

# **Building and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities Online: A Case Study Approach**

## **An Evaluation of Erikson Institute's Online M.S. in Early Childhood Education**

Commissioned by The Boeing Company

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report presents the results of a year-long evaluation conducted with the new Erikson Online M.S. in Early Childhood Education degree program and the EriksonOnline teaching and learning environment to assess their effectiveness in the use of enabling technology, instructional design, and online teaching methods to encourage interactions, establish presence for instructors and students, and develop and sustain an online community. The outcome of this evaluation was a case study, which provided Erikson Institute with a documentation of its processes, lessons learned, and effective practices.

A mixed method approach was used to collect data to evaluate four aspects of the program: students' perceptions about the online program, instructors' teaching experiences, community building, and program effectiveness. The evaluation process involved online students from the first cohort ( $n=15$ ), who started in the online program in January 2010 and students from the second cohort ( $n=12$ ), who started in January 2011. Students completed an online survey and participated in one interview. Instructors who had taught in the online program completed an online survey and participated in a focus group. In addition, the instructional team met with the evaluator to provide insights on the program design and to conduct a demonstration of the EriksonOnline course management tool. Observations of course design also were conducted to determine if identified program goals had been met.

Findings of this case study demonstrated that building and sustaining a professional learning community online requires intentional design; common interests, goals, and practices; interactions supported and mediated by enabling technologies; and, most importantly, individuals who have the motivation to be committed, dedicated, and engaged in the sharing of information and social support to create a sense of community: formal and informal.

Findings of this evaluation suggest that the relationship between teaching and learning online for the M.S. in Early Childhood Education degree program is the outcome of: (a) an organized and welcoming environment; (b) the use of enabling technologies; (c) a supportive staff team; (d) A cadre of instructors who design learner-centered instruction and facilitate the learning process; (e) online teaching methods that encourage interaction, establish presence for instructors and students, and motivate students; (f) online community-building strategies; and (g) students who identify themselves as education professionals and view their online learning experiences as exceeding expectations.

Practical implications emerged from this evaluation study that easily can be transferred to other fields: solid program design, content relevance, and sense of presence and community. With a solid instructional design approach centered on the learner, the use of enabling technologies to connect people, a sensible and supportive staff, and a group of passionate and knowledgeable instructors, Erikson Institute met its goals of providing a relationship-based education with high standards. The Erikson Institute's online program has shown that the key to the success of their students is providing relevant, practical, and timely information and preparing professionals to connect personal experience to professional values and beliefs in working with diverse populations. The evaluation results indicated that for online students in the early childhood degree program at Erikson Institute with little or no experience online, learning exceeded their expectations. Students acknowledged increased knowledge and skills, changes in their practices, growth in their professional careers, and personal satisfaction.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Erikson Institute is an institution of higher education founded in 1966 with the purpose of preparing child development professionals for leadership through its academic programs, applied research, and community service and engagement. The Institute follows a stable and cohesive set of values grounded on relationship-based education (the centrality of relationships is in all learning), commitment to social justice (equality and justice in education and care for all children and families is the hallmark for education), diversity (professionals are prepared to work with diverse populations), complexity (the interplay of various biological, psychological, cultural, historical, and social factors that influence each child is part of its values), and high standards and excellence (its alumni describe Erikson's academic programs to be more than worth the effort).

Being a champion of education and innovative in its approaches, in January 2010 Erikson Institute launched a new online M.S. in Early Childhood Education program for experienced teachers. The design and development of EriksonOnline was intentional in creating an online teaching and learning environment that encourages interactions, enables relationships, and builds community. These cornerstones of the Erikson approach to teaching and learning are essential to the success of its online courses, professional certificates, degree programs, and professional development offerings.

Designing, developing, and delivering an online program in the field of early childhood education is not an easy task. The field traditionally has been skeptical of technology as a tool for learning about child development and teaching practices, given that relationships are at the heart of the work with young children, parents, and families. However, the skepticism that technology is unable to model ways to build relationships and communities online is becoming outmoded. The concern is no longer if the use of enabling technologies will guarantee effective practices for teaching and learning online to inform, engage, and empower individuals; to enable professional relationships across the miles; and to foster a meaningful and lasting community of practice for Erikson students. Rather, the issue is if the instructional design and methods for teaching and learning online are building and sustaining a learning community among its members.

The field of early childhood education has been hungry for evidence that online relationships and communities are possible and is seeking guidance in terms of effective practices for building and sustaining communities of professionals. Therefore, this report presents the results of a year-long evaluation conducted with the new Erikson Online M.S. in Early Childhood Education degree program and the EriksonOnline teaching and learning environment to assess its effectiveness in the use of enabling technology, instructional design, and online teaching methods to encourage interactions, establish presence for instructors and students, and develop and sustain an online community.

The Boeing Company, which supported the development of Erikson's first online master's degree program, funded this evaluation. Part of the funding was to support an independent evaluation of the program's effectiveness, framed as a case study of effective practices in creating a sense of online community. The author of this report, an independent researcher with particular expertise in creating a sense of presence in online communities, was commissioned to conduct the research.

## METHODOLOGY

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A mixed method approach was used to collect data to evaluate four aspects of the EriksonOnline program:

1. Students' perceptions about the online program
2. Instructors' teaching experiences
3. Community building
4. Program effectiveness

### Data Collection

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The evaluation process involved online students from the first cohort ( $n=15$ ), who started in the online program in January 2010 and students from the second cohort ( $n=12$ ), who started in January 2011. Students were invited to complete an online survey and participate in one interview. Instructors who had taught in the online program were invited to complete an online survey and participate in a focus group. In addition, the instructional team offered to meet with the evaluator to provide insights on the program design and conduct a demonstration of the EriksonOnline course management tool. Observations of course design also were conducted to determine if identified program goals were met. The Framework for Designing Online Courses with a Sense of Presence guided the survey questions, focus group protocol, interviews, and observations (Lehman & Conceição, 2010). Table 1 shows the data collection strategies used, purpose, and timeline for collecting data.

Table 1. *Data Collection Strategies, Purpose, and Timeline*

<b>Data Collection Strategy</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
Learning Management System observation	Identify how a sense of presence was created in the online courses Relationship between learning and teaching in the online environment Program effectiveness	October 2010– July 2011
Online survey of instructor	Instructors' perceptions of their online teaching experiences: course design and implementation	October 2010
Online survey of the first and second cohort of students	Students' perceptions of their online learning experiences Student participation in online communities	January–April 2011
Focus group with instructor	Instructor's perceptions of their online teaching experiences Identification of community building strategies	November 2010
Interviews with students from both cohorts	Students' perceptions of their online learning experiences Student participation in online communities	March–July 2011

*Observation of Learning Management System (LMS)* was conducted using a protocol that included the Determinants of Presence and information from before, during, and at the end of

the course. Data were gathered from conversations with the IT (information technology) team and LMS observations.

*Online survey of instructor* was based on the Framework for Creating a Sense of Presence and gathered instructors' perceptions about the design and delivery of their online courses. A total of 7 instructors responded to the online survey.

*Online survey of cohorts one and two* gathered information about students' perceptions of their online learning experiences and participation in online communities. Of a total of 27 students from both cohorts, 14 completed the online survey.

*Focus group with instructors* was used to triangulate instructors' perceptions of their online teaching experiences and identification of community building strategies used during the delivery of the online courses. Seven instructors participated in the focus group.

*Interviews with students from both cohorts* were used to triangulate students' perceptions of their online learning experiences and participation in online communities. A total of 9 students participated in the interviews—5 students from the first cohort and 4 students from the second cohort. Two of these interviews were completed via email.

## Data Analysis

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The Framework for Designing Online Courses with a Sense of Presence (Lehman & Conceição, 2010) guided the analysis of the findings of this evaluation. The framework provides a model for understanding the concept of presence in online teaching and learning and identifies the elements for designing online instruction.

### *Framework for Designing Online Courses with a Sense of Presence*

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The concept of presence is what makes an online course more concrete and allows identification of how the course elements are designed. Being present in an online course is “being there” and “being together” with others in teaching and learning in the virtual space. Figure 1 shows the Framework for Designing Online Courses with a Sense of Presence. Survey instruments, interviews, and a focus group contained the elements of the framework, which were addressed from different standpoints, so that data were gathered from a variety of perspectives.

On the left of the framework, the “Being There for the Online Learner” model provides a foundation for becoming aware of and understanding presence in an online environment. From the model to the instructor, an arrow corresponds to the instructor's awareness of how presence happens online. Following is an arrow that goes from the instructor to the determinants of presence, denoting the path the instructor takes to design a course with a sense of presence. The determinants of presence (the components of the design process) direct the instructor to create presence in the online environment. The arrows arching above and below show the ongoing action when using and revisiting the components of the framework.

### *Being There for the Online Learner Model*

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The Being There for the Online Learner model uses a learner-centered approach in which the instructor or designer views the learner as the center of the teaching and learning experience. The model encompasses the inner and outer worlds of the learner, which interface

with each other. The inner world of the learner includes the dimensions of thought, emotion, and behavior in dynamic interplay and takes place in the online environment.

An effective online course with a sense of presence considers four types of experience: subjective (a feeling of personal and psychological presence in our mind), objective (a psychological and physical feeling of being in another location), social (a sense of existing with others in the online environment), and environmental (the capability of having technical access and feeling integral to the online environment). These types of experience affect learning based on the course content and modes of presence: realism (a close match between the real and the virtual world), immersion (illusion through virtual reality), involvement (personal and interactive engagement with others), and suspension of disbelief (a psychological “letting go” of reality). Learners and instructors experience a sense of presence when they think, feel, and behave through interactions. The outcome is “being there” and “being together” as a community for the online learning experience.

The Being There for the Online Learner model is circular in shape to represent a cylinder in motion containing three cylinders within it. The dark shaded lines between some of the cylinders represent the interface between the inner and outer worlds of the learner. The outside cylinder is the physical world of the learner connecting to the online environment via technology. Next are two inner cylinders representing the types of experience and modes of presence, which blend into each other and can occur in combination. At the center is the cylinder that represents the learner and the learner’s perceptual process, which includes the dynamic interplay between thought, emotion, and behavior.

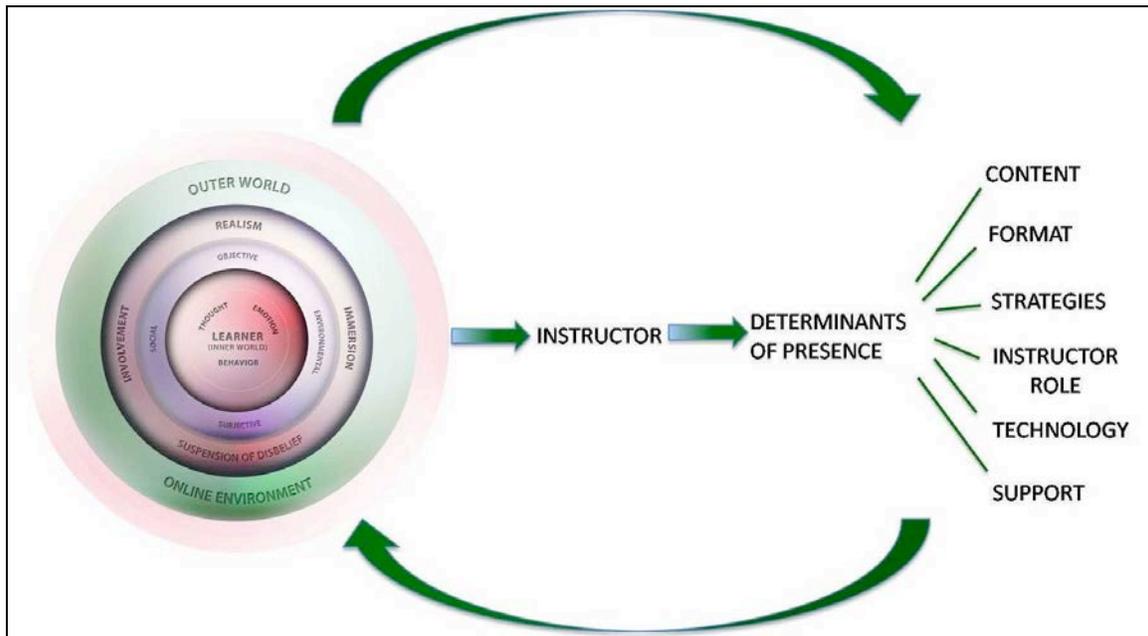


Figure 1. Framework for Designing Online Courses with a Sense of Presence

### Determinants of Presence

In the framework, the determinants of presence are the components of the design process that guide the creation of presence in the online environment. These components are the type

and focus of content, the learning experience format, the interactive strategies, the instructor roles, the technologies employed in the course, and the types of support the instructor provides. These components can work interdependently, and depending on how they are combined, they can affect student's and instructor's level of presence in the online environment.

The *type of content* is determined by the course discipline; the *focus of content* is either process-based or content-based or a mix of both.

The *format* may be self-paced, group-based, or a mix of both formats.

*Strategies* engage learners with the instructor, the content, and each other, and can be instructor-led, logistical and instructional, cooperative, and/or collaborative.

*Instructor roles* are varied, depending on what needs to be accomplished, and can include the role of instructional designer, lecturer, tutor, mentor, supporter, facilitator, catalyst, observer, and/or evaluator. In all cases, the instructor is also a learner, interacting with course participants and engaging in course activities.

The *type of technology* used in the online course can be asynchronous (time delay), synchronous (same time), or a blend of both. Asynchronous and synchronous technologies offer different experiences and are used for specific reasons.

*Support* is critical in the online environment. Learners need both instructional and technical support to function well. Support from the instructor provides psychological and emotional assistance; technical support helps learners overcome deficiencies in writing or lack of understanding about technology.

The findings of this evaluation answered the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions of their online learning experiences?
2. How does the online experience affect student learning?
3. How does the course design affect student learning?
4. What are the instructor's perceptions of their online teaching experiences?
5. How does the online program design support community building?
6. What types of communities are formed within the online environment?
7. What is the relationship between learning and teaching in the online environment?
8. How effective is the online program in meeting its goals?

The end result of the evaluation is a case study, which provides Erikson Institute with a documentation of its processes, lessons learned, and effective practices.

## FINDINGS

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Findings of this evaluation are grouped in themes based on the answers to the research questions. These themes include: students' perceptions of their online learning experiences, how the online experience affected student learning, how course design affected student learning, development and maintenance of online communities, and effectiveness of the online program in meeting its goals.

## Students' Perceptions of Their Online Learning Experiences

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Students' perceptions of their online learning experiences were described through metaphors during the interviews that clearly portrayed the general meaning of the students' experiences. Their experiences were contingent upon the way they looked at the learning process, depending on where they were in the program. Students from both cohorts saw the process as a transformative one leading to change. Students in the second cohort also viewed the process as a dynamic one.

Students from the first cohort, whose learning experiences accounted for 18 months at the time of the interviews, saw the process from a "big picture" perspective with an end in mind. A student from the first cohort described her online learning experiences like a *folder* with good information that she could access at her own convenience and relevant to her practice. Another student from the first cohort characterized her process as "a *spaceship* that blasts off at first (really hard and all new), feels out of control, then one finds the flow and goes into orbit, soon comes back down and lands, and completes with the program."

The second cohort of students saw the process as focused and on the move. Students in the second cohort had completed the first semester in the program and were taking summer courses at the time of the interviews. The perception of the process was like being on a survival mode. Descriptions of the process went from a *book*, to *first time doing white river rafting*, to *plowing through*, and a *butterfly*. The student who used the *book* to describe her online learning experiences stated:

I feel like I've worked for so many years and haven't really gotten back to the core of what I was doing in the field, so it's nice to have the additional learning, the additional history, and the additional new information that's out there in our profession. So I think I would probably say a book, and the book would represent my learning and the continuation of my learning in my field.

Another student said that her experience in the program was like a mental picture of somebody doing group *white river rafting for the first time*:

You get all suited up beforehand, and you're trying to figure out how your life jacket fastens, and you're not sure what else you're doing. You get in there and at first you're getting tossed around, you are terrified but when you realize that not many people are doing as fine as you are, and after a while, it started to be a lot of fun and you all [start] laughing and having a good time figuring out how to go down the river together.

As part of the dynamic move through the program, another student identified her process as *plowing through* and getting the work done:

I think at times the program is very overwhelming. I think that the program is set up knowing that most people are working, and I have two sides to that. At times I am very overwhelmed and I think there is too much, but on the other side of that I really admire the fact that this program is rigorous and it is not a joke. I feel that this makes it a really respectful program, so that's the exact opposite of what I just said, but being overwhelming at times, it makes it more respected ... I have been sometimes just getting by. Like if a discussion question comes up I read it and I go "okay, so what do I have to answer?" and I read as much material as I need to get the answer, and then if there are 400 more pages to read I don't do

it, and I don't like to work that way, but out of necessity I just do sometimes. I'm plowing through it.

"Feeling overwhelmed" was a common expression during the interviews, particularly with the students in the second cohort. This feeling was attributed to the heavy course content, amount of readings, difficulty in managing discussion, and balancing workload. This student explained that during the first semester "the course content was a little intimidating." This other student said that the amount of reading "was overwhelming to a point to where you have time to do the readings, your own posts, and to do the minimum response posts rather than responding freely back and forth with each other." Managing the discussion and the time spent on the discussion was an issue for this student:

There are so many responses [in the discussion] then sometimes it feels like I have a lot where I think I might log on and do my required stuff. In my head it is like it will be a half hour and sometimes it ends up being an hour and a half or two hours because I'm trying to respond to everybody. So at times it can be overwhelming, but at other times it's nice and reflective because I can see other people's written words and look at them and process them easier than spoken words.

Some students were concerned with how to manage course activities and balance workload. One student did not know how to deal with course readings until she heard from another student about downloading the readings at the beginning of the course and felt that this strategy helped her better organize her time and workload. She was also concerned about having access to course materials after she graduates. Another student thought that the course offerings created some difficulty in managing her workload since she works full time. This other student talked about offering certain classes together and how they affected her semester:

I think there was some thought when each class should be taken like the classes paired together, but it seems unavoidable putting two difficult classes together. I see right now we have a very good balance in our class. I see right now we have a class that is very detailed oriented and specific and then we have a class that is more passive and [addresses] broader concepts, which are good complements. We have had two classes that were both similar and heavy. So it was pretty difficult this last semester.

During the interviews when students shared a concern, they were probed to provide suggestions on how to solve these concerns. In the case of managing course materials and balancing workload, one student suggested having the module discussion questions available ahead of time, so that she could plan her time, reflect on the readings before answering the questions, and manage her workload. Another student suggested, "providing smaller groups of readings, smaller chunks of readings."

Using a *butterfly* to describe her online learning experiences, this student explained the changes that a person can undergo through the program:

You would be starting into the class as one thing, and go through a great deal of change during the course of the schoolwork. And when you're graduating, you're the beautiful butterfly that has kind of emerged, maybe almost as something different from where you started because of all of the content and experiences and exposures. And you're kind of free to take flight in your professional work.

## How the Online Experience Affected Student Learning

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Based on the online survey results, from a total of 14 students, 71% of the respondents had not taken an online course before entering the program. Before entering the program, they said they were nervous and had no idea what to expect of the online experience. Their first reaction was that the program was challenging, engaging, and overwhelming, but with time they started feeling more comfortable with the enabling technologies and interactions with other people.

### *Enabling Technologies That Affected Student Learning*

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The online program encouraged interactions through a variety of enabling technologies including telephone, email, the Learning Management System (LMS) Blackboard, Skype, WebEx, Wikis, blogs, and so on. These technologies allowed for asynchronous and synchronous interactions and gave students a sense of being present with each other. Students indicated that the technologies allowed them to connect, reflect, maintain ongoing communication with instructors and other students, and bring closure at the end of the semester.

“Using technologies was not better than a live class,” said a student in the first cohort, but allowed students to see each other rather than just hearing their voices or reading their postings. Another student in the first cohort said that the “technology bridged the personal gap associated with online learning.” Yet for some students, being part of an online program pushed them to learn how to use new technologies and to learn about computer tools.

### *Interactions That Affected Student Learning*

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Students referred to their instructors, advisors, and Information Technology (IT) staff as impressive, helpful, and supportive in assisting them in feeling more confident about the learning process. Students’ feelings about their online learning experiences had a lot to do with the types of interactions they had with the technology, academic support staff, instructor, and other students before the program started and during and end of a given semester. These interactions made the students feel close to the instructor and other students, but were definitely different from being “there” in the “real” world, mainly for the students who lived out of state. These interactions helped them trust the people with whom they were having online conversations.

*Interactions Before the Program Started.* Before the program started, the majority of the interactions were with the technology through tutorials, online orientation, Academic Success Center (ASC), and Blackboard. Interactions with people involved IT staff and advisors to request assistance on technology requirements, advising, and how to use the LMS.

Advisors and IT support staff were considered exceptional by students because they made the learning experience easier. One example is a student’s statement saying that the support staff were the “extra ear to give resources and cheer them up through the first course.” Another student said, “Without the academic support staff, I would not have made it through the first semester.”

IT staff were seen as “having patience in walking students through the technology” and providing quick responses on requests. One student stated, “I never felt like I was left to figure things out by myself.” Advisors were helpful in keeping tabs on students and contacting them via

email when they were not active online “just to touch bases and see how things were going,” as a student commented. Students who were new to the online environment and struggled with writing took advantage of the ASC. One student indicated that she got over her anxiety and became more confident when she received help from the writing mentor. In the beginning of the program, students felt overwhelmed, and advisors provided suggestions on how to break down bigger projects into manageable chunks. Some students did not use the ASC Web site, but liked to have it available.

*Interactions During the Semester.* During a given semester, the types of interactions students had with the instructors affected their learning experience. These interactions included: electronic office hours, one-way instructor presentation of content, instructor feedback on individual assignments, and instructor feedback on discussions.

Instructors were considered supportive and responsive. For example, electronic office hours were considered helpful because students had direct contact with the instructor. Some students did not take advantage of the electronic office hours because the schedule of the office hours did not match with their schedule. Some students saw the electronic office hours as the time when instructors would be responding to emails, but they perceived that when the instructor did not respond to emails in 24 hours, it had a negative effect.

One-way instructor presentation of content had a positive effect on students’ learning when the presentation had a combination of video and audio, was informative and thorough, the format was easy to follow and created a sense of classroom presence. These instructor visual presentations of the materials “were helpful and a good change from reading the materials,” said one student. Students preferred when instructors did not read the PowerPoint and elaborated beyond the content.

Instructor feedback on individual assignments was helpful when individualized, detailed, thorough, timely, frequent, prompt, and consistent because it gave students a sense of direction, identified personal strengths and weaknesses, and guided student learning. Feedback varied from instructor to instructor. Students felt frustrated when the instructor was too strict with grades, did not provide constructive criticism, or provided “cut and paste” feedback and posted grades at the end of a module, rather than letting students know how they were progressing. For some students, cut and paste feedback was not personal and did not challenge them to grow. Feedback that addressed broader concepts and their incorporation into practice were helpful. An area students considered in need of improvement was grading. Students perceived that a more consistent approach for grading among instructors would be helpful and encourage improvement and growth.

Instructor feedback on discussions was crucial to student involvement and learning mainly when the instructor clarified ideas, extended the topic in the discussion, and encouraged students to “dig deeper.” One popular group feedback provided by the instructor was the content summary in the discussion board at the end of each week. A handful of interviewed students said that this method assisted them in connecting content and maintaining the flow of the content from week to week.

*Interactions at the End of a Semester.* The interactions at the end of a semester were realized through the enabling technologies. These technologies served as tools for students to communicate with each other, review content, and reflect on their experience throughout the semester. Students enjoyed using Skype to talk with classmates and review content. Online surveys at the end of the semester allowed for reflection on experience and gave students a

sense of closure. Both cohorts had access to a Facebook designated for each cohort. Not all students in both cohorts were members of the Facebook group for their cohort. Some students indicated that the Facebook was used for informal interactions and as a way to support each other by maintaining continuous communication outside the formal learning environment in Blackboard.

## How Course Design Affected Student Learning

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The course design was analyzed based on the Determinants of Presence, the design elements of the Framework for Designing Online Courses with a Sense of Presence: type and focus of content, the learning experience format, the interactive strategies, the instructor roles, the technologies employed in the course, and the types of support the instructor provided. These components worked interdependently and, depending on how they were combined, they affected student and instructor level of presence in the online environment. Insights from the design team, instructors, and students, and observations of Blackboard allowed for a thorough analysis of how the course design affected student learning. Findings in this section are addressed based on the design team, instructor, and student perspectives.

## Design Team Perspective on Course Design

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The design team at Erikson Institute includes a director of distance learning, an instructional designer, and, more recently, a digital media designer. This team works together to provide support to instructors and students. Considering that not all instructors in the online program had had extensive experience teaching online, the design team created a template-based environment that helped instructors move content online more easily. This template-based environment provided consistency and removed some of the pressure from the instructors. Each online course contained the same navigation based on course modules, activity checklist, and weekly work placed in the same location in Blackboard. Therefore, students always knew where to go to get course information. This consistency in course design provided a rhythm to online teaching and learning.

During conversations with the design team, it was clear that the approach driving the program design was learner-centered, in which the designer viewed the learner as the center of the teaching and learning experience. Based on the reality that the population of adult learners in the early childhood program at Erikson Institute had limited technology skills and online experiences, the online learning environment had to meet their needs: a learning environment “easy to access, simple to use, and impossible to get lost,” as the director of distance learning indicated. The incorporation of presence was intentionally part of the program design. Presence began with the program design: the type and focus of content, the learning experience format, and the interactive strategies.

*Type and Focus of Content.* The order of courses offered in the program reflects the incorporation of presence. The first courses in the program of study are the *Integrative Seminar: Leadership in Early Childhood Education* and the *Family and Culture*. Both courses created a sense of community by allowing students to share thoughts, build relationships, and gain trust from instructors and other students.

*Learning Experience Format.* A mix of self-paced and group-based formats was part of the online learning experience. Before even starting in the online program, students were invited to attend a self-paced online orientation called *Learning with EriksonOnline*, a Web site that

introduces students to the online environment through a self-guided tour, tutorials and tours, brief introduction to online learning and some effective practices for surviving and thriving in the online environment, access to a list of technology and online learning terms, access to textbook listing for each semester, and the privacy statement and intellectual property policy. During the orientation, the Academic Success Center (ASC) staff also contacted students. ASC is an environment where students receive one-on-one support for academic advising, writing, bibliography, and so forth. Group-based activities were incorporated into most courses through asynchronous discussions, synchronous meetings, team projects, and so forth.

*Interactive Strategies.* These strategies were created to engage students with the instructor, the content, and other students. One-way instructor presentation of content was provided in several ways: PDF file of the slides, presentation notes, and narrated PowerPoint presentations via audio or video. Some instructors used video to explain the module in a more conversational format. According to the design team, one instructor suggested an addition to the template: a section at the bottom of the template for a few sentences to indicate where the course was moving next. Interactive strategies occurred depending on the technology used. For example, synchronous interactions involved large group meetings in WebEx, while small group meetings were held in Skype. Asynchronous interactions took place in the discussion board, blogs, and Wikis, where students cooperated and collaborated with each other.

### *Instructor Perspective on Course Design*

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Instructors had an opportunity to reflect on the online courses they taught and the tasks they performed during the design and delivery of the courses through the completion of the online survey and participation in the focus group. Of the seven instructors who responded to the online survey, five had taught at least one online course while two had taught two online courses prior to teaching in this online program. The online survey responses confirmed the design principles used by the design team. They all indicated the importance of having consistency in the type and focus of content, format, and strategies.

*Focus of Content and Learning Experience Format.* Most courses had a mix of content and process-focus depending on the format of the course. For example, two courses used content and process-focus and a mixed format using self-paced and group-based activities. Two courses focused on content only, while one course used a mixed format, and another course used group-based activities. The integrative seminars used different foci and formats. One of the seminars supported students' application of content to practice using self-paced and group-based activities while the other seminar was a reflective course bridging theory with the students' professional practice. In this later one, students were provided a timeframe for completing the posts and activities, but worked on their own pace within the timeframe.

*Interactive Strategies.* Interactive strategies depended on the format of the course, the technology available, and the instructor's role. All courses used asynchronous online discussions to interact with students. Two courses used case studies, two courses used guest speaker presentations, two courses used interviews, three courses used synchronous discussions, and two courses used group projects.

One instructor stated that she used Skype for individual as well as group activities, Diigo (social bookmarking program), and Wikis for group projects. She also engaged students in photo and bio sharing, reflective assignments for group sharing and peer commenting, and students' posting of pictures or videos of objects that represented their professional practice.

Other interactive activities included the creation of writing and time management tips that were posted in the ASC Web site.

All instructors played the role of instructional designers and facilitators. Sixty-seven percent of instructors took the role of lecturers through narrated PowerPoint presentations, mentors, catalysts challenging students during discussions, and observers, while 83% considered themselves supporters. One instructor also took the role of advisor.

Instructors' perceptions of their online teaching experiences were evident during the focus-group meeting because it allowed them to reflect on the design and delivery processes and identify the strategies they used to deliver their online courses. Instructors stated that the IT support to design instruction was very helpful in creating and implementing online instruction, which is part of Erikson Institute commitment to aid instructors and students in managing difficulties. Instructors' views about online teaching included offering a welcoming environment for students, helping students connect their personal experience to professional values and beliefs, and assisting students in becoming more independent over time. Instructors also considered group work as an effective strategy for building relationships and getting to know learners more closely online. They used feedback and follow-up as approaches for maintaining and sustaining presence online.

### *Student Perspective on Course Design*

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Students' perceptions of the course design were evident in their online survey responses and clearly revealed during the interviews. Tangible design factors such as the organization of the content, the types of interactions they engaged with the instructor and other students, the role of the instructor, the types of enabling technologies used, and type of support received all affected student learning.

*Content Organization.* Students considered the content design to be organized, repetitive, and overwhelming. The organization of the different elements of the course was considered easy to view and navigate through Blackboard. A couple of students considered the content repetitive and in too many places confusing. One student commented that condensing the content somewhat would make navigating the materials less challenging. Another student indicated that content could be better navigated if in one location in Blackboard or if a table of contents for accessing course materials were available. Students in both cohorts expressed feeling overwhelmed by the heavy content displayed in Blackboard even though they considered it informational, helpful, relevant, and applicable.

*Types of Interactions.* Students acknowledged that the use of different types of interactions created, established, and sustained presence within the learning community in Blackboard. One student said that the interactions through the discussion board "allowed a chance for the conversation to keep going and for others to follow suit like a [face-to-face] conversation." One student from the second cohort indicated that the *Family and Culture* course in the first semester of the program was very helpful in creating and establishing the sense of community. She said:

... to have the [Family and Culture] class in the seminar [created] that feeling of community. And once that feeling of community got established, I have become much more comfortable sharing my thoughts[and] asking questions . . . the first time [it] was very intimidating to do that.

The design of the first course in the program obviously gave students permission to become a learner more easily, as this student explained:

It became, once we understood that it was okay to go into the not knowing and [that] not knowing is the good place to be. That's more comfortable because I kind of mentally gave myself permission to be a learner at the very beginning. It was much easier. Rather than believing that you know [already] because this is a master's program, I should know much before I commit to it. I think I had to get out of my own way a little bit.

*Role of the Instructor.* Students realized that the instructors had different teaching styles and recognized that they enjoyed certain teaching styles over others. All instructors were seen as facilitators by the students. One student went further to say that “instructors are not superior to us; [rather] they are facilitators.” Another student shared that she perceived the instructors as “not a traditional kind of teacher in a lecture setting.” This student explained her perceptions about the types of instructors she had and their role in the program:

I really enjoyed the instructors that I have encountered at Erikson. Sometimes, it did take awhile to understand each instructor's expectations. Each instructor expected [a] different amount of involvement, participation, and professionalism. I think that by the fifth week of every module, students understood what was expected of them. All the instructors encouraged participation, solicited comments, asked questions, led activities, and provided a great amount of valuable material to be used in our classroom.

Instructors played different roles, depending how they designed the course. Students perceived that if the course involved discussions, some of the instructors played a quiet role in the discussion while students were more active asking questions, and then intervened when necessary. They also noted that other instructors were very engaged in the conversation. This student explained her experience with the instructors playing a supporting role in her learning: “They were so supportive and so responsive to questions and feedback we had, and tailored their instruction appropriately.”

*Types of Enabling Technologies.* Students were pleased with the types of enabling technologies used in the online program. These technologies allowed effective and efficient learning, but when a technology did not work, they felt frustrated and discontent. One example brought up by several students in the second cohort was the use of WebEx. At that time, WebEx was being implemented and the program was still figuring out the “bugs” in the system. The students' statements indicated that the technology issues clearly aggravated them. Some of the issues included the time zone challenge, the number of participants in a synchronous meeting, and the technology's lack of reliability. Generally, large group synchronous discussions frustrated the students. They preferred to use Skype with small groups because it was easier to figure out the pacing of communication and everyone had a chance to participate in the interactions. Because of the issues with WebEx, the discussion board in Blackboard became the preferred mode of communication for the second cohort because it provided more intentional conversations, deepened the communication, and the technology was reliable and transparent.

*Support Received.* Support was an important aspect of the course design for students; it eliminated some of the anxiety of being a novice online learner and increased a sense of belonging to the online program. Two types of support were available for students: instructional and technical. Instructional support was the psychological and emotional assistance provided by

the instructor and advisor throughout the online course. Students referred to instructor feedback as a major support strategy for them to feel psychologically and emotionally comfortable with the course. Strict feedback was not desirable because it did not give them space for growth. Support from advisors was also crucial in learning how to manage course workload and in understanding what being an online learner meant. The ASC and IT staff provided technical support, assisting the students in overcoming deficiencies in writing and in learning how to use the different technologies.

## Development and Maintenance of Online Communities

One of the goals of the online program was to develop and sustain an online community. Findings of this study indicated that two types of online communities were formed within the program: formal and informal. The formal online community was located in Blackboard and created by instructors, while students created the informal online community in Facebook. Each community presented specific characteristics and a distinctive level of involvement to its community members. Instructors and students shared factors that contribute to sustaining the online communities.

### Formal Online Community: Blackboard

#### *Community Characteristics*

During the focus group meeting, instructors stated that the concept of online community was embedded in the design of the program through a variety of strategies that created and built relationships within Blackboard. Some of these strategies included video introductions to each module, Skype discussions of content, and meeting other Erikson instructors as “guest speakers” in module presentations so that students heard other instructors about issues in the field. Instructors believed that the modules were designed to support new online learning and offered opportunities for students to negotiate meaning through forums where students asked questions of the instructor and other students about working relationships with instructors they had had or would have in the future. For students to support one another, one instructor created documents with them, posted the documents to the ASC Web site for all students to access, and had participants add information to the document throughout the program.

To negotiate knowledge, instructors scheduled individual Skype meetings with students to reflect on their learning and online experience and encouraged students to pose questions and respond to one another. Instructors indicated that over time students began to respond to each other’s postings without the instructors’ intervention. Instructors also used strategies to foster knowledge negotiation through students’ work in pairs, completion of small tasks for large projects, and peer reviews.

To maintain the overall development of the online learning community, instructors encouraged students to connect personal experiences to professional values and beliefs, assured students that the level of feedback and follow-up when they began to struggle was real, and that Erikson really was committed to helping students manage all kinds of difficulties.

#### *Level of Involvement of Community Members*

Instructors stated that students’ level of involvement in the online community was noted during Skype meetings, in feedback from other instructors, by students’ deeper involvement in discussions, and when students became reciprocally supportive of each other. One instructor said, “During Skype meetings, students shared how they were thankful they had the opportunity

to engage with other seminar members from the opposite group in the *Family and Culture* course, even though they were 'longing to be back home' with their original group in the seminar." In this course, groups extended over a two-year time frame. This instructor further explained, "At the end of the first semester they commented on how they [felt] like such a family together." Another instructor indicated that the "level of commitment to online activities, courses, and the program has evolved by a deeper and breadth [sic] of discussion content." Another instructor observed, "Everyone has a voice, they [have] become very mutually supportive."

One instructor considered the Skype meetings a key factor during the first semester in increasing the level of community members' involvement. Other factors included comfort with the technology, confident that they understood the content, consistent design of Blackboard, highlighting voices of members as a way to provide opportunities for dialogue, and discussion forums and assignments that had students working with each other.

According to the instructors, the formal online program community identity took shape by letting students create emergent discussion questions and facilitate discussion with a partner. Instructors stated that students have showed their intentions in becoming members of the online program community by *Skyping* each other for support, sharing ideas for future seminar courses, addressing people by name and asking questions (especially the hard ones), apologizing for being late, and providing explicit comments to each other.

One instructor acknowledged students' levels of participation and contributions when "they started using quotes, questioning, connecting, and summarizing posts of peers." In this case, students were modeling what the instructor had done, and the instructor took a background facilitator's role. Instructors stated that some students tried to "talk" to everyone, while others "paired off" in continuing discussion. As the semester evolved, the level of participation increased over time, and the majority of the students posted beyond stated course expectations. Instructors believed that the strength of the communication and interactions was due to positive peer pressure, students' feelings that instructors listen to them, student acknowledgement of others' comments, sharing of information and experiences that revealed great trust with other members of the online community, and student support regarding academic and group functioning tasks.

Students indicated that they considered the online community formal in Blackboard, but also personal with a professional focus. Students identified themselves as professionals in the field of education with similar life demands related to work, family, and school. Some students considered themselves extremely involved and engaged in the Blackboard community, while others tried to balance work, family, and school. Some students scheduled time on selected days of the week to participate in the course activities, while others preferred to be online every day to avoid overload, and still others varied their participation, depending on their professional workload.

### *Informal Online Community: Facebook*

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#### *Community Characteristics*

Students in both cohorts created the informal community in Facebook. Only students had access to the Facebook communities. According to students, the informal community focused on excitement, frustration, and challenges. Interviewed students who participated in this study used the Facebook community to communicate informally with other classmates, get psychological support, and vent about courses.

### *Level of Involvement of Community Members*

Not all students interviewed were members or active members of the Facebook community. Students from the first cohort were less likely to be active members of Facebook. Three students from the first cohort stated that they went to Facebook in the beginning, but personal matters deterred them from being more involved or preferred to use Facebook for personal life, not Erikson affairs. One student said that Facebook did not interest to her: "I never joined Facebook and it just doesn't appeal to me. I kind of feel that if I wanted to reach out to one of my fellow colleagues, then I could email them or get in touch with them."

All interviewed students from the second cohort were members of the Facebook community. Three of them were active members and used the informal community to seek psychological support. One student stated that she was a member of Facebook, but was not looking for an in-depth relationship with classmates due to time constraints, but appreciated the informal communication. A student from the second cohort explained her view of Facebook as an informal community:

[Facebook is] just for the Erikson cohort, for our cohort. So there we put things like our feelings about the week, our emotions about the week, or "did you see this?," or "did you know this?," or things like that. And I've found that that's a great way to kind of collaborate and talk to my classmates off of Blackboard, and away from the instructor. And, just to kind of say, "oh my gosh, this is a busy week," things like that. But the only downfall of that is that not all of our cohort members are on Facebook. So there's only about six or seven of us that are talking on Facebook. So that's the only downfall. People that are on there, we talk frequently, and it's just a more relaxed way of talking to them.

One student said that the informal nature of Facebook made students sound like teenagers when reading their postings because of the secrets shared in this informal private environment, as this student explained:

That's very casual and friendly and a lot of that is focusing on the excitement and frustration and fear as a part of it but also the joy of challenge connected as human beings rather than just colleagues. So the Facebook adds access to it. Oh, in addition to being part of the group in Facebook, most of the people who are in the group are also friends on Facebook so that you are looking at somebody as a person thinking personalized and truly becoming friends.

Contrary to Facebook, in the Blackboard discussion board, students worked together as colleagues at the professional level. One student stated, "However, you still get that personal aspect of it, which you really want to go on about different people's skill sets and strengths." She continued to explain the difference between the formal and informal environments. In Blackboard:

You know who you are talking to and you respond to [the] discussion part. ... the discussion poses me the access to the conversation because it has challenged me to think so far beyond whatever had [occurred] before. It is not only possible because the whole community there help[ed] create a safe environment. We had a little bit of a situation with someone who used the word "huge" in the discussion panel. He was just saying "your presentation was really huge. Your presentation was great and your kids were very cute." We had a big conversation about whether or not cute or something that could be offensive because somebody could be offended by it, and it was a conversation that was interesting enough started on Blackboard ...

... but it was an excellent example of how we went through the professional aspect of it in terms of what it means to children when we talk about things like cute and whenever we use nicknames. We did that in the Blackboard. But then on Facebook, we talk[ed] about what you say when you really mean by that. We have two completely different avenues.

This situation showed how the formal and informal environments could be used to address issues at different levels, as the student explained. In this situation, what could have been offensive to certain people became a process opportunity to talk about the issue as a community in Facebook as this person explained about her feelings about the encounter: “No one would seem to be offended at all. I never felt embarrassed or uncomfortable sharing something that I would say, ‘Hey I don’t know about it; this is my ignorance. Please help me get it.’ ”

One interesting comment made by a student comparing the formal and informal environments related to the level of identity one community provided over the other:

Facebook is easy because when you post, your picture comes up, so you know who is making the comment. That is really easy. In Blackboard your name comes up, your name shows for who[m it] is posting, so you always kind of know who is posting. There are times when I have to go back to look on Blackboard to see like if I put reply to something and then I forget who I am responding to. I don’t believe their name is still there. So that makes it a little difficult. I just want to refer to people by name. If I’m going to respond to someone, I want to put their name and have my name on it, too. Yeah, it makes it more personal.

### *Factors That Contribute to Sustaining the Online Communities*

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Instructors and students were asked to share their perceptions related to the factors that can contribute to sustaining an online community. Instructors believed that avenues for “alums” to stay in touch, a welcoming environment, and opportunities for students to know each other intimately through the online courses can encourage future interactions. Ongoing interactions and joint projects all were factors instructors thought could contribute to sustaining the online program community overtime.

Students who were interviewed were asked the same question. Their answers pointed to the program design, continuous engagement, and relationships built over time. Program design was referred to the content application, the types of interactions, and support staff. The design of the program provided opportunities for direct application of content to practice, as this student explained:

The design of the program, but also so much of the information is so personally applicable to my everyday teaching. There were really no courses that didn’t apply to my professional life, so it really made it easy to take an active role.

The types of interactions incorporated into the design of the different courses allowed for continuous engagement. These interactions fostered open communication, respect, and professionalism, and provided a safe, respectful learning experience. One student described this perception:

Certainly, the more classes that we're in together, the more familiar we'll be with one another, the more we'll have learned about each other, and we'll feel more comfortable, it won't be so overwhelming, all of the technology pieces will be familiar with the format, and so, hopefully then, we'll be able to discuss in more free and open ways.

Another factor identified by interviewees was working with different people. This student referred to a class she was taking at the time of the interview:

I think in this class, our groups are more mixed, so we might start with this group and then change it. We've got smaller group assignments for the first time; in each group assignment I have different people that I'm working with each time, so I think that gives you a chance to maybe make some connections through the activities that are assigned. And I think beyond that, it takes each person's own initiative, perhaps, to want to remain engaged with those people beyond when class ends.

For this student the variety of activities kept her interested and motivated: "Varying up the activities some, which is happening, also keeps my interest. Because if it is continually read and discussed, I would be really bored with that so a variety of activities are important with the same people."

Students could not have been more positive about the program staff. Instructors were seen as passionate, and the level of commitment of the staff was considered exceptional in strengthening the continuous feeling of being part of the online community. Students were quick to note that staff members were good at identifying issues and fixing them rapidly. But most important were the level of dedication and contributions of students. These three students explained how students' commitment, dedication, and engagement contributed to sustaining the online community:

STUDENT ONE: I think that I try to be an active member, though sometimes I do fail because of the life that happens around me. I think it does take everyone to make contributions to sustain the online community.

STUDENT TWO: I think sort of a level of dedication that the cohort has to each other because if we don't sort of follow a protocol, things can fall apart. You know if you are not doing your share on time, it is really hard to respond because it just sort of limits you.

STUDENT THREE: I would say at least one component of it is that continuous engagement and the joy that comes with having new learning experiences. I think that definitely is a factor. And making sure that safe, respectful bases [are] maintain[ed].

## Effectiveness of the Online Program in Meeting Its Goals

The effectiveness of the online program in meeting its goals was evident in the statements from students provided with minimum probing throughout and at the end of the interviews. Clearly, students wanted to share the value of their education, how beneficial it was for them, and their feelings of satisfaction with the program. Comments varied from the amount of knowledge and skills gained in the program, changes in practice, and growth as a professional in the field, to the quality of the program:

A final thought... that a lot of people are intimidated trying to do an online class or they feel better attending online class than they would sitting in class face-to-face, one way or the other. My feeling with it is that not only that it is not [as] scary as you [think], but that [it] is doing even more than I could imagine if I could have gone through face-to-face.

I feel that [the program] is very, very challenging. I feel like I am growing professionally as a teacher definitely, and I feel like I am also learning more about other professions within education that I can look toward in the future.

This program was a lot harder dedication than I could have expected. When I applied for the program, I did not foresee the upcoming challenges. I had faced many challenges in my own family life and in the school, during this program. Though, I would like to say that I was always met with support from instructors and facility members during every stressful situation I faced. I would not change the fact that I enrolled in this program, and I am going to be very proud after I graduate. School changes when you are a parent and working. I face challenges every day. However, I think the amount of knowledge I am gaining makes up for the lost vacations, family time, and sleep.

I think that this program is successful obviously because of the design, but also because of the tech team and our amazing professors behind it. To our professors, we seemed less like an online screen name, and more like a real person—something I was really surprised by due to the nature of online courses. The compassion our professors showed was so amazing and commendable. I know that a number of us experienced some very trying times in our lives—everything from the death of close family members, to new babies, to the loss of jobs to international moves—you name it, we had it. The professors were so accommodating, and so helpful in giving us time to get caught back up. The compassion and understanding that was shown to me was truly heartwarming. I was also touched by the way the faculty communicated with each other about these events. It meant so much to me that my professors had notified my advisor that we had experienced a great loss and that she reached out to me—seriously—how often does that happen even in a face-to-face program? They really did such a great job of creating that face-to-face experience in an online community—I was truly astounded!

This entire program was really such an amazing experience all around, and I would absolutely recommend it to anyone. The responsiveness and encouragement were just phenomenal. I really can't say enough great things about this program and Erikson Institute and their AMAZING faculty.

I don't even know how to describe my experiences ... they have been so awesome. I have just learned so much. It has been such a great learning experience. If for some reason I even had to leave at this moment, I would like to treasure everything that I have learned and still want to share it with my co-workers. I wish that everybody would get this experience. I just keep pushing the girls at work to continue their education.

Actually [I am] making changes [to my practice] ... I am wording things to be more culturally sensitive and to have more collaboration with families, so that parents feel like they are a part of things and they are collaborating with us and we are all learning at the same time versus I am the one teaching them and they are the ones learning kind of thing. There has been so much in each class. There has been something of my work that I am changing or sharing with my teachers about play and building and how children learn. Those little

moments sometimes are passed up because you don't know that they actually are moments of learning.

It has definitely been a rich experience. I just wish that more of my staff would be able to partake in going to Erikson, because I think it's a really top-notch school. I am just really excited to be a part of it and to have discovered it. And I found it through a *Child Exchange Magazine* and just happened to get in on it when they were starting the cohort. So I feel pretty blessed about being a part of that. I hope this continues because I think that it's through online that we are going to be able to reach a lot more people. A lot more people are going to be able to get a valuable education. I think they really thought everything out very well. I think they were very passionate about it.

Online learning can be intimidating at first, but once individuals understand and experience the environment, it can surpass their expectations. This intimidation is clearly addressed in the above statements. This feeling of intimidation can be caused by personal and academic challenges, but with support, students can overcome these challenges and feel like they are part of a community. The amount of support students received in the Erikson online M.S. degree was based on the intentional design of the program, which allowed them to focus on their learning, feel their transformative experience, and grow as professionals in their field. The end result is a sense of satisfaction and a desire to motivate other people to participate in a high-quality learning endeavor.

## CONCLUSIONS

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The case study of the Erikson online M.S. in Early Childhood Education degree program demonstrated that building and sustaining a professional learning community online requires intentional design; common interests, goals, and practices; interactions supported and mediated by enabling technologies; and, most importantly, individuals who have the motivation to be committed, dedicated, and engaged in the sharing of information and social support to create a sense of community. This sense of community was found in two types of online communities within the program: formal and informal. The formal online community was the result of a well-orchestrated act of teaching and learning by support staff, instructors, and students. The informal online community was the virtual space to address concerns in a relaxed manner. Both communities involved sharing of information, social connection, and support. They intersected but maintained their distinctive characteristics and level of involvement of community members. The informal community also can serve as the ongoing connection for alumni after they graduate and desire to continue sharing knowledge and practices. Outcomes of the evaluation findings led to identification of lessons learned, effective practices, and recommendations for program enhancement.

## Lessons Learned

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Findings of this evaluation suggest that the relationship between teaching and learning online for the M.S. in Early Childhood Education degree program is the outcome of:

1. An organized and welcoming environment that provides relevant, practical, and timely information and helps students to connect personal experience to professional values and beliefs.

2. The use of enabling technologies that bridge the personal gap associated with online teaching and learning.
3. A supportive staff team that is committed to instructors and students and provides them professional, sensible, and efficient assistance.
4. A cadre of instructors who design learner-centered instruction and facilitate the learning process by encouraging students to gain confidence, become independent, and apply knowledge to their specific professional needs.
5. The use of online teaching methods that encourage interaction; establish presence for instructors and students; and motivate students to participate in an in-depth, convenient, and flexible environment in which they have control over their learning process.
6. The use of online community building strategies that foster involvement and engagement in the learning process and allow instructors and students to get to know each other more closely and to share practical knowledge and skills.
7. Students who identify themselves as professionals from different fields within education and view their learning experiences as going beyond what they expected due to the quality of the program design and rigorous standards.

## Effective Practices

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Practical implications emerged from this evaluation study that easily can be transferred to other fields. These implications can become effective practices related to program design, content relevance, and sense of presence and community.

The evaluation results showed that the learning experiences of students varied from person to person, based on their experience with online learning, professional roles, family status, and personal lives, but one common objective brought them together: learning about early childhood development. With a solid instructional design approach centered on the learner, the use of enabling technologies to connect people, a sensible and supportive staff, and a group of passionate and knowledgeable instructors, Erikson Institute met its goals of providing a relationship-based education with high standards. The online program structure and consistency, along with teaching methods that create a sense of presence, fostered a welcoming environment in which technology was transparent and students felt emotionally connected to each other, instructors, and staff. These interactions created a sense of presence and community.

Today, information and knowledge are dynamic as professional practices change in response to the speed of technology and availability of resources and information on the Web. Maintaining content relevancy has become a challenge for educational programs because individuals can access information in the palms of their hands and through the tips of their fingers at anytime, any place, any pace. The Erikson Institute online program has shown that information and knowledge are important, but key to the success of their students is providing relevant, practical, and timely information and preparing professionals to connect personal experience to professional values and beliefs in working with diverse populations.

Though the field of early childhood education has been hesitant about the use of online methods to deliver instruction, the evaluation results indicated that for online students in the early childhood degree program at Erikson Institute with little or no experience online, learning exceeded their expectations. The online methods created a dynamic interplay among cognition, emotion, and behavior. Students acquired new and relevant knowledge through a variety of intellectual activities (case studies, interviews, discussions, team projects, etc.). Students connected emotionally with instructors, staff, and students through direct contact online, individualized feedback, and group projects. Students responded as though they were present in the same location physically, psychologically, and emotionally. This dynamic interplay created a sense of presence and belonging to a community. As a result of these methods, students acknowledged increased knowledge and skills, changes in their practices, growth in their professional careers, and personal satisfaction.

## Recommendations

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Based on the evaluation findings and suggestions from study participants, recommendations are provided for program enhancement. These recommendations are related to overcoming the sense of feeling overwhelmed, to making technology more transparent, and to continued access to resources after graduation.

The sense of being overwhelmed was shared by students in both cohorts. Often this type of reaction is based on the inner world perception of the outer world and how the outer world affects one's way of dealing with new situations. Being overwhelmed was common when novice online students started in the program, but also was a factor when facing demanding issues in their personal lives such as the birth of a baby, loss of a job, or death of a close friend. At these moments people feel emotional and unaware of their surroundings. Students related their distress to the heavy course content, the number of readings, difficulty in managing discussions, and the inability to balance the workload. They all said that with time the situation improved and they started feeling more confident and comfortable about the courses and workload. Communicating to students how the online environment works and how to overcome these concerns during program orientation can eliminate the sense of feeling overwhelmed.

During the interviews, students came up with strategies on how to decrease the sense of feeling overwhelmed. Suggestions included having readings presented in small chunks, downloading reading materials before the module starts, having discussion questions available for them ahead of time, balancing assignments between classes in the same semester, and adding an alert feature for new postings in Blackboard. These solutions mean that instructors can play a critical role in supporting and preparing students for the course by offering materials ahead of time and assisting students in pre-planning their learning experiences. Another approach is to offer one course every 8 weeks, so that students only focus on one course at a time. Another solution would be to provide students with learning management strategies as a part of the program orientation. These strategies could focus on pre-planning, seeking support, cognitive approaches for studying, and time allocation tips.

When technology was not transparent and issues arrived for the second cohort of students, a distraction resulted. Even with all the support provided by the responsive staff at Erikson Institute, students saw only the problem rather than the intent of the interactions and felt frustrated. Once the issues were resolved and the anxiety was eliminated, students started feeling part of the program. The use of new technologies at the beginning of a cohort can intimidate students and be a threat to student retention. The support staff clearly resolved the

issue instantly; however, the effects of the experience were still present in the memory of the students a few months later because they raised the issue during the interviews. Avoiding the use of new technologies before testing it in house and slowly incorporating the new technologies into the program can solve this issue.

One concern raised during the interviews was continued access to the online materials and library after graduation so that students would not lose the relevant information they had received while in the program. The solution could be the use of an electronic portfolio in which students could organize and maintain materials. By using an electronic portfolio throughout the program, together with the seminar courses, students can reflect on their learning and create their own resource library for future use. As information becomes outdated and new practices emerge using social media such as Facebook will help students to maintain their community of practice by sharing resources, exchanging practices, and staying in touch.

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