevitably biased from the start, for we’ve already decided what we’re going to find before we even begin the research process.

In an effort to overcome these weaknesses, I have chosen to take an approach to this research that is loosely based on the methods Clark Moustakas has outlined in his book, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994). Largely influenced by the transcendental
phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Moustakas’ interpretation of phenomenology is concerned primarily with describing the everyday world of commonsense knowledge and human experience, called the life-world (*lebenswelt*), which Husserl claimed was the basis of meaning in every science (Schwandt 2001). Although the life-world is an intersubjective reality, the beginning point in establishing the truth of things is individual perception. Moustakas calls phenomenology the *first* method of knowledge because it begins with ‘things themselves’ (1994, p.41).

In our case, we are concerned with establishing the truth of how the course is being experienced by the participants, which is in part accomplished by asking them to *describe* their experiences; for they alone are capable of knowing how phenomena appear to their conscious minds. However, the researcher’s act of being present, participating, making observations, and asking questions, undoubtedly affects the life-world of the entire group, particularly so when the researcher is looking for specific evidence; for not only is his or her own perception biased, but those very same biases will influence the outlook and behaviour of the co-participants. This begs the question of how the researcher can best go about gathering evidence in an unbiased way, the solution of which lies in the process of Epoche.

**Moustakas’ Phenomenological Method**

*Epoche:* Life is a subjective experience, even to the extent that our ‘objectiveness’ is subjective. Our usual perception of reality is interpreted through the filters of social, cultural, and emotional conditioning. The experience of seeing, let’s say, a Rolls Royce drive down the street would be described in a unique way by each individual, with perhaps the most striking differences noted along lines of economic status and political beliefs. Generally, this
holds true for the qualitative researcher as well, whose attempt to interpret an event of interest is unavoidably skewed by his or her own biases. In phenomenological research, it is necessary to start with an awareness of these biases, and to proceed only after our everyday views are set aside; a process Husserl called *Epoche*, a Greek word meaning ‘freedom from suppositions’. Once Epoche has been activated, we can then see phenomena *as they appear*, in their ‘suchness’, absent of any presuppositions, stripped of all prejudgments, allowing us to see things openly and freshly, as if for the very first time.

*The interview:* Phenomenological methods of research rely heavily upon the informal interview to produce evidence. When conducted in the Epoche, the researcher takes no position whatsoever, treating everything with equal value. Questions are open-ended and careful effort is taken to not to taint the interview with ‘facts’ or assumptions about the research question. All that is present is the conscious, experiencing self of the researcher, the participant who shares descriptions of his or her experiences, and the recording device which captures what is said.

*Phenomenological Reduction:* Following the interview is the process of phenomenological reduction, which consists of reducing a participant’s statements to its essential constituents and from those, constructing a textural description of the experience. The first step is horizontalization, where, in a state of Epoche, all statements made by the participant are treated of equal value. Those that are repetitive, overlapping, or unrelated to the research question are discarded, leaving the *horizons*; which are further clustered into themes. It is from the horizon clusters that a complete textural description of the participant’s experiences is constructed, untainted by the biases of the researcher.
*Imaginative Variation:* As the process of phenomenological reduction results in the ‘what’ of the experience, imaginative variation provides the ‘how’. Being intimately involved as a co-participant and observer, the researcher is in a unique position to provide this type of insight. By reflecting deeply upon the textural description and using his or her imagination and intuition, the researcher attempts to provide possible meanings by approaching the description from different perspectives. The final purpose is to arrive at structural description, which accounts for the underlying causal factors which serve to illuminate the participant’s experience, giving it meaning and structure.

*Synthesis of Description and Meaning:* The final step is to synthesize the textural description or experiential essence with the structural description or possible meanings and causes for the experience as described. What results is a combination of a participant’s description of his or her experience with the researcher’s input as to how those experiences came about. The result is a depiction of a participant’s experience of phenomena, which is able to be captured by the researcher through the Epoche process. Thus, the effectiveness of this phenomenological approach is largely determined by how well Epoche can be practiced.

**My Approach Explained**

Considering the complexity of the case, and the dangers of looking for evidence of a specific variety, I decided to conduct an inquiry deeply inspired by Moustakas’ approach as outlined above. What follows will be a detailed description of exactly how I went about gathering evidence for this project, with particular emphasis on areas where I felt adaptation was necessary to suit my particular needs.
Informal interviews, or ‘encounters’, were conducted separately with each of the six learners, all of which took place in mid- to late April, two to three weeks before the end of the semester. The participants were informed that the conversation would be recorded and that their names would be used in the final document. They were also told that they would be shown the final draft of the report before it was submitted, knowing fully well that they could refuse participation at any time in the project. Each encounter took place in the back of the East Asia Center on a balcony next to a wooded area and babbling brook. This was done purposely to create a natural, relaxing environment conducive to reflection and relatively free from distraction. Sessions began with a two to three minute period of silence, in which learners were asked to reflect upon their experiences, while I, the researcher, attempted to enter a state of Epoche by focusing on my breath and physical sensations, consciously letting go of any and all biases and presumptions. The period of silence was gently broken by asking each participant to begin describing what arose in his or her conscious mind during the silent period. From there, learners were prompted to speak about their experiences with different aspects of the course. All questions and prompts were open-ended and great care was taken by the researcher to maintain Epoche throughout the interview, never to make assumptions or ask leading questions. Examples of the type of questions asked included but were not limited to the following:

- What experiences, if any, stood out for you the most during this course?
- How did the experience of cooperative learning affect you, if at all?
- How did you feel about the public nature of the course?
- What was your experience of online learning like?
• How did the experience of this course affect the people around you?
• Did you experience any personal changes over the course of the semester?
• What thoughts do you have about running a blog?
• Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

The average length of an interview was forty six minutes. Interviews were transcribed by hand, word-for-word, and subsequently analyzed according to Moustakas’ method. Horizons were reduced from each transcript and clustered into themes, from which textural descriptions were made. The textural descriptions were then emailed to the six participants asking them to check for accuracy; all but one responded with comments. Each textural description then underwent imaginative variation to produce a corresponding structural description. After that, a textural-structural synthesis was made for each participant. Finally, an overall composite textural-structural description was synthesized from all six of the textural-structural descriptions.

To better illustrate this process, let us examine more closely the how the textural-structural synthesis was constructed. Initially, a list of statements (invariant horizons) was made from each interview transcript. The following example is part of the invariant horizon list for one of the participants:

8. It’s easier to give criticism online because in a face-to-face setting, people are worried about hurting other people’s feelings or starting a chorus of similar criticisms.

9. In the blog, it’s easier to think of a way of making a criticism that the person will be able to use, rather than just get hurt by it.

10. Knowing that other people are reading what I’m writing and getting their feedback and responses makes me feel really good.
11. With just a few exceptions, the entire project has been overwhelmingly a positive and fulfilling experience.

12. It’s an affirming experience to use a tracker to see that people are visiting your site from different countries and webpages.

13. When people take the time to read my page, it makes me want to put more effort into it and make it that much better.

14. Having a blog is something I’m proud of….a real confidence booster.

15. In the beginning, my project was really personal and I definitely had some worries about who might read it.

Upon close examination of the invariant horizons for each participant, it became clear that the majority of the statements could be sorted into four different categories: cooperative learning, weblogs, the blended structure of the course, and the public nature of the online portion. Statements that did not fall clearly into any of these four categories were placed into a fifth, ‘miscellaneous’ category. Statements which were entirely irrelevant to the study were discarded. For the short invariant horizon list in the example above, statement numbers 8 and 9 were clustered under ‘blended structure’, number 10 was clustered under ‘cooperative learning’, number 11 under ‘miscellaneous’, numbers 12, 13, and 14 under ‘weblogs’, and number 15 under ‘public nature’.

Once horizons clusters were made, textural descriptions were composed, which simply meant turning all the statements in a given cluster into a paragraph, which represents the ‘what’ of the experience. What follows is a short example of a textural description from one of the participants:

John stated that the public nature did not change the way he posted to his site. “I didn’t change the way I posted because of the public nature of the blog. I didn’t do anything special.” However, this doesn’t mean that he
wasn’t affected by the sense of exposure the public nature engendered. “One of the more difficult things that I've had to deal with this semester was the sense of exposure I was feeling from my webpage. I have done some things on this webpage that I am not proud of, such as the abandonment of my original goal of learning music, but I have found new paths and goals along the way.” At the beginning of the term, the feeling of owning a blog was different. “It was the sort of feeling about ‘me against the world’, not in a bad way, but that countless thousands of people are going to be poking and prodding you. That was a little freaky.”

Examining and reflecting upon the textural description, we use imaginative variation to provide a structural description of how the textural description came to be, answering the ‘how’ of the experience. The following is the structural description derived from the textural description above:

I think this has to do with John’s drive for self knowledge. He’s not afraid to look inside and see who he really is. He is searching for ways to do this. John started off the term a little hesitant and confused about what he should be writing on the blog, but he became more comfortable with it as the term progressed. He stated several times throughout the semester that the fact that so many people could potentially read what he posted didn’t affect the way he wrote. Indeed, John is can be quite frank and open in f2f discussions and isn’t the type of person (isn’t able?) to hide his emotions. It is not surprising to hear him say that the public nature didn’t change the way he posted.

Once having arrived at both textural and structural descriptions of a participant’s experience, the next task is to synthesize the two into a textural-structural composite description, which provides us with both the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the experience. The following is a textural-structural composite of the two descriptions listed above:

John has a thirst for self-knowledge and was very open on his weblogs about his emotions, feelings, and inner struggles. At first, the public nature of the online portion caused may have caused some slight discomfort, but he insists that it didn’t change the way he made postings and comments. “At the beginning of the term, the feeling of owning a blog was different. It was the sort of feeling about ‘me against the world’, not in a bad way, but that countless thousands of people are going to be poking and prodding you. That was a little freaky.” “I didn’t change the
way I posted because of the public nature of the blog. I didn’t do anything special.” However, this doesn’t mean that he wasn’t affected by the sense of exposure the public nature engendered. “One of the more difficult things that I’ve had to deal with this semester was the sense of exposure I was feeling from my webpage. I have done some things on this webpage that I am not proud of, such as the abandonment of my original goal of learning music, but I have found new paths and goals along the way.”

Once all of the textural-structural composites were constructed for each of the six participants, a meta textural-structural composite was formed to describe the overall experience.

**Addressing the weaknesses**

One of the criticisms leveled against this type of phenomenological method of inquiry is it’s over-reliance on the personal interview as a means of generating data (Fleming 1986, in Jones 2000). Not only are the feelings expressed by a participant on any given day likely to change over time, but the presence of the researcher may induce the participants to purposely distort or falsify their claims in order to impress or influence the study, sometimes called the ‘Hawthorne effect’ (Cohen et al 2000, p156). To base all the evidence on a single interview session with each participant is a questionable practice in my view. Indeed, I readily agree with Richardson’s (1999 in Jones 2000) call for more scientific vigor in qualitative inquiries that rely heavily on the interview, such as paying more attention to accounts given by the learners over the course of the entire event. For this reason, I took notes throughout the semester on statements that I overheard learners make or that were made directly to me in casual f2f interactions. I also kept a daily personal journal of my own thoughts, which grew to 12,000 words by the end of the term. In addition, I made use of the online record of interaction in the weblogs, as well as the learners’ self evaluations and final statements on
their experience with the course. Any statement made by a participant, whether f2f or online, was included as a horizon and grouped with that participant’s list of horizons from the interview. Any relevant personal observation that I made, either in my notes or in my journal was taken into account when performing imaginative variation to produce structural descriptions. In this way, I was able to keep participant accounts separate from my own observations, only synthesizing them in the textural-structural step, effectively including both in my analysis of the interview data. By including data from my observations and reflective journal, the online record of learning, and the self evaluations and final statements of the learners, I attempted to introduce triangulation into Moustakas’ interview-based phenomenological method. By doing so, I have tried to address the potential criticisms of ‘method-boundedness’ (Cohen et al 2000, p113) to ensure a more holistic approach to data gathering in the field.

**Ethical Issues**

Because of the personal nature of the interview process and the openness of the course, it was necessary to consider issues of ethics. First, consent from the East Asia Center director was obtained before embarking on the project. Once the students arrived on the first day of class, they were given full disclosure of the purposes and intent of the research project. It was explained that I would be carrying out research on their learning throughout the semester by making and recording observations, performing interviews towards the end of the term, and by making use of their online writings and evaluations in the final report. It was also made clear from the start that the study would **not** be anonymous or confidential, and that any statements made in the interviews or written on the blogs might be used in the report. It was likewise made clear that any participant had the right to withdraw from the project at any
time and that each of them would have the opportunity to review the final draft of the report before it was submitted or published. Finally, I explained that at any time during the semester, the terms of confidentiality and anonymity, along with any other doubts or insecurities that might arise, were open to negotiation and discussion at any point throughout the semester. All of the learners accepted these terms and agreed to participate in the project.
Chapter 3 – Textural-Structural Descriptions of the Course

In this section, I will present the textural-structural descriptions for each of the six online participants, which will be followed by a composite description derived from a synthesis of each of the six participant accounts.

3.1 – Austin’s Experience

Austin began the course with the intent to use his weblog to cultivate deeper self awareness by counting on the insights of others to uncover the blind or hidden areas of his consciousness. The content of his initial postings varied, but he soon came to realize that the virtual space could best be used to complement his studies in different subjects. The direction of his project then turned to cultivating interdisciplinary synthesis.

Cooperative Learning Online

For Austin cooperative learning using weblogs was a largely a success. He seemed to truly appreciate the input of others. “Knowing that other people are reading what I’m writing and getting their feedback and responses makes me feel really good.” “What was most fulfilling was not the content of my project, but rather the way people were participating in it. Participation was more important than the project itself.” Along with his appreciation for the cooperative element, he also saw the potential that wasn’t being met, and this led to some frustration. “Even though I was having a positive experience personally, seeing the lack of
energy and commitment from some of the other participants frustrated me, especially when I thought of the project in terms of potential.” Austin recognized that commitment was required to cooperate effectively. “If you’ve made a commitment to cooperate then you should at least go on the blog once a week and read what people are doing. There should be a minimum level of visible participation.” Austin had mixed feelings about what took place on the blogs of some of the co-participants. Some experiences were enjoyable, “I really liked being cooperative and participating on Jaymie’s blog because I felt like she really valued what I had to say. I liked some of the discussions that started to form and thought that there was a good cooperative exchange going on.”; while other experiences Austin found to be challenging, “On some blogs, I felt alienated - ignored, out of place, or unwanted. This feeling of alienation limited my participation.” Ultimately, it was the participation of others in Austin’s project that he found most meaningful. He comments, “Disinterested criticism is a gift like none other.”

**Blended Structure**

Unlike some of the other students, Austin found the blended structure to be enriching, over and above the type of communication and learning taking place in his more traditional f2f classes. “I felt that I communicated a lot more with the people in this class than I have in other classes that were only face-to-face.” “It’s great to have access to different modes of communication, because one doesn’t always work for some people.” For Austin, academic communication with some of his classmates on the blog was richer than it was in ‘reality’ and he expressed his desire for more such communication. “I wish I could read and respond to what people in my other classes were writing. It would make for a richer learning environment.” That way, “If one way of communicating isn’t working, I still have another
Weblogs

Austin found the use of weblogs as learning tools to be “useful”, “valuable”, “motivating”, and “fun”. “Having a blog is something I’m proud of - a real confidence booster.” “It’s an affirming experience to use a tracker to see that people are visiting your site from different countries and webpages.” “When people take the time to read my page, it makes me want to put more effort into it and make it that much better.” The blog gave him a sense of ownership. “I really like the fact that the blog is mine. The blog is like an extension of me. It’s personal and I don’t have to share it with anybody.” “I can put all my work on it and have control over that.” It was the comment features that Austin valued the most, receiving participation from family members in addition to his peers. “On my blog, I’ve been really been enjoying the responses that I get and the discussions that have formed. It’s been really fulfilling.” “On this blog, through discussion, we can cultivate a powerful tool--dialectic. I want to subject all of my learning to this dialectic, so that everything I learn is open, public, participatory, democratic, and challenged by the minds of all of you. I feel like I can synergize my academic efforts this semester by using this blog as a focal point for discussion and learning.” Austin also recognizes the blog as a valuable learning tool, “The success that
I feel I have had with this blog is evinced by the fact that I have every intention of maintaining it.”

**Public Nature**

Austin began with a very personal project on his weblog, causing him to deal with the public nature of the learning environment in a direct way. “In the beginning, my project was really personal and I definitely had some worries about who might read it. It was kind of scary.” “…but after you do it, it feels really good, like taking a weight off your chest.” “Once you make something that you’re feeling public, it becomes much easier to deal with.” Austin also saw the public nature of the blog as having a challenging effect, causing him to “examine how much of myself I wanted to expose, asking myself, “Why should I be scared about something I’m feeling?” Austin likens the public nature of the blog as having a motivating effect on the learner. “The public nature of having a blog is exhilarating. It’s a little scary, a kind of fear that’s motivating though. It feels good and kind of pushes you to write well because not only do you know that other classmates and family are going to be reading it, but also that anybody could read it. There’s this huge unknown.” “The public nature of the blog is a motivating force.” Another insight that Austin shared had to do with what ‘public’ really meant to him. “The public nature is kind of a chimera, like an imaginary monster, because you think it’s the whole world but in fact it’s really only ten, fifteen, or maybe even a hundred people. It’s not really the whole world.” Finally, Austin was well aware of what the public nature meant to the project, “Exposure, remember, is the very purpose of this blog--to expose your ideas, your writing, your self to our class, to the world, but ultimately to yourself.”
3.2 – Abi’s Experience

Of the six learners, Abi had the most difficulty deciding how best to use the weblog in the context of the course. Postings to her weblog were sporadic and content was varied. She constructed a cosmetically attractive weblog and uploaded some of her photographs she had taken the semester before and a short film she had directed before coming to Japan, but little outward evidence of her learning process was offered in the weblog, nor was any clearly defined project carried out.

Cooperative Learning Online

Abi found participating online difficult and challenging, preferring f2f interaction instead. Although she struggled communicating online, she was able to see the value it had for other participants. “I liked seeing other people’s development and how everybody else got into it. I enjoyed seeing how excited it made Austin and where it brought John. I appreciated how it appealed to them and how it brought them to another level.” “In terms of the community that they were able to build and the way it really raised their confidence and how it worked for the other students really impressed me.” Abi felt very out of place online, and even experienced problems getting her family and friends to participate. This led to frustration and feelings of futility. “I felt like nobody cared and so what’s the point?” Within the learning group however, she felt trust was present and valued the peer evaluations. “Trusting is the way our community is.” “We trust peer evaluations. We want to hear what other people think.”
**Blended Structure**

Unlike Austin, who found the blended structure to enrich the quality of communication in the class, Abi did not take kindly to the online aspect of the course and asserted that things would have been better without the computers, which Abi saw as creating distance between the learners. “I’m a really personal person. I feel so distanced when there’s any electronic or paper or anything that separates me.” “I just felt this distance within the community, like there was a separation between each individual.” “We became more individual.” Blended learning was confusing and strange for Abi. “The weirdest aspect was that we met everyday and we were there physically around each other and we discussed a little bit in terms of what we were doing, but it was always, ‘if you want to know, go look at my blog.’ I wanted to talk to people about what they were doing, but I felt like if I talked to them they would be like, ‘Well, you’re just lazy and don’t want to go on the blog and don’t want to find out.’ I mean, what’s the point of human interaction anymore when you can sit here and talk to somebody, but (instead) you go on a computer to read about it.” Abi found that the existence of the online element may actually have lessened cooperation and communication between participants than had it been a strictly f2f cooperative learning group. Overall, the online element was more of a conundrum for Abi. “I feel like it was this gap, this void somewhere in the sky that existed where everything was supposed to be going on.”

**Weblogs**

The reverse chronological order of postings on weblogs emphasizes the here-and-now of the learning process, something to which Abi showed aversion, stating many times that she was not a ‘process person’. Working with weblogs in this course helped her to realize this even
further. “Once I’ve already put something out there, then my mind goes and it’s somewhere else and things would change. I just want to like, get it there, get it out, have it done with and have it be over with.” Using computers to communicate with others was frustrating. “It’s hard. I get really impatient dealing with the computer and putting something out there and not getting a response.” However, she recognized the value a weblog could have, especially for communities whose members are geographically dispersed. “What it gives to an outside community is really great. It’s great for the people that are back home or whatever. When you are five thousand miles away and it’s your only connection, it brings you closer but it’s still not like reality.” Abi likened the process of making a posting on the weblog to taking ‘one step back and a sprint forward.’ “All of the sudden you step back for a second and then run! You get that evil grin on your face and you’re like, ‘Ha, ha, ha! I want to see what happens.’ And so you just step back a second because it tenses you up for a second.” There were, however, some aspects of running a weblog that Abi found useful, for example, as a means for an individual to develop self awareness. “It’s a window who I am. It’s something that forces you to look at yourself. Having something out there to acknowledge once in a while forces you to become aware of your growth and development.”

Public Nature

One aspect of the course that Abi found particularly interesting was its public nature. “I like the public nature of the blog because I’m a performer.” Although she saw the public nature as ‘potentially stifling’ at the beginning of the course, she expressed how it challenged her views. “It really forces you to look inside yourself and say, ‘Is this something about me that I’m comfortable enough with to show the entire world, no matter who it is? Are these opinions strong enough within myself that I can either put them out there and not feel like I
have to defend them or once I put them out there, defend them?’” “Is this really something of me that I want portrayed to the entire world?” Dealing with these issues gave Abi insight into how we create an image of ourselves online. “It forces people to be almost like…fake? It’s almost this fake actualization because you really don’t know whose looking at it.” One must ask the question, ‘For whom are you writing and what type of image do you want to portray?’

### 3.3 – John’s Experience

John’s initial intent was to document his process of learning music in Japan. As the semester progressed, the content of the postings on his weblog took a largely introspective turn, chronicling his inner struggles and triumphs with his life as a foreign student in Japan.

**Cooperative Learning Online**

John is an emotional learner, whose experience with cooperative online element of the course alternated between feelings of frustration and satisfaction. Sometimes his frustration was directed toward himself for not being a more cooperative learner, and other times it was directed towards his fellow participants for the same reason. Actually, the lack of participation from several of the other learners was something that John felt affected the dynamics of the entire group. “Austin and I seem to be in a spot where we get so frustrated that we don’t want to care anymore and the other three don’t care that we’re frustrated. The problem with this situation is that it never gets to the point where we have unfettered
communication, so I feel unfulfilled.” These feelings affected his perception of the peer evaluations as well. “I don’t want them to evaluate me because I don’t think they’ve been paying enough attention for their evaluation to matter.” John’s family took an active role in his learning online by frequently responding to his postings, yet John was left yearning for participation from those he didn’t know. “I feel bored with criticisms of people I already know.” “I wanted somebody to come out of nowhere and surprise me, but I didn’t really get it.” In spite of his frustrations, John did seem to benefit from cooperative learning in several ways. On the topic of peer evaluations, John wrote, “I read through them and found the criticisms to be enlightening, even my own evaluations seemed different when I was able to read them along side those of other students. I am especially grateful to Austin for posting this peer evaluation (of me), it was both well written and insightful. I'm glad that he made me aware of some of the faults in my work this semester, because I may have never uncovered them myself had I not been given some outside support.” Indeed, the online cooperative process may have affected John’s self awareness. “I think that other people tend to know more about what I'm doing than I do because I'm too busy to realize. The mindset is: ‘Okay that's done. Now, on to the next thing.’ Habits begin to form if you don't pay attention to what you're doing.” John especially benefited from the criticisms offered by some of the other participants. “A different point of view can be surprising and surprise is invigorating.” “Someone would come along and post something on my site -- an idea or a story -- and when I read that posting I would feel energized! I would respond and revise, write news stories, and organize my page.”
**Blended Structure**

Like some of the other learners, John also found the combination of f2f and online learning confusing at times. John suggests that this may have had something to do with the close physical proximity of the participants. “Perhaps we were too close to one another to effectively use the blog as a way to exchange ideas back and forth. After all why would we post something if we could say what we wanted to say to each other in person? It sounds like a mean question to ask, but I think it's something that all of us had trouble with this semester.” Another insight John had was based on his experience concerning communicative context. “I think that if you read through this blog it becomes apparent that our conversations do tend to lean toward closed conversations, or high context conversations. That is to say, we know each other well enough to leave out details when we're speaking to one another and unless you are an insider you may not know what's going on! I didn't create this page to be a forum that only a few people could participate in, and the fact that Austin had difficulty with that (and supported that claim with evidence) is proof enough that I still need to work on creating a two-way street of communication on my blog. That's very important to me. I want anyone to be able to post here and feel comfortable with whatever they choose to write.”

**Weblogs**

John describes the experience of running a blog to be very consuming in terms of time and energy, which was stressful at times. “I found that attention to the blog required a great deal of time and energy and that when I didn't maintain momentum, everything came crashing down around me. Soon a week could pass by without a posting.” “I maintained my site and kept up a good speed, but there is still that gnawing in the back of my head saying, post...
Running a weblog as a cooperative learning tool requires one to find a balance between posting and commenting. John describes his method, “When comments start to pop up, you don’t really know if you should keep going with new subjects or if you should comment on these things. Pulling ideas from comments and put them in on the front page eliminated the response on one and kept things within the realm of the past two days so I was still able to post a significant amount.” Although John sometimes felt frustrated when several days would go by without any participation, he really enjoyed the process of creating and maintaining a weblog. “The blog is totally free and personal.” “I think the interaction aspect is really fun.” “The blog has so much potential. It’s really, really fun.” He likened his blog to an interactive journal that talks back to him. “When I think of how much time I’ve spent on this site, I do become a bit surprised. I don't think I've ever worked on a project this big for so long! I get a good feeling when I'm working on the blog and my main goal is to share my experiences with everyone and anyone who visits my site. I'm glad to see new people on the site and the conversation that this anonymous forum can generate is a power beyond my comprehension. Everyday I look forward to posting something new or writing a response to something because for me, this blog is an interactive journal - a journal that talks back to me.”

**Public Nature**

John has a thirst for self-knowledge and was very open on his weblogs about his emotions, feelings, and inner struggles. At first, the public nature of the online portion caused may have caused some slight discomfort, but he insists that it didn’t change the way he made postings and comments. “At the beginning of the term, the feeling of owning a blog was different. It was the sort of feeling about ‘me against the world’, not in a bad way, but that
countless thousands of people are going to be poking and prodding you. That was a little freaky.” “I didn’t change the way I posted because of the public nature of the blog. I didn’t do anything special.” However, this doesn’t mean that he wasn’t affected by the sense of exposure the public nature engendered. “One of the more difficult things that I've had to deal with this semester was the sense of exposure I was feeling from my webpage. I have done some things on this webpage that I am not proud of, such as the abandonment of my original goal of learning music, but I have found new paths and goals along the way.”

3.4 – Jaymie’s Experience

Jaymie’s initial project was to learn how to better cultivate her creativity by documenting her experiments in artistic creation. However, her work later evolved into posting work from other classes for comment, some of which were creative writing pieces.

Cooperative Learning Online

In general, the cooperative process for Jaymie was one that she enjoyed and valued. Being a creative person who takes pride in her work, she thrived off comments from others, especially those which praised her writing skills. “Eighty percent of the feedback I got wasn’t praise, but it all worked in such a motivational way.” “The feedback really served as a means of perpetuating my interests in the blog and wanting to put more and show people that I had more.” Because Jaymie loves to write creatively and exhibits outward signs of being a socially-oriented learner, it is not surprising that being cooperative and taking part in discussions online was one of her strong points. “One of the most enjoyable aspects in the
class for me was to participate in other people's blogs. I really enjoy having online
discussions.” She was also comfortable with peer evaluations. “I think the peer evaluations
is a really great part of the class, especially because to get written feedback on what your
peers actually thought, on a whole, of their experience with you as a peer.”

**Blended Structure**

Jaymie found that having an online portion to the class allowed her to know her peers in a
different way than usual. “In a normal setting, I don’t see the work that the other students are
doing. To actually be able to read other students’ work and have them read mine, it lets all of
us know each other in a slightly different way, that kind of unspoken knowledge like when
you read an author, you feel like you have some connection with the author.” She saw the
f2f work as necessary for successful online learning, but also felt that it created a feeling of
separateness in the class. “The blended learning was kind of necessary instead of just
dictating the course online. That could have been really confusing.” “My idea of the class
was more face-to-face meeting and the work I did was a blog. So it was like, we had class
and then work, which was the blog. So it was kind of separated into two parts.” Her
inconsistency of postings on her weblog may have indicated a preference for f2f learning.
“Maybe I wouldn't be so hesitant to keep on top of my writings if this was a totally virtual
environment, Aaron! I think that being able to talk to everyone in the class whenever I’d like,
on or off the blog- well, mostly off the blog, has its advantages and disadvantages.”

**Weblogs**

Running a weblog was helpful for Jaymie and she was keen on the sense of ownership. “It
was kind of liberating to have my own site. This is the first time I’ve had my own website,
and it was so nice to just go on and have my own page to do whatever I want.” One of the biggest advantages for Jaymie was the accessibility it gave others to her work. “People could go to my site by choice and say what they thought. It’s kind of nice to have that.” “As a result of having a site, my family members have seen it and other students have seen it and given me incredible feedback.” “If I didn’t have that blog, all my writings would be sitting in my folder and I probably wouldn’t show them to anybody.” Jaymie, like many of the other participants, was busy and stressed, especially from being in a foreign culture. This course took up a lot of time and she found it difficult to post consistently. “The only real anxiety I had was worrying about keeping my blog updated and not sort of lagging behind and having a stagnant website.” Nevertheless, Jaymie recognized the usefulness of weblogs as learning tools. “The blog is so resourceful. It’s a really great way of posting consecutive works. Then I can look back on it and see the progression of how I was working.” As a direct result of using a weblog in a cooperative context, Jaymie seems to have benefited in two ways. “I think that I developed a voice in writing this semester, which is something I have been trying to do for as long as I have been writing.” “I think that in my own way, I was able to improve my understanding of my own creativity in ways that I never intended to.”

Public Nature

Exposure was a key theme with Jaymie and her weblog. It occasionally caused slight feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and vulnerability to arise. Interestingly, it was people that she knew rather than strangers that most affected her. “I was probably most aware of the people I knew that were going to see it, and that was probably my most vulnerable spot. It really didn’t matter with people I didn’t know.” “That would bring up a little anxiety in if they
were going to respond, but they never did.” In response to a comment on her blog from another participant asking her to share more of what she thought about her creative process, Jaymie writes, “I appreciate the comments on the last posting, but the truth is that I feel exposed. I feel like I have some standard to meet with whatever I post now.” “The site has been registered with search engines (verdad?), and I am finding all these crazy thoughts of insecurity about my work and my creative dignity flying through my head!!! AHHHHH!! I appreciate the introspective look that you guys take into reading my work, it really means so much. I am wondering though, what kind of response would the general public have to this? Maybe I will be confronted with a whole new level of feeling exposed when someone I don't know comments on my work. I don't fear that as much as I fear reading an opinion of someone I know....that's pretty strange!”

3.5 – Andy’s Experience

A senior, Andy is three to four years older than the rest of the participants. Although he started his weblog with a variety of different types of postings, he eventually used it as a space to post his work in progress for his senior thesis paper on Japanese youth culture.

Cooperative Learning Online

Like Abi, Andy also found the cooperative online element of the course challenging. “I have read almost every single post of all the other learners but found it hard to find my voice in relationship to their work. In this aspect I make a rather bad cooperative learner. I feel that I
failed the other learners by not finding and utilizing my voice for the sake of their work and humbly apologize.” Finding his voice online was one of Andy’s main struggles with the course. “For me, I had some problems sharing my own thoughts on where my research was going. This created in the end, a huge problem for me. Without anywhere to depart from, outside observers found it difficult to comment on my work. At the same time, I found it difficult to relate to other students work on the blog. I think this might have had something to do with the broad range of concepts and ideas that were being expressed in the class.” Andy often posted work from his senior thesis project, but offered little explanation of what he was trying to accomplish by doing so, rendering his voice conspicuously absent. He seemed to confuse requests from other participants to explain what he was working on with sharing his personal feelings. “What I haven’t gotten out of it is critical analysis. I get a lot of ‘how do you feel?’, Friends World flakey questions, and what I want is critical analysis, which I am getting at some points, but a lot of it seems to be based around more self-reflective critical analysis, and what I want is academic analysis.” However, the cooperative element wasn’t a complete failure for Andy. “I feel that the class was a valuable tool for me. One of the things that helped was that by posting information and research I found that people were able to give me new venues to pursue.”

**Blended Structure**

Andy was the only participant who had previous experience with an online course, yet he had experienced difficulties on that course as well as this one. One of the reasons Andy gives for his difficulties learning online is his preference for physical things. “I like to think I’m rather technologically minded, but there’s something in me that likes to hold something in my hand - something solid, something I can spill coffee on (laughs). I can’t spill coffee on my
laptop.” “There’s something about that, the physicality of an object that I respond to; I respond to books really well.” This preference for physicality also pertains to people. “I’ve got to see people’s eyes.” “I like human interaction.” Perhaps the biggest challenge for Andy in the blended learning environment was trying to determine the best way to communicate with the other participants. “Commenting online was really hard because I could always just turn my head and say, ‘Hey!’” “It’s tricky when you’re sitting right next to me at the computer. I can say it a little easier.” For this reason, he thought that the online learning would have been more effective had there been more physical distance between the participants.

**Weblogs**

Andy’s primarily used his blog to compliment his senior research project by continuously posting the notes taken from his interviews with Japanese youth as they became available. “The blog is the place where I throw up things. It’s like my point of departure almost. I throw up what I’m thinking about in its roughest form.” Indeed, Andy saw the act of posting to his blog like a ‘release mechanism’ which helped him to distance himself from his work. “What I’m looking for is the release, the next step of movement.” “When I throw things up on the blog, I become more and more conscious of what I’m doing for the next step.” He didn’t view his blog as an appropriate place to write about how he felt. “I’ve been using my blog as a place to put up my data for critical analysis from other people.” “How I feel is not the first thing I throw up on the blog.” “I just don’t want to give my opinion.” “What I write on my blog is not that revealing, you know? It’s not showing me.” In spite of this attitude, he does see the potential of the weblog to serve another purpose. “Running a blog is such a great way to get your thoughts out. I think that’s really important.”
Public Nature

Andy had mixed feelings about the public nature of the course. On the one hand he liked the exposure that the internet offers. “One thing I really like is that I like putting what I do up and knowing anyone in the world can look at it.” Conversely, he explains that the same exposure can affect him negatively. “I feel that my in-class comments were ok, but when I was on the Internet, I found that it was intimidating to voice my opinions and in many cases found that I had none to voice.” Andy explains his way of dealing with this, “I try to ignore the public aspect of the blog, because then I become self-conscious.”

3.6 – Rachel’s Experience

Although Rachel wasn’t officially a part of the course, she was a student at East Asia Center who decided to run a blog and participate in the online discussions. For this reason, she had no experience with the blended element, nor did she take part in the evaluation process. Rachel most used her weblog to post and discuss work from other classes and to start building a resource for a method of language learning that greatly interested her, called The Silent Way.

Cooperative Learning Online

Rachel is a serious learner who saw the meaningful and authentic nature of the weblog and the cooperative element of participation it enabled. She started a blog and participated knowing full well that she would not receive any official credit for her efforts. After she had
begun participating, she found that the process of commenting was satisfying. “I really, really enjoyed commenting on other people’s blogs.” “Commenting on other people’s blogs felt like I was giving something.” She only commented on other peoples blogs when she felt she had something important to say. Rachel also appreciated receiving comments from others. “It meant so much to get a comment on my blog.” She discovered that receiving input from others helped her learning as well. “The few times I did have a discussion on my blog, it was amazing.” “Discussions on the blog not only make your paper better, but also it makes your general learning better.” Other than her peers, members of Rachel’s family also participated in the discussions on her blog. “My impression is that my family members really enjoy the blog.” “Because my mom and sister know me so well, they saw where the holes were and knew exactly how to pick the right spot and challenge me.” The experience of cooperative learning wasn’t always so smooth however. For example, Rachel found it difficult to read and participate in John’s blog, which tended to exhibit John’s emotional and personal side. “I was annoyed reading John’s blog.” “I didn’t really feel comfortable participating in it.” “I didn’t feel I could respond to personal things like that. I didn’t feel that should be my role to contribute to that type of learning.” Finally, Rachel had this to say, “Peers are necessary to make the experience more meaningful.” “I think it would be a really powerful thing to have students at all centers take part in this kind of blogging.”

Weblogs
Rachel initially chose to run a weblog after she saw how it was helping another learner. “The reason that I started blogging in the first place is I saw Austin getting all excited about it. I thought it would be really cool to do.” Rachel identified with her blog. “There is something about the blog that is very ‘me’. I put something on there and it has to be an accurate
representation of me, maybe just because it has my name on the top of it.” Interestingly, she didn’t see the blog as a place to post personal things. “I’ve noticed that some people want to take a strictly academic theme on it, and others are more personal.” “I wouldn’t put my personal feelings on it.” “I don’t like to put personal stuff up on the blog.” The blog also played a meaningful role in Rachel’s learning. “The blog is meaningful in a personal sense.” “Every time I was going to put something on my blog, I automatically checked it to make sure it was meaningful to me. Wanting to put it on my blog is exactly what told me if it was meaningful to me.” She also recognized how the weblog played a meaningful role in the learning of other participants. “The fact that John puts personal things on his blog really says something about what it means to him.” “The first thing Austin started doing was writing about his consciousness. That’s a perfect example, you just don’t do that kind of thing for school!” Rachel gives us insight into what the experience of posting to her blog is like. “When I put something on my blog I feel really good.” “I feel like not only have I finished it, but that it’s totally done.” “It gives me peace of mind.” “Putting something on my blog is nothing like turning in a paper.” She also offers her views about the frequency of posting. “When somebody hasn’t posted in a while, I kind of stop reading. Likewise if somebody’s posting things too often, I stop reading too because I can’t keep up with it.” “One of the issues I had was that I didn’t want to keep posting everyday because I wanted to leave room for discussion.” Finally, the time-consuming nature of running a blog was also mentioned by Rachel. “What I don’t like is I’m so busy and that the blog is time consuming.” “Time consumption is part of the nature of the blog.”
Public Nature

The public nature of the blog for Rachel was something that she saw in more intimate terms. “I don’t think about the public nature in terms of ‘the entire world is going to see this’. I think about it more in terms of my friends and family.” She asserted that the public nature of the blog didn’t significantly change the way she made a posting or what she posted. “The public nature of the blog doesn’t make me uncomfortable because the public doesn’t mean anything. It’s just an abstract concept.” Feeling anxious or worried due over her postings being available to the public were mental states she didn’t feed. “I had to ignore my fears and insecurities when posting in order to feel comfortable. I didn’t have time to sit there and be nervous about what I’m writing. I basically just blocked that out.” The feeling of exposure was evident in Rachel’s descriptions. “My passion usually goes in to what I’m writing and on the blog, I feel like my passion had kind of been exposed.” Trust was important to her and the public element offered the potential for trust to be compromised. “There are definitely people I choose not to tell about my blog because they’re not people that I trust.” Finally, Rachel saw how the public nature of the blog made what she and the other learners were writing authentic. “It’s so easy with school when you have a paper to write, you just kind of write something that you don’t really care about. It’s just ‘fluff’.” “You can really tell when something is authentic.”
3.7 – The Overall Experience of the Course

What follows is a composite textural-structural experience for the all the participants.

**Cooperative Learning**

The participants equated cooperation with participation in each other’s weblogs, which was enabled through the comments feature provided by the software. Receiving feedback from others was motivating and energizing, and at times sparked further discussion. Usually the feedback was deemed as beneficial and helpful, sometimes surprising, sometimes incredible, and often meaningful. At other times however, comments were seen as contrived, while other participants felt bored receiving feedback from the same people. Giving feedback was time consuming and required effort, but was a satisfying endeavour, ‘like giving a gift’.

Participating in other learner’s blogs was enjoyable, meaningful, and appealing at its best; difficult, annoying, and alienating at its most challenging times. Each learner had control over the look and content of his or her own cooperative space (weblog), each of which had different affects on different learners. A weblog could be interesting and inviting, or it could be difficult to relate to or alienating; an important factor in the resulting quality of communication. Trust was claimed by most to be present, but the lack of perceived participation from certain members of the group definitely caused a lingering, yet not overwhelming, frustration to arise in two of the learners, the reasons for which were seen as lack of commitment. Although the participants had previous experience with self and tutor evaluations, they had mixed feelings about peer evaluations before they actually took place on this course. Some were comfortable with the idea, others were slightly anxious about how
to write them and what they might reveal. Afterwards however, it was unanimously agreed that the peer evaluations were beneficial and insightful.

**Blended Structure**

The combination of f2f and online interaction amongst the members of the course gave them a way to see each other from a new perspective. Because the participants live and study together, the quality of their communication was highly contextual. Those who showed a preference for f2f interaction and physical things, weren’t as successful in participating in the online portion, and expressed either frustration or indifference towards the process. They found the online portion to be difficult and confusing and suggested that it may have actually lessened cooperation in the group. One member in particular felt that the online portion should not have even existed at all, for it created a feeling of separateness and exacerbated individual differences. On the contrary, others found the online portion to enrich the quality of communication in the group, allowing everyone to share their work and thoughts in an entirely new way. Rather than creating distance, the blended structure had the opposite effect of bringing the participants closer to one another. One participant stated that the f2f element was necessary for supporting the online interaction, while another suggested that had there been more physical distance between the learners, online communication would have been more effective. Indeed, a contentious issue for most of the participants throughout the semester was how best to communicate with one another, causing them to consider not only what should be discussed in person and what should be discussed online, but how to balance the two, especially when some learners had different conceptions of how this should be.
Running a weblog gave all of the learners a sense of ownership, which some described as ‘liberating’, ‘confidence boosting’, and a ‘source of pride’. The weblog is something personal with which the learners identified, like an extension of the self. It’s also authentic; something which can be affirming for some, yet can cause anxiety to arise in others. The weblog validates their work and can motivate them to share more. The accessibility the weblog offers to their thoughts and academic work allows family members and friends from home to participate, which most learners appreciated. For others, the lack of participation from friends and family was frustrating. Some saw the weblog to be an excellent learning tool for cultivating self-awareness, developing writing skills, and for creating a personal learning resource, complete with a historical record of all postings and the discussions which followed. One participant likened it to a ‘journal that talks back to you’. It was described as ‘useful’, ‘motivating’, ‘valuable’, ‘cool’, ‘free’, ‘personal’, ‘liberating’, ‘resourceful’, and ‘fun’. It was also experienced as an aid to movement and fluidity in the learning process. Posting to the weblog was like a release mechanism, giving the learner a temporary peace of mind, enabling him or her to focus on the next phase. Running a weblog was time-consuming however, which caused the participants to feel pressured to keep up with reading posts and comments on other blogs, and writing postings and responses on their own blogs. This led to stress, anxiety, and in some cases frustration. One learner had an aversion to the reverse chronological format of the postings, while others expressed dislike for having to participate in blogs whose content was intimate and emotionally revealing, asserting that a weblog was not the place for that type of learning. All participants professed the desire to continue maintaining their weblogs in the future, after the course was finished.
Public Nature

The completely public nature of the online learning environment engendered a strong feeling of exposure in the participants, which was a key issue. This was sometimes described by participants as being scary, intimidating, and discomforting, causing feelings of anxiety, insecurity, apprehensiveness, and vulnerability to arise. At other times, learners found the public nature of the course to be ‘challenging’, ‘motivating’, and ‘exhilarating’; making them feel good. Some explained that they were more affected by the potential for specific acquaintances to read their work than by complete strangers. These were people to whom a lack of trust was attributed. The public nature brought the kind of authenticity to their learning that the participants had never before experienced. Knowing that what is posted could be read by anyone on the internet caused the learners to question themselves and their views before posting. Some found this to be stressful and one described her feeling that there existed some type of standard to be met. Others said that it motivated them to write more. What ‘public’ meant to the learners varied. While one participant likened it to ‘the whole world poking and prodding you’, several others professed that they saw ‘the public’ as only a few people – mostly acquaintances - rather than multitudes of strangers. One learner described the public nature as a ‘chimera’ in that it was not real, only imagined. The open environment caused some learners to turn inward and examine themselves deeply before posting. Others insisted that it did not change the way they posted, purposely not dwelling upon the consequences of making their work public. One participant described posting in a public forum akin to ‘being fake’, suggesting an insight into how identity is constructed online.
Chapter 4 – Discussion

4.1 – Emergent Issues

The results of the data analysis presented in the preceding seven chapters depict the experiences of the course participants, accomplishing the main purpose of this study. The nature of the phenomenological research methodology employed was designed simply to capture the participants’ experience; not to focus on any area in particular, but rather to lend equal weight to all descriptions. This differs from other, perhaps more common approaches where a specific issue is identified from the beginning, and the resulting study is an attempt to find and qualify such evidence. The advantage of using a transcendental phenomenological inquiry in the context of a case study is that it effectively captures its complexity. Any issues that may emerge depend entirely on their being identified by whoever examines the evidence. What the six learners have to say about their experiences will be interpreted differently by each reader according to what is deemed relevant to that person. Just as a falling tree cannot make a sound without someone to hear it, an issue cannot emerge without someone to define it. It is therefore my intention now to discuss what I see as being the main emergent issues resulting from this study. What I deem to be emergent are those issues which most stood out for me when reflecting upon the descriptions of experience, the online record of interaction, my observations throughout the term, and my research journal. Because this is an examination of a single learning event, the generalizations derived from it are rooted in the study itself and may or may not apply to
other cases of a similar nature. However, given my intimate involvement with the course participants of the course of the semester, I am confident that the individual best positioned to make the following claims is me. Again, I want to emphasize that I do not believe that the statements below are universal, only that my intense experience with this particular case has influenced me to lend tentative validity to the claims, suggesting that they may indeed be true in other cases.

To date, I have not encountered any other such case studies where CSCL was employed in a classroom setting using a weblog-based VLE. However, with so much rich discussion and action research taking place on the internet from educators, innovators, intellectuals, and philosophers, I have drawn upon some of those sources as supportive evidence for my claims.

- In an open course structure, successful cooperative learning requires commitment, compromise, and a sense of personal accountability from each participant, in addition to whatever positive interdependence structures may be in place. Positive interdependence exists when learners understand that their work is mutually beneficial and that the success of each learner is dependent upon the input and support of the other members (Johnson and Johnson 1994). In our case, an attempt was made to create positive goal interdependence by continuously discussing - in our face-to-face meetings throughout the term - the importance of cooperation in each other’s project and how the feedback and support from other members was vital to the success of each project. Even with the looming presence of peer evaluations, the cooperative success of the group largely hinged upon personal commitment to one another. We saw how the perceived lack of participation from Andy and Abi caused frustration in the two most outwardly committed participants,
John and Austin, who saw the cooperative potential not being met. Interestingly, it was
Austin who professed difficulty cooperating in John’s project, for not only did he feel
ignored and alienated, but he was also put off by what he perceived as some of John’s
shortcomings as a learner. Later in the semester however, Austin wrote:

What I perceived as the other learners' shortcomings was my own inability or
resistance to relate to them in a way that made me uncomfortable. Cooperation
requires compromise, and I didn't really do that. Instead, I used the
idiosyncrasies of the other learners' blogs as excuses to avoid my responsibility
to help them. Or, as was sometimes the case, I just didn't know how to best help
them. (Damiani, 2003)

This is an illustrative example of how a learner came to see compromise as an important
element of successful cooperation. Furthermore, Austin holds himself personally
accountable for his lack of participation in John’s project, rather than shifting the blame
wholly on some causal condition outside of himself. While a strong sense of personal
responsibility alone may not ensure cooperation, it is a necessary element if the
qualitative potential of cooperative learning is allowed to develop to its fruition. As
Slavin (1994, in Salomon and Perkins 1998) points out, in the absence of personal
accountability, a group member may become a ‘social loafer’, not expending the needed
mental effort. So the question remains then, in addition to structuring positive
interdependence into the course and employing peer assessment, what other ways can
educators help learners to realize the importance of commitment, compromise, and
personal accountability in the cooperative process, especially in a very open, loosely-
structured learning environment?
• **Blended learning environments present significant obstacles for those with a strong preference for f2f interaction.** F2f interaction, or ‘copresent’ interaction, is ‘thick’ with information, delivering far more context than any other form of human exchange; its density both ‘engages and entraps us’ (Boden and Molotch 1994, p259). The two learners who least participated online, Andy and Abi, both indicated a preference for f2f interaction, a claim never even mentioned throughout the semester by the other four participants. While Andy stated he needed to ‘see people’s eyes’, Abi felt ‘distanced’ and ‘separated’, which reiterates Peters’ (2001) claim that some students who learn online report feelings of isolation and loneliness. Peters also states that many variables contribute to the students’ desire for f2f instruction, among those may be limited ability to express oneself in writing in combination with a need to gesture and vocalize during communication, echoing Lally and Barrett’s (1999) assertion that the absence of non-verbal clues in combination with the ‘formality and permanence’ of written dialogue may inhibit learner participation online. Another possibility might be the limited capacity to conceive of the virtual space as a physical space, rendering it unfamiliar and frightening (Robinson 1998). Yet another study indicated that students who emphasize f2f interaction do not believe that computers should replace conventional experiences, while that those who emphasized ‘reflection, generalization, and application’ believed that computers could help provide the appropriate experience (Hester and Hirsch 1999). This raises important questions for tutors facilitating blended courses with learners having no previous experience with online learning. How do we initially identify those with strong preferences (addictions?) for f2f interaction and how do we in turn go about helping them to either genuinely participate successfully, or to find a way to meet their needs within the context of the cooperative group?
An open course structure with undefined content and outcomes strongly encourages learner introspection and self-reflection. The open structure and lack of defined content and outcomes of this course gave the learners considerable freedom to choose their own topics of study, define their own learning goals, and select the course of action that would help them achieve those goals with the cooperative support of the community. As McConnell (2000) suggests, such self-directed learning encourages participants to take deep approaches to their learning, where issues are dealt with in a meaningful way. One aspect of deep learning that was abundantly evident in the case record was that of introspection, reflection, and self-examination. Being introduced to basic action research methodology, given an empty weblog, and asked to choose a personal project for the entire semester caused each learner to take a close look at what he or she deemed meaningful. Furthermore, the ‘interactive journal-like’, personal nature of the weblog even further encouraged self-examination and reflection, raising awareness of habitual patterns of thinking, beliefs, and expression; what Fiedler (2003) calls ‘confrontation with other patterns of meaning and alternative interpretations’, facilitating the ‘elicitation of personal learning myths’. Even Abi, whose online participation was perhaps the most limited, exhibited evidence of being confronted with herself as a learner, stating, “It’s a window into who I am. It’s something that forces you to look at yourself.” As educators, structuring our courses to encourage learners to become more reflective practitioners is prudent, for it will serve them well beyond the university into their professional life (Boud and Knights 1996).
A virtual learning event completely open to the public can engender a strong sense of exposure in each participant, causing further introspection and self-reflection to take place. As stated earlier, making our learning public can help to expose areas of our learning and behaviour that are blind, hidden, or unconscious (McConnell 2000). One of the most unique aspects of this course was that it took the concept of ‘public learning’ to the extreme by opening the entire online record to the public as it was happening. Anyone with an interest could not only follow the learning taking place, but he or she could also participate. Knowing this, the learners expressed initial feelings of anxiety and uncertainty as to who might be reading what they posted and how might those people perceive them. This caused learners to examine how much of themselves they wanted to expose online, which varied from Andy, whose voice was mostly absent in his weblog, to John, whose postings were of a personal and revealing nature. Abi aptly illustrates the self-reflective effect the public nature had when posting to her site:

Is this something about me that I’m comfortable enough with to show the entire world, no matter who it is? Are these opinions strong enough within myself that I can either put them out there and not feel like I have to defend them or once I put them out there, defend them? Is this really something of me that I want portrayed to the entire world? You know, do I want to admit that I can’t get my shit together? Do I want to admit that I’m really frustrated with school right now and I can’t stand it? (Interview transcript, 2003)

Of particular interest was the claim that it was acquaintances from outside the learning community rather than complete strangers that caused the most anxiety. The presence of such feelings engendered by the public nature of the course seemed to have an inhibiting effect on one learner, Andy, who described it as ‘intimidating’, suggesting that a
completely public learning environment might not be ideal for those in whom levels of fear and anxiety climb too high.

- *In a weblog-based CSCL event, both the quality of cooperation present and the quantity of discussion on any given weblog is largely determined by the individual owner of that weblog.* The weblog can be described as a personal reflective space where the learner can cultivate his or her own learning community. Unlike a traditional threaded discussion based VLE (i.e. Blackboard or WebCT), which “emphasize control within a gated community space over interaction with the rest of the internet” (Lowe 2003a in Luft 2003); a weblog-based learning event can be thought of as an open conglomeration of personally tailored cooperative spaces, what several researchers have described as ‘decentralized’, loosely-coupled conversations (Windley 2003, Wrede 2003). Actually, there are no weblog-based VLEs in the commercial sense of the term ‘VLE’, but rather in the literal sense: a ‘Virtual Learning Environment’ arising from bloggers who commit themselves to participating in each others’ reflective spaces. In our case, the class members formed a cooperative core by reading and responding to each others’ blogs, yet the composition of participants on each individual’s blog differed due to outside participation from friends and family members (See fig. 12.1). The weblog of each learner can be thought of as a focal point of conversational activity, where learners take part in both monologue and dialogue, benefiting from the advantages of both forms (Wrede 2003). Because the weblog is a personally owned space, the content and quality of discussion is largely dependent on the way the learner chooses to make postings and respond to feedback. For example, Andy’s blog postings usually consisted of unfinished portions of his thesis project, usually without any explanation of what he was trying to
accomplish, rendering his personal voice absent. He also seldom responded to comments left by other participants. Not surprisingly, by the end of the semester, discussion on his blog was largely non-existent, echoing Winer’s (2003) opinion that without a voice, it isn’t a weblog, hinting that the online presence of the blogger is a vital component to successful two-way communication. On weblogs where discussion flourished (John’s and Austin’s), we see evidence of steady and consistent postings over time and comments being answered. Both learners also attempted to cultivate discussion further by making reference to postings on other weblogs and by continuing discussions in the comments section by bringing it to the level of a new posting. They also created links to weblogs outside the group in an attempt to reach out to the greater community.
The authenticity and sense of ownership provided by weblogs taps into a learner’s intrinsic sense of motivation and can lead to autonomous, deep learning strategies. Unlike traditional learning artifacts which tend to remain in the classroom, the weblog serves as a platform for personal publishing in the “real world”. Being able to share one’s work with the public validates it, causing a shift in perspective from seeing the work as just an exercise in preparation for some future endeavour to a creative task that matters now. Also, because the weblog can be experienced as an extension of the self, a
keen sense of ownership can arise, encouraging the learner to take pride in his or her work and to take greater care in the way it is presented. Williams (2003) reports a similar confidence gain from her students who ran blogs as part of a university class. As McGee (2003, in Richardson 2003) states, weblogs amplify the connection between craft and creator. When activity becomes personally meaningful, deep learning strategies are employed.

- The completely public nature of a weblog-based VLE gives the learners direct experience with learning outside the confines of the formal institution, furthering their progress toward developing life-long, autonomous learning skills. The cooperative structure of the course encourages learners to participate in each others’ learning by reading one another’s blogs and engaging in online discussion. However, learners soon come to realize that there is really nothing that separates their weblogs from any of the other weblogs on the internet, other than the perceived notion that they and their peers have formed a learning group. Just as Jaymie participates in Austin’s blog, she could do likewise with any other blog she encounters on the internet. For those who enjoy blogging, what results is the realization that they don’t actually need the class to blog, it’s something they can do on their own, eliminating ‘the firewall around the classroom’ (Carraher 2003). Personal learning communities can easily be formed by participating in other blogs of interest, linking to those blogs, and discussing ideas from those blogs on their own blogs using the trackback feature; potentially gaining experience in the networks of socially distributed knowledge outside of the university setting, what Timothy Luke (1996) describes as ‘mode 2 knowledge’. Of the six participants in the course, the four who described running a blog as ‘fun’, ‘motivating’, ‘resourceful’, and
‘liberating’, are the same four who are now still using the blog as a learning tool, five months after the semester has finished! Indeed, all four have professed their intention to keep running their blog. The experience of participating in an authentic learning event encourages the development of learner autonomy and helps to develop life-long learning habits and skills that can be employed beyond the classroom. Wrede (2003) summarizes this idea nicely:

If professors want students to become autonomous, creative, helpful and cooperative, educational institutions must actually allow students to practice exactly these skills (and allow students to be autonomous, creative, helpful and cooperative) by designing curriculums and courses that really value these qualities.
Chapter 5 – Review

Questions to Consider – Revisited

Before embarking upon our phenomenological inquiry, I posed some initial questions in Chapter 3, which arose naturally from my review of the literature. And rather than search for specific answers to those questions in the midst of complex human interaction and learning activities, I chose to practice Epoche by suspending my assumptions, biases, and judgments; allowing participant descriptions of experience to come forth untainted, treating all data equally. Only when the inquiry was complete and the textural-structural descriptions were composed and presented could I step out of Epoche, examine the processed data, and define the emergent issues. Afterwards, I could return to those questions arising from the literature review and compare them with the data to discover whether or not answers emerged, keeping in mind that my intent was not to answer those questions, but rather to capture the experiences of our participants and see if what emerged bore any relation to the questions previously posed. Had my intent been to provide specific answers to those questions, it would not have been entirely appropriate to select a phenomenological approach to inquiry.

Closely examining the participant descriptions of their experience with the course, it becomes clear that partial answers emerged to most of the questions posed, specifically those related to the open, negotiated structure of the course, collaborative assessment, the blended learning environment, the public nature of the online portion, and using weblogs as a learning tool and communicative vehicle. There is little conclusive evidence in the results of the
phenomenological study, however, to support the previous research on gender and computers, which is most likely due to the extremely small sample of participants and the fact that, unlike the other issues, it never arose as a topic of discussion in the tutor-participant encounters or the online record of interaction. Because the course was an elective, those with little computer experience or who may have been prone to computer anxiety might have chosen not to take part; and had a larger number of learners enrolled, perhaps the influential role that gender plays in computer supported learning would have been more pronounced. The two participants in our course who experienced the most difficulty participating online (one male and one female) seemed to attribute their problems to a strong preference for f2f interaction over that which took place in the virtual environment.

**Summary**

My purpose for this study was to capture and depict learner experiences with using weblogs in a blended course employing a cooperative learning structure. By doing so, I envisioned that issues pertinent to research in CSCL could emerge and be discussed, ‘opening up avenues of enquiry’ to which I could apply analytical reasoning (Mason 1996). I began by clearly explaining the type of cooperative learning structure used, showing its theoretical origins in social constructivism. Next, I discussed weblogs, giving a definition, history, and overview of current use in society; finally suggesting that weblogs may be ideal for use in constructivist learning models by encouraging deep, autonomous, and reflective learning strategies. After that, I explicated the structure of the course itself, highlighting its main features and – in reference to the literature – raising important issues pertaining to possible outcomes of the learning event to take place. I then moved on to discussing the ‘Moustakas-inspired’ phenomenological research methodology employed, justifying both my reasons for
choosing it and for making adaptations to suit my circumstances and epistemological position. After explaining how I carried out the field work and processed the data, I took a brief look at the ethical issues involved and then, in the proceeding section presented its results: six learners’ textural-structural descriptions of their experience with the course, followed by a composite textural-structural description depicting the overall course experience. Finally, I stepped back and examined the results for emergent issues, discussing how I deemed them to be relevant and supporting my claims with further evidence from the body of literature.

Avenues for further study
This dissertation has taken as its main theme the depiction of learner experiences with CSCL using weblogs in a blended classroom environment. As a result, we should now have a better idea of the advantages that such a course structure offers as well as the potential pitfalls and challenges that accompany it. Clearly more research needs to be done on weblogs as educative and learning tools. Of particular interest is a better understanding of the nature and patterns of communication that occur on weblogs and within weblog communities. Another issue in need of greater clarity is the effects of making our learning completely public, rather than only public within a protected community of learners. What types of learning are best suited for the completely public arena and what forms are better carried out in safer, more closed areas? Also, what are the ethical implications of allowing university students to place themselves in such an exposed environment? Another question is how can we best structure our ‘blended’ classrooms to ensure that the needs of all participants are met, especially for those with a strong preference for f2f interaction? Finally, it would be valuable for other practitioners to present similar qualitative case studies so that we can gain a clearer picture of
how learners experience and respond to the course structures that we educators create, employ, and facilitate.

References


