

An Exploration of Perceived Learning Activities and Assignments Preferred by
Millennial Nursing Students in an Online RN-BSN Nursing Program

Submitted by
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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
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I verify that my dissertation represents original research, is not falsified or plagiarized, and that I have accurately reported, cited, and referenced all sources within this manuscript in strict compliance with APA and Grand Canyon University (GCU) guidelines. I also verify my dissertation complies with the approval(s) granted for this research investigation by GCU Institutional Review Board (IRB).

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred). This qualitative exploratory single case study sought to understand the perceived preferences of millennial online registered nurse to Bachelor of Science in nursing (RN-BSN) students for online activities and assignments. Three questions were posed: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs? How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs? How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs? Constructivist and social constructivist learning theories served as theoretical frameworks. Through purposive sampling, eleven participants from one Illinois RN-BSN program were chosen to be interviewed. Direct classroom observation and program document reviews were also used to triangulate the data. Thematic analysis identified eight themes: Preference for face-to-face learning activities, Influences to choose online learning activities, Clear directions, Relevant to practice, Instructor engagement, Research required, Thought provoking, Lectures, Uninvolved instructors, Related to preferences and influences for assignments and activities in the online classroom. Preferences were identified in the online classroom that have evolved through experience in the face-to-face classroom and the use of technology.

Keywords: Millennial nursing students, Nursing education, RN-BSN completion programs

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the four most important people in my life: Chad, Cole, Ross, and Luke Farley.

To my boys, Cole, Ross, and Luke, my most important accomplishments, you will never know the joy you have brought to my life. Thank you for your support and know that the love and laughter you have brought will forever sustain me. You too can do anything; just say you can.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	xiii
List of Figures	xiv
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Background of the Study	4
Problem Statement	6
Purpose of the Study	7
Research Question(s) and Hypotheses.....	9
Advancing Scientific Knowledge	12
Significance of the Study	17
Rationale for Methodology	20
Nature of the Research Design for the Study.....	21
Definition of Terms.....	28
Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations	32
Assumptions.....	32
Limitations.	33
Delimitations.....	34
Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study	34
Chapter 2: Literature Review	37
Introduction to the Chapter and Background to the Problem	37
Research Sources and Strategy	39
Conceptual Framework.....	40
Review of the Literature	44

Phenomena.....	44
Nursing education.....	45
Millennials.....	47
Millennial digital natives and digital immigrants.....	49
Instructional delivery.....	50
Traditional and online nursing course activities.....	53
Group work.....	56
Group discussions/discussion boards.....	59
Asynchronous delivery.....	61
Impact of prior online experience.....	67
Communication tools that promote learning.....	70
Methods of communication.....	72
Email.....	72
Social presence.....	73
Methodology.....	74
Instrumentation.....	76
Summary.....	78
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	82
Introduction.....	82
Statement of the Problem.....	83
Research Question(s).....	85
Research Methodology.....	87
Research Design.....	89
Population and Sample Selection.....	94
Confidentiality.....	97

Participant recruitment.....	98
Sources of Data.....	99
Semi-structured interviews.....	100
Online classroom direct observations.....	104
Document reviews and analysis.....	107
Validity and Reliability.....	107
Validity.....	108
Triangulation.....	109
Data saturation.....	110
Transferability.....	110
Reliability.....	110
Data Collection and Management.....	113
Data Analysis Procedures.....	115
Ethical Considerations.....	121
Limitations and Delimitations.....	122
Summary.....	127
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results.....	132
Introduction.....	132
Descriptive Data.....	133
Data Analysis Procedures.....	137
Methodological (within method) triangulation.....	143
Validity.....	144
Transferability.....	144
Reliability.....	148

Results.....	149
Emergent theme one: Face-to-face preferred.....	152
Emergent theme two: Obligations influence choice.....	155
Emergent theme three: Instructor commitment.....	160
Emergent theme four: Lectures.....	164
Emergent theme five: Relevance to practice.....	167
Emergent theme six: Research required.....	169
Emergent theme seven: Not challenging.....	175
Emergent theme eight: Uninvolved instructors.....	178
Summary.....	180
Limitations.....	182
Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	185
Introduction.....	185
Summary of the Study.....	187
Summary of Findings and Conclusion.....	200
Face-to-face preferred and obligations influence choice.....	201
Instructor commitment, lectures, relevance to practice, and research required.....	203
Not challenging and uninvolved instructors.....	204
Implications.....	187
Theoretical implications.....	188
Practical implications.....	190
Future implications.....	192
Strengths and weaknesses.....	192
Recommendations.....	207

Recommendations for future research.	207
Recommendations for future practice.	210
References.....	213
Appendix A. IRB Approval Letter Study Site	231
Appendix B. IRB Approval Letter.....	232
Appendix C. Permission to Conduct Study	233
Appendix D. Interview Protocol.....	234
Appendix E. Classroom Observation Protocol	238
Appendix F. Artifacts Review	240
Appendix G. Interview Invitation.....	241
Appendix H. Participants Consent Form	242
Appendix I. Codes, Frequency and Themes	246
Appendix J. Semi-Structured Interview Responses RQ1	250
Appendix K. Semi-Structured Interview Responses RQ2.....	252
Appendix L. Semi-Structured Interview Responses RQ3	255

List of Tables

Table 1. What Are the Best Ways to Learn in Online Classes?	55
Table 2. Demographic Characteristics by Participant.....	137
Table 3. Level 1 and Level 2 Codes Emerging From Sources of Data	141
Table 4. Group Codes and Emerged Themes	150
Table 5. Semi-Structured Interview/Classroom Observation/Document Review Alignment With Research Question 1 and Emerging Theme	151
Table 6. Semi-Structured Interview/Classroom Observation/Document Review Alignment With Research Question 2 and Emerging Theme	159
Table 7. Semi-Structured Interview/Classroom Observation/Document Review Alignment With Research Question 3 and Emerging Theme	173

List of Figures

Figure 1. Births by year and generation. 48

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Millennial registered nurses (RNs) are quickly dominating positions in bachelor's degree in nursing online completion programs. The need for higher education and leadership in nursing is growing. Gone are the days when nurses donned a white cap and uniform and helped to bath and comfort patients. Nurses today autonomously care for very ill patients and coordinate their on-going care. Also, they continue to oversee patient progress outside the hospital walls and into the community setting. These profound changes to the role of the nurse and the necessary skill set required of a nurse have implications for nursing education (Caputi, 2016). Research conducted by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (2015a), found that nurses prepared at the baccalaureate or higher-level reduced mortality rates and medication errors, as well as enhanced positive patient outcomes. Therefore, a well-educated nursing workforce is necessary to deliver high-quality patient care (AACN, 2015a). In addition, in the United States, there are different educational levels of an RN; therefore, creating a challenge to develop a nursing workforce with an equal level of education. The following paragraph discusses the different educational paths to becoming an RN.

There are three different educational paths to becoming an RN: (a) associate degree, (b) bachelor degree, or (c) a diploma program, and they all allow a potential nurse to take the national licensure exam. The bachelor's degree is traditionally where a nurse gains more knowledge in management and community health. There are two different degrees an RN can hold and practice. Traditionally, RNs gain training in nursing

leadership and management at the bachelor's degree level as opposed to the associate degree RN training.

According to the National League for Nursing (NLN), in 2014, the percent of students over the age of thirty in bachelor's degree nursing programs was eighteen (NLN, 2014). This means that most of the bachelor's degree nursing students are millennials (also known as Gen Y or the Net Generation) and they encompass students born between 1982 and 2000 (AACN, 2015c). In 2010, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a report titled *The Future of Nursing* that called for an increase in bachelor's prepared nurses to meet the demands of the complex and evolving workforce and called for achieving higher levels of education for nurses (AACN, 2015a; Caputi, 2016). Since the current nursing workforce is 60-70% associate degree-prepared nurses, there is a need for online RN to a bachelor of science in nursing (RN-BSN) programs to identify how this group of students prefers to learn through online delivery (Conner & Thielemann, 2013). As millennial associate degree RNs move from the traditional face-to-face educational setting into bachelor's degree online programs, it is not known how they prefer to learn in this new educational setting. This single case study explored the perceived learning activities and assignments preferred by millennial online RN-BSN students. It is important to understand as the IOM, and the Carnegie Foundation called for a seamless transition from associate degree nursing (ADN) programs to RN-BSN programs (AACN, 2015b).

The different characteristics of millennials or Generation Y were well documented in the literature (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; DeVaney, 2015; Dixon, Mercado, & Knowles, 2013; Montenery et al., 2013; Suh & Hargis, 2016). Robb (2013)

identified a gap in the literature that research did not identify preferences of millennials and how they prefer to engage and learn on-line, and argued that students will be more motivated, and academic success will be improved if learning preferences are met. Gazza and Hunker (2014) echoed this in their findings of an extensive review of the literature regarding identifying strategies to improve retention in online higher education.

Literature found that course design influenced the potential for students to drop an online course. Further, Therrell and Dunneback (2015) identified the potential to improve student-learning outcomes by identifying millennial student preferences and implementing them in course design. According to the AACN (2015d), it is critical to provide the nursing workforce with RN-BSN completion programs that are seamless in transition and accommodate different learning needs with content that prepare them to practice in a complex and ever-changing healthcare system. In addition, Therrell and Dunneback (2015) noted that there has been little research into the preferences of undergraduate students in curriculum design and that millennial student voices be heard; therefore, a gap exists.

This qualitative exploratory single case study explored millennial nursing student preferences for activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those who may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. Methods of pedagogical practices and student opinions about those practices were explored through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews to determine how and why this specific group learns best in the online environment. Organization of this chapter includes the introduction to the study that notes the current nursing educational needs and

nursing student population; the background of study focuses on the history of this phenomenon and its evolution; the problem statement delineates the issue and determines the necessity of the study; research questions for the qualitative exploratory single case study; advancement of scientific knowledge through the identification of gaps in literature; and the significance of the study. Additionally, discussion of constructivist and social constructivist theories, as well as nature and design of the study and the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Background of the Study

The demands on nurses in the workforce are constantly growing, due to the complex combination of ever changing science and technology, and the push for patient activism. These demands and the shortages noted in all areas of nursing support the need for nursing education to be changed to meet the needs of the profession (AACN, 2015d). Currently, the RN population in the United States is aging, with the average age being 50 years old, leading to a time in the very near future that the current group of millennials will constitute the bulk of the nursing workforce (Budden, Zhong, Moulton, & Cimiotti, 2013; Shatto, Meyer, & Delicath, 2016). The need for more nurses, and the IOM calling for 80% bachelors prepared nurses by the year 2020 brings a need for flexible online education in nursing to meet the demands of the working nurse and improve the nursing shortage (Goodman, 2016; Robb, 2016; Smith, 2010). This and the arrival of millennial students in college courses and their specific needs changed the landscape of nursing education and challenged nurse educators to develop new strategies that will retain nursing students (Cosco, 2015). Nursing courses contain a level of academic rigor that requires students to analyze and apply information and interventions (Caputi, 2016).

Robb (2013) noted that experts suggested that educational engagement and success has been difficult due to a mismatch of methods used by faculty and learning preferences of millennials that this group may prefer different pedagogical methods than have been previously used. One area of pedagogy that requires exploration is the preferred communication method and tools by the millennial generation (Robinson & Stubberud, 2012). Engaging students in the use of new technologies and delivery of curriculum enhances learning of millennial students (Montenery et al., 2013). Identifying students' perceptions of various online communication and collaboration tools can facilitate the effectiveness of online strategies. The nursing discipline lacks research that has identified and evaluated millennial students' preferences as an influential factor of engagement and successful academic outcomes (Robb, 2013, p. 302). A further gap in the research was noted by Simonds and Brock (2014) and Therrell and Dunneback (2015) that found that different age groups engaged in online learning had different learning preferences and that there was a need to determine these preferences as the millennial generation continues to dominate college classrooms and traditional campus-based programs move to online delivery.

Currently, new graduate nurses entering practice today are mostly from the millennial generation (Shatto, Meyer, & Delicath, 2016; Toothaker & Taliaferro, 2017). This and the IOM's recommendation to achieve 80% of practicing nurses with a minimum of a bachelor's degree in nursing by the year 2020 (Conner & Thielemann, 2013; Goodman, 2016), translates into online RN-BSN programs admitting predominantly millennial nurses. The gaps identified in the research support a need for an understanding of the preferences of the millennial nursing student in online programs to

improve learning, by revising assignments and activities that may hinder learning. This study intended to investigate the needs of this specific group.

Problem Statement

It is not known how millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs identify preferred learning activities and assignments. Also, it is not known how and why millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs perceive certain assignments and learning activities as facilitating or hindering learning in online RN-BSN programs at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. The number of higher education institutions offering online courses has increased substantially (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Yoo & Huang, 2013). These programs and courses offer students the flexibility to work full-time and have families, and provide students the advantage of gaining new skills while working (Yoo & Huang, 2013). Suh and Hargis (2016) suggested that the millennial generation is the largest generation in college and the workforce today. In agreement, Fry (2016) declared that statistically, the millennials are now the largest group alive today. Each generation brings different characteristics and preferences where learning is concerned (Suh & Hargis, 2016). To increase the number of RN-BSN prepared nurses and promote successful completion of required coursework, faculty identification of the needs of this generation and development of teaching strategies that accommodate the millennial generation's unique set of needs should be a priority (Montenery et al., 2013; Robb, 2013).

The term *evidence-based* refers to the systematic approach of finding the most relevant evidence, through research, to make the best decisions (Zerwekh & Zerwekh-Garneau, 2012). Research to determine evidence-based learning activities and

assignments preferred by millennial RN-BSN nursing students to improve outcomes for today's millennial nursing students commenced. Findings indicated curricular changes that can improve the seamless transition for students from ADN nursing programs to bachelor's degree programs. It will also help to promote learning, prepare them for success in caring for complex patients, and help to increase the number of bachelor degree prepared nurses (Robb, 2016).

The higher education classroom continues to expand beyond the traditional classroom with increasing online delivery (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). It is important that researchers study millennial students' preferences and satisfaction in online courses, so educators can implement changes that better meet students' needs (Blackmon, 2012). The literature reviewed found that addressing student's learning preferences has the potential to improve motivation and engagement in the learning process, improve student retention in online classes and programs, and result in better learning outcomes (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Robb, 2013). This study aided faculty in understanding the preferences for activities and assignments that millennial RN-BSN students perceive to hinder or promote learning. In addition, it built on the current pedagogical strategies in RN-BSN online courses, facilitating the ability of faculty to engage millennial students and better facilitate their learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred), at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. The

intent was to seek an understanding of the preferences of this specific group and more effectively engage and instruct students in the online nursing classroom. Further, the intent was to improve learning outcomes and increase the number of bachelors prepared nurses in the workforce.

In 2015, one hundred and thirty thousand three hundred and forty-five students were enrolled in RN-BSN programs nationally (AACN, 2015c). Many of the students in nursing programs today are members of the millennial generation (Robb, 2016). This qualitative exploratory single case study investigated the preferences in assignments and those that were perceived to facilitate learning for this generational group enrolled at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois, that is one of 34 accredited RN-BSN programs in the state. Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program was the single case study unit used in this study. The number of nursing students enrolled in the online program at Eastern Illinois University consisted of approximately 31 students. The target population for this study was the 19 currently enrolled millennial nursing students who met the eligibility criteria. The program selected for this study is an online program that enrolls students from all over the state of Illinois and is currently enrolling students from surrounding states for following semesters. The program selected for this single case study was due to the convenience of access to the students and courses for the researcher, as well as, the design of the program. Although most online RN-BSN programs are asynchronous, meaning they do not have an online face-to-face component, Eastern Illinois University's RN-BSN program offers synchronous and asynchronous learning activities and assignments. The program offers a weekly synchronous or face-to-face online lecture through video conferencing that happens in real time. The opportunity

to examine both methods was the reason for choosing this case study unit. The study gained insight into this millennial generation through qualitative individual semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observations, and document reviews that identified preferences of activities and assignments that facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those that hinder learning (not preferred).

The phenomenon of consistent growth of online classrooms and the growing millennial population in higher education brings about a need to understand the specific population's preferences, as well as, gain insight that will improve learning (Boton & Gregory, 2015). The phenomenon required the study to explore thoughts and opinions of millennials in higher education today. After Academic Quality Review (AQR) and institutional review board (IRB) approval, the researcher sent emails to students enrolled in the program of study in the spring of 2017 that met the eligibility criteria to participate in semi-structured interviews. Next, participants' interviews took place in the summer of 2017, none of the participants in the study were enrolled in any courses with the researcher during the study period. In addition, archives of three nursing courses in spring of 2017 as well as, included document reviews from the courses and nursing program. Understanding that students prefer to learn in different ways based on their experiences provided insight into new strategies needed to meet their needs.

Research Questions

Qualitative research does not test hypothesis, but guided by research questions. The phenomena explored for this study is defined as students' preferences in activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program

in Charleston, Illinois. In a study conducted by Woods, Wilson, and Walkovich (2011), they found that millennial learners brought a unique set of characteristics to higher education such as academic skills and personal preferences that are different from previous generations leading to the necessity of faculty to move away from traditional didactic strategies. Schell and Janicki (2013) suggested that faculty should disregard old and outdated teaching strategies using the constructivist model that constructs new knowledge and process material using the technological preferences that they are accustomed to in their everyday life.

Currently, in the year 2017, the ADN is the most common degree of nursing education in the United States (Conner & Thielemann, 2013). With the high demand for continuing education in nursing and bachelor degree prepared nurses, to fill leadership positions, many RN-BSN completion programs are available; however, it is critical to understand the needs of nursing students moving from face-to-face programs to online completion programs. Boton and Gregory (2015) offered that the millennial generation has always had access to the use of computers and the internet, and this has an impact on the way they communicate and learn. Boton and Gregory found that retaining students in online courses to be directly related to several factors with one being the utilization of constructivist online pedagogies. The phenomenon demanded the study to explore thoughts and opinions of millennials in higher education today.

The goal of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. With

the influences of the lived experience of millennials, technology, and the consistent move to online programs, it is not known how or why assignments are preferred by millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN nursing programs.

These unknowns bring about the need for a better understanding of the preferences of the millennial nursing student in order to improve student learning. The phenomena explored for this study was defined as students' preferences in activities and assignments utilized in the online classroom related to student's experience and current trends in higher education. It was sought to find the preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. Semi-structured interviews with millennial nursing students in RN-BSN online programs were utilized to discuss these preferences. Using multiple data sources, individual semi-structured interviews, member checking, classroom direct observations, and program document/artifacts reviews, the study results were able to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs?
- RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?
- RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

These research questions aided the research in guiding the study to address the problem that it is not known how millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN

programs identify preferred learning activities and assignments. Also, it is not known how and why millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs perceive certain assignments and learning activities as facilitating or hindering learning in online RN-BSN programs at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. Answers to the research questions were identified through analysis of the data collected and allowed for advancement of scientific knowledge.

Advancing Scientific Knowledge

The research concerning millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs for this study included various current research studies and several content areas. Examples of those content areas included the medical field: nurses and nursing students (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Goodman, 2016; Hampton & Pearce, 2016; Horsfall, Cleary, & Hunt, 2012; Kim-Godwin & Martinez, 2016; Murray, 2016; Robb, 2013; Robb, 2016; Seckman, 2014; Smith, 2010) health professions students (Therrell & Dunneback, 2015), psychology students (Drouin, Hile, Vartanian, & Webb, 2013; Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014), health informatics students (Adwan, 2016), and speech communication students (Russo, 2013).

Many education-based studies and included millennial age students in the traditional high school classroom (Crews & Neill, 2014; Kotz, 2016), online undergraduate students in education exploring different aspects of synchronous and asynchronous delivery methods (Clark, Strudler, & Grove, 2015; Harris & Martin, 2012; Olson & McCracken, 2015; Quinn, 2015; Suell & Whitsett, 2013; Wen-Yu Lee, 2013), graduate education students in online courses that explored different delivery and communication methods (Marmon, Vanscoder, & Gordesky, 2014; Martin, Parker, &

Deale, 2012; Vu & Fadde, 2013; Wegmann & McCauley, 2014; Whiteside, 2015; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014; Yoo & Huang, 2013) and studies including a mix of graduate and undergraduate education studies studying different delivery methods in online learning (Chang, Hurst, & McLean, 2015; Huss & Eastep, 2013). Although there was available research, as noted above, it lacked empirical examinations using millennial RN-BSN online students and their preferences for activities and assignments online. Robb (2013) identified a gap in the literature that current research does not identify preferences of millennials, and how they preferred to engage and learn on-line (Gazza & Hunker, 2014). According to the AACN (2015b), it is important to provide the nursing workforce with RN-BSN completion programs that are seamless in transition and accommodate different learning needs and content that prepare them to practice in a complex and ever-changing healthcare system.

Therrell and Dunneback (2015) noted that there has been little research into the preferences of undergraduate students in curriculum design and that millennial student voices be heard; therefore, a gap exists. This study added to research regarding the specific group of millennials who are in online RN-BSN programs and their preferences in online assignments and activities that promote learning. In addition, findings from the study added to research regarding assignments and activities that are perceived to hinder learning for millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs. The research was completed at one University in Illinois, using a qualitative exploratory single case study design. This research attempted to fill the gaps in the literature discussed within the upcoming literature review chapter to provide direct support for the design of this study. Semi-structured interviews with millennial nursing students in an RN-BSN online

program were utilized to discuss preferences. Through interviews, classroom observations, and program document reviews, the study addressed the following questions: (a) How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs; (b) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs; and (c) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Results noted that there was little understanding of the needs and preferences of the millennial nursing student in online RN-BSN courses and the exploration of the preferences of this group garnered a better understanding of the activities and assignments that promote learning. The Constructivism Learning Theory guided the study and informed in the analysis. The basis of constructivism is the idea that people construct their own knowledge through their personal experiences (Al-Huneidi & Schreurs, 2012). Constructivist Learning Theory was born from the field of education and draws from the developmental theories of Kelly and Piaget (Hunter & Krantz, 2010). Hunter and Krantz (2010) noted that in 1977 Piaget found that students created new knowledge and created frameworks to build on from previous experiences. Both theorists suggested that learners understand new knowledge from the basis of previous knowledge and life experiences and that through these different experiences, students assume different meaning and value that they apply to their learning (Hunter & Krantz, 2010). The IOM and Carnegie Foundation posited that it is imperative that students moving from an ADN program to a BSN program need seamless transition (AACN, 2015b; Caputi, 2016). Educators utilizing this framework seek to build curriculums and

assignments that build on previous experience and alleviate circumstances where students are repeating previously learned knowledge. The aim was to construct new knowledge through the identification of what knowledge the students bring to the program (Legg, Adelman, & Levitt, 2009).

Major (2015) expanded on the ideas of constructivism in that learning can be mediated by technology tools and that learners interact with technology and each other. Major dubbed this as “Sociotechnical Constructivism,” and that learners simultaneously construct knowledge using their own experience, social interaction and their tools, or technology. Using a social constructivism view emphasizes the nature and role of the interaction, as well as the theoretical foundation that guides the choice of pedagogy utilized in delivering course material (Bryant & Bates, 2015). For this reason, the Constructivist Learning Theory was used to guide this study. Social Constructivist Theory is guided by the belief that learners construct new knowledge from old through experience, collaboration, and online pedagogy (Bryant & Bates, 2015; Schell & Janicki, 2013).

Additionally, the Social Constructivist Theory guided the study. Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, built on Piaget’s Constructivism Theory by developing the Social Constructivist Theory. Suggestions from the literature found that learning is highly dependent on cultural, social, and individual interactions (Bryant & Bates, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) believed that social interaction has significant influence on cognitive development, and learning is highly dependent on these interactions because individuals are inseparable from them.

The same technology that the millennial generation has known throughout their entire lives has also made it possible for nurses to advance their careers at a distance while working and raising families. Legg, et. al (2009) explained that not all students are equal, and nursing faculty who adopt a constructivist paradigm identify what these specific students need, considering the experience and preferences they bring to the classes. Al-Huneidi and Schreurs (2012) indicated that when faculty approaches online learners through a Constructivist framework, they acknowledge that students bring different perspectives and skills and by identifying previous knowledge, they can build on those experiences. Therefore, it is important to identify how students prefer to learn in online courses. This study sought to identify preferences in activities and assignments, and those perceived to hinder the learning of millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN courses. The intent of this exploration was to add to the Constructivism theory in the context of millennial online nursing students in identifying their experiences in order to promote learning in this cohort of students. The intent of this exploration was to add to the to the literature in the context of using the constructivist framework, to identify preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred).

Seventy-six million Gen Y learners are entering higher education and matriculating into the workforce and bring with them a set of characteristics and expectations that challenge both educators and workforce managers (Woods et al., 2011). The millennial generation is very technological driven and comes to the adult world with a different set of characteristics and preferences (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; DeVaney, 2015; Suh & Hargis, 2016). This leads to the need for leaders and educators alike to learn

the preferences and utilize them in course development (Suh & Hargis, 2016). Hendren (2010) explained that there is a growing need for nurse leaders, as well as all nurses to be well-educated, technologically savvy, and able to lead, making it imperative that nurses receive higher education and can fill leadership positions.

The literature reviewed was rich in discussions on how technologically savvy the millennial generation is and how they have only known the world with technology (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; Devaney, 2015; Montenery et al., 2013; Simonds & Brock, 2014). Bryant and Bates (2015) posited that students' learning could be influenced through community-focused collaboration and pedagogy that fits the experiences that students are accustomed. Yoo and Huang (2013) suggested that simply utilizing traditional teaching methods in the online arena could lead to attrition in online programs; therefore, it is imperative to explore the specific needs of online learners. This study influenced learning using the Social Constructivism theory that asserts new learning is gained from experience and the interaction and collaboration with others.

Significance of the Study

A review of the literature suggested there was a gap regarding millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments in online RN-BSN nursing programs (Montenery et al., 2013; Robb, 2013). Higher education has changed and evolved to accommodate the needs of the society that it serves. In recent years, higher education classrooms have implemented technology and included technology-based online offerings (Berman & Hassell, 2013). In a study conducted by Simonds and Brock (2014), they examined the best way for students to learn online, and it was found that different age groups responded differently when asked preferences in online learning. Although

the study was quantitative in nature, it also used focus groups that gave the study's findings much more depth and meaning for generalization and future study recommendations. Future study recommendations identified a need for the specific exploration of preferences in different age groups and cohorts in online learning and was the intent of this study. Robinson and Stubberud (2012) indicated that given the rate of change in technology, student preferences be researched often to develop online activities and engage students. Further, Simonds and Brock (2013) identified the use of qualitative inquiry to improve online learning by listening to the needs of the students and utilizing their comments and focus group discussions.

A mixed methods study by Huss and Eastep (2013) surveyed 1,085 students (half of who were millennials) regarding their preferences in online learning activities and communication. The study found that not only were there definite preferences from the group studied, but that critical themes emerged that if implemented could improve learning. It was concluded that learning could be improved in certain online groups if preferences were identified. In addition, they recommended further study among specific populations.

A similar study by Therrell and Dunneback (2015) focused on millennial preferences in the classroom. The study found that undergraduate students majoring in education had strong preferences for activities, teaching, and learning. The recommendations of the study were to examine online students and identify their specific preferences. Although Therrell and Dunneback recognized that students were not the experts, it was important to understand their needs to capture their attention and improve teaching and learning practices.

A study of graduate education students by Bryant and Bates (2015) indicated that students construct new knowledge from experiences through a Social Constructivist approach and interaction and sharing of information with others. There are many different activities and assignments available to use in online nursing programs. Considering socialization can be lost and students can feel isolated in online courses, Bryant and Bates found that rich and timely feedback from professors in online courses is imperative and leads to constant interaction and enhances the learning process. Giving feedback through many assignments in course design such as discussion boards, lectures, group meetings, and email is possible. There are many different assignments available to use in online nursing programs that can provide an opportunity for interaction and information sharing.

The significance of this study was necessary to extend previous research and identify the preferences of a specific cohort recommended by current researchers in the field. Using multiple data sources, this study added to the existing research literature by exploring and analyzing the preferences of millennial online RN-BSN students in online programs. The students' preferences and the value of learning were identified. By identifying the millennial nursing students' preferences for different activities and assignments, teaching and learning in online RN-BSN programs can be improved. These findings are not only intended to promote learning in the online RN-BSN classroom, but by extension increase the number of bachelor's prepared nurses available in the workforce. Increasing the number of bachelor's prepared nurses can help to fill much-needed leadership positions, as well as, fill seats in master's degree programs that can potentially help to increase the number of advanced practice nurses such as nurse

practitioners, nurse educators, and nurse administrators who are highly sought-after candidates in healthcare organizations. Education level affects patient care and ultimately helps to meet the needs of the communities that these highly educated nurses serve (AACN, 2015b).

Rationale for Methodology

The consensus in the literature found that students have distinct preferences. With the constant change in technology, and the consistent growth of online learning, it is necessary to understand the specific needs of different generations in higher education (Chang et al., 2015; Huss & Eastep, 2013; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015). This study used a qualitative exploratory single case study methodology to explore the activities and assignments preferred by millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN courses, and those that were perceived to hinder learning. Also, the study not only sought to understand what preferences these students have, but why they preferred them.

Qualitative research is the choice of methodology when a researcher seeks to understand people and the meanings they have constructed, as well as, being the ideal methodology for social science because most real-world settings can be explained and described contextually through qualitative methods (Rule & John, 2015; Tumele, 2015). Basic or naturalistic research is propelled by an interest in the gaining knowledge about the phenomenon, and the result is to contribute to the knowledge base; whereas, applied social science research/researchers intend to gain insight into a phenomenon that will improve the way things are done or improve practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Epistemology of qualitative research was further described by Merriam and Tisdell as socially constructed, and argues that there is not a single, observable reality, but rather,

there are multiple realities or interpretations of a single event. This study sought to understand the students' beliefs about online preferences through the exploration of their previous knowledge and justification of their experience that led to these beliefs.

Qualitative exploratory single case study research was chosen for this study. Qualitative research is distinctly and fundamentally different from quantitative research, in that quantitative research uses numbers and statistics to come to objective conclusions about the phenomenon; whereas, qualitative research methods analyze narratives to describe themes and patterns that explain the phenomenon (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Qualitative research can provide the opportunity to explore and understand complex and multifaceted situations that quantitative methods cannot explain (Anderson, Leahy, DelValle, Sherman, & Tansey, 2014). Qualitative research seeks to understand how people interpret their world by exploring thoughts and feelings about their experiences. The statistical analysis that results from quantitative research can give insight to participant's perspectives, but cannot provide the meanings behind those perspectives. Qualitative research and methods provide a means to more deeply understand the group being studied and capture the complexity through the process (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). The goal of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of the millennial online nursing student and their learning needs.

Nature of the Research Design for the Study

Qualitative research design is described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as richly descriptive and six common designs of qualitative research identified: (a) Basic qualitative research that the researcher simply searches to find meaning or an interpretation of a phenomenon. It is the simplest and the types of qualitative research

and the primary goal is to uncover and interpret meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); (b) Phenomenology is attempting to understand the basic structure and meaning of an experience and to understand and recognize influences that shape the participants world view (Toothaker & Taliaferro, 2017); (c) Ethnography is about understanding the culture of a specific group. Fusch, Fusch, and Ness (2017) described ethnography as a way to explore meanings and relationships between people and their culture through their feelings and beliefs; (d) Grounded Theory is another specific type of qualitative research that focuses on building a theory through hypothesis developed through concepts and categories of findings (Lo, 2016); (e) Narrative Inquiry uses stories and written text to identify and understand meaning of the human experience and to ultimately understand the resolution or end result (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); and (f) Case Study is an in-depth empirical inquiry that describes and analyzes a contemporary phenomenon or case (Aczel, 2015). Qualitative research is encouraged in circumstances where the researcher wants a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that was the goal of this study.

Many qualitative designs can explore specific phenomenon and each of the qualitative designs were considered. Phenomenology was not the chosen methodology for this study because as Yin (2016) discussed, this is a way to examine a specific experience or used to illuminate an event or occurrence through the study of the participant's perceptions and feelings. Ethnography was not an option for this study because although the millennial cohort shares similar life experiences that could lead to similar attitudes and behaviors (DeVaney, 2015), and are very diverse, coming from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Kotz, 2016), this study is not looking specifically at the cultural background that leads to their preferences. Likewise, Narrative

Inquiry was not chosen, because as Anderson et al. (2014) described that it looks at a small number of participants and explores in detail a specific life experience. Narrative inquiry examines social phenomenon through the collection and analysis of stories. In addition, the Grounded theory contributes to the understanding of social problems through the collection of data from field research to formulate a theory (Lo, 2016). This study also did not seek to develop a new theory because of the inquiry; therefore, Grounded theory was not chosen.

Tumele (2015) described the single case study as one that examines an individual case or contemporary phenomenon and used for analytic generalization of a study. When questioning the *how* or *why* experiences occur and exploring the answers to these questions, case study research is a valid method of investigating the phenomenon (Aczel, 2015; Tetnowski, 2015). Further, Aczel (2015) explained that case study research as an empirical exploration into a case within a phenomenon through the context of real world observations. Therefore, building on basic research method, a qualitative exploratory single case study design was chosen, rather than quantitative or other qualitative options, to explore the assignment preferences of online assignments in a group that were millennials in an RN-BSN program at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois.

Hancock and Algozzine (2016) suggested that a case study is a broad category of analysis in qualitative research that examines an individual representation of a group. All qualitative research methods look at a specific group or a phenomenon; however, case study research is the in-depth study of a case of that group or phenomenon in its natural context or setting. Case study research is also highly descriptive because data can be

mined from varied sources such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and document reviews. Yin (2016) described a case study as a way of getting close to the subject of interest through interviews or observations that will gain knowledge that will allow elaboration and generalization of the subject. Further, a case study is useful in empirical research due to its powerful ability to explain real-life situations (Cronin, 2014). In this study, the group was millennial online bachelor's degree nurses and how they prefer to learn online. Boton and Gregory (2015) explained that case study research is a way to not only determine preferences of learners, but also to explore the participants' point of view.

Data for this case study was collected through three different methods following AQR and IRB approval. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews with millennial online nursing students, followed by member checking. Next, classroom direct observations in three online nursing courses. The courses observed ended in May of 2017 and course archives reviewed in June 2017 at the university during the spring semester. The courses observed and activities, assignments, and faculty/student communication reviewed. The course faculty also was utilized to share further information that was not obvious in the archive, such as specific emails, and to clarify any questions. Further, perspectives were reached through document reviews of the RN-BSN program such as syllabus, required coursework, and program requirements that achieved triangulation. Denzin (2012) noted different methods of triangulation; a) investigator triangulation to compare the relationship of many investigators; b) data triangulation to compare the relationship of people, time, and space; c) theory triangulation for comparing the relationship of many different theoretical strategies; and d) methodological triangulation for comparing the relationship of data collected from multiple methods. In addition, the study employed

methodological triangulation. Fusch et al. (2017) posited that this method adds depth to the data collected.

Semi-structured interviews are described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as consisting of questions that have a specific purpose and hope to derive desired information to answer the research questions. However, when using semi-structured interviews with pre-determined questions to guide the discussion, the questions are flexible and do not have to follow a certain wording or order. This type of structure allowed the researcher to deviate from scripted questions and respond to new ideas that came from the dialogue with the participant. Semi-structured interviews followed up with review of three course archives at the university during the spring semester. The courses viewed to examine learning activities and assignments utilized in the RN-BSN online classroom. Further examination was then completed through document reviews of the RN-BSN program such as syllabus, required coursework, and program requirements that demonstrated methodological triangulation.

Babbie (2013) described a population as a group that one is interested in generalizing. The population for this study was millennial nursing students enrolled in online RN-BSN programs in the Midwest, with the target population or sampling frame being students that met the eligibility criteria at one university in the Midwest. A sampling frame is a list or quasi-list of units composing a population from that sample is selected (Babbie, 2013). A sampling frame to identify students who met eligibility criteria was employed and an invitation through email extended.

The opportunity to participate in interviews was extended through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is the act of deliberately choosing a sample with the goal

of identifying the group that represents a specific group and garner the most relevant data (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participant selection should be well thought out with a specific purpose to answer the research questions in qualitative theory (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). Palinkas et al. (2015) further explained that the goal of purposive sampling is selecting participants who can specifically give the most relevant and rich data to the study. In this study, achievement of purposive sampling was reached by offering participation to students who met eligibility criteria related to this study. The eligibility criteria for students to participate in the study were that they were born between the years of 1982-2000, have taken at least one previous online course, and enrolled in the enrolled in the RN-BSN program at the university approved for this study in the Spring semester 2017. Invitation to participate in the study was first extended to students who met the eligibility criteria, and had taken more than three nursing courses in the case study unit. It was intended to extend an invitation to others until the number of participants to be interviewed or saturation was achieved. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 of the 11 participants previously enrolled in three or more nursing courses in the program of study. The intent of first selecting participants who had taken three or more online nursing courses was to yield more relevant and rich data. At the time email invitations were sent, the target population in the unit of study consisted of approximately 19 students enrolled in the online RN-BSN program in the spring semester 2017.

The three data collection procedures that were utilized in the study were semi-structured interviews, classroom direct observations, and document reviews. The purpose of using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions was to better understand

the students' experience, as well as allowing the researcher to interpret the experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized. Characteristics of semi-structured interviews are as follows:

1. The interviewer and respondents engaged in a formal interview in that they had a scheduled time to sit and speak with each other, and both parties recognized this to be an interview.
2. The interviewer had a clear plan in mind regarding the focus and goal of the interview. This guided the discussion.
3. There was a semi-structured interview guide. The interviewer built a rapport with respondents, getting respondents to open-up and express themselves in their own way.
4. Questions were open-ended and expressed little control over informant's responses (Yin, 2016).

The three data sources that were explored, semi-structured interviews, classroom direct observation, and course and program document reviews, were utilized to demonstrate methodological triangulation. Interview questions developed were similar to a structured interview concept, but the interviewer allowed the participant to elaborate on the questions that then resembled an unstructured interview technique. Participants were asked to elaborate on their preferences for activities and assignments in relation to learning, and follow-up questions were guided by a list of common assignments used in online coursework to gather further information on the participants' past online experiences. Interviewing gives the researcher more depth and understanding of an experience than a survey (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Permission to collect data at the case study unit was obtained. A review of archived nursing courses, offered in the spring semester in the online RN-BSN program was reviewed for assignments. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that observations of the natural setting allow the researcher to

experience the phenomenon being explored. Reviewing assignments allowed the researcher to verify assignments in the RN-BSN classroom, but through experiencing the course through the eyes of the student, a sense of how participation in these activities and assignments promote learning was gained. Initially, Community Health Nursing and Nursing Research courses were to be observed; however, an additional course, Professional Nursing Seminar, was offered in the spring 2017 semester and viewed as well.

Program documents from the case study unit were also reviewed and analyzed for information related to online activities and assignments. Documents such as program requirements and course syllabi were viewed to identify the expected objectives of the program and course to determine if assignments and activities were being utilized as expected. Reviewing and analyzing these documents gave the researcher a picture of how students expected to learn through activities and assignments in the program and courses that they were enrolled.

Definition of Terms

Exploring preferences in online education requires a clear understanding of the communication technology and the terms used to describe delivery methods used. The following definitions may have different meanings in different contexts; however, the following definitions applied to this research study. The terms will be further elaborated on and discussed in Chapter 2. The following terms were used in this study:

Asynchronous learning. Asynchronous online learning comprises course components supplied by the instructor that may be accessed and completed by students at different times (Cosco, 2015; Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014; McDaniels, Pfund, & Barnicle,

2016). This delivery method often includes lectures, discussion boards, videos, tests, and other assignments be completed in a certain timeframe. This allows for correspondence between the teacher and students without meeting at a predetermined time (Major, 2015).

Blended learning. Blended learning or hybrid learning is defined as a course in a college or university that offers a course that blends online instruction through a learning management system, as well as traditional face-to-face classes within the same course (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

Case studies. Case studies are learning activities in which scenarios are presented to students that help them to prepare for the clinical setting and help to transition classroom learning to hands-on clinical learning. Students utilize their knowledge to work through scenarios presented in the case study (Billings & Halstead, 2016).

Clinical practice courses. Clinical practice courses take place in different healthcare settings such as hospitals, nursing homes, and community health settings. In this setting, nursing students combine the learned classroom knowledge and hands-on nursing skills and apply these into the practice of the roles and responsibilities of a nurse. They have opportunities to care for clients in the healthcare setting with the guidance of clinical nursing instructors and nurses at the healthcare facilities that they are assigned (Billings & Halstead, 2016).

Coding. Coding is an organized process in which the researcher or data collector recognizes patterns in data and in turn, assigns a word or short phrase to identify the meaning of certain recurring information of the text (Yin, 2016). This task involves putting data in categories and assigns themes to information in order to more easily analyze and interpret the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Course management systems. Course Management System (CMS) or Learning Management System (LMS) are terms for software application purchased by the college or university offering the online course. These systems supply the faculty and students a central hub or platform to deliver the course materials. Some examples of such learning software available are Blackboard, Desire2Learn, Moodle, and Canvas (Major, 2015).

Critical thinking. Critical thinking is a term used in nursing education that describes a way solving clinical problems by using knowledge regarding the subject matter related to the problem, as well as using necessary skills to use and manipulate the knowledge to solve the problem (Billings & Halstead, 2016). Caputi (2016) described critical thinking in nursing as encompassing other terms such as nursing judgment, clinical judgment, and clinical reasoning.

Distance education. Distance education or Distance learning is a way to formally deliver education when students and teachers are physically separated (Major, 2015). Also, described as extending learning away from the traditional classroom in various ways such as video, audio, computer, and continues to evolve as technologies advance (Crews & Neill, 2014).

Learning activities and assignments. Teaching pedagogy and strategies are a way to promote learning in the higher education classroom whether it be online or face-to-face (Chang et al., 2015; Simonds & Brock, 2014; Suell & Whitsett, 2013). The terms activities and assignments represent the numerous strategies that can be used by and instructor to promote learning in the classroom. Potential examples of such activities and assignments are lectures, paper writing, group work, case studies, and tests (Simonds & Brock, 2014; Tomos et al., 2013).

Millennial. Millennial is the term used to describe a cohort of people who were born between the years of 1982 and 2000 for this study. The literature reviewed did not agree on exact dates of this cohort, with birth years ranging from the late 1970s to early 2000s (Crappell, 2012; Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Rickes, 2009).

Online RN-BSN nursing program. An RN who has obtained an Associate Degree or Diploma in Nursing and has successfully passed the licensure exam to be an (RN), can continue their education. The next degree allowed to obtain in the nursing profession is the BSN (Zerwekh & Zerwekh-Garneau, 2012). Completion of the BSN is offered at the university level in the United States and includes further knowledge in management and leadership, health promotion of communities, and nurse scientist role (Conner & Thielemann, 2013). Although there are face-to-face RN-BSN programs offered, this study's research focused on online RN-BSN completion programs.

Pedagogy. Pedagogy is a term that describes the different strategies that help to guide a teacher in delivering course materials (Serdyukov, 2015).

Simulation. Simulation in nursing education is used to replicate the clinical setting. It utilizes mannequins and mock healthcare settings to give students the opportunity to practice and refine clinical skills and situations (Billings & Halstead, 2016).

Synchronous learning. Synchronous online learning comprises of course components or sessions that students and instructors are required to be online at the same time to access the material and the students participate in a class in "real time." This delivery method often includes lectures, discussions, and presentations (Cosco, 2015; Major, 2015; McDaniels et al., 2016; Olson & McCracken, 2015).

Traditional face-to-face learning. Traditional face-to-face learning takes place in a classroom or other designated place where the instructor delivers the course materials to the students in real time (McDaniels et al., 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Assumptions. The construction of this single case study focused on the following assumptions:

1. It was assumed that students know and can articulate their opinion regarding their preferences in activities and assignments in online courses and were truthful and honest. Since qualitative methodology involves studying the means of people's lives that exist in a unique group with unique characteristics in their natural environment (Unicomb, Colyvas, Harrison, & Hewat, 2015), it was assumed this research methodology would capture students in an RN-BSN program prospective regarding preferences for activities and assignments. It was assumed regarding preferences for activities and assignments. It was assumed that the use of inductive semi-structured interviews would provide subjective evidence of preferences within the unique group being studied and answer the research questions.
2. The students who participated in the study did so openly and honestly based on their past and current experience, and was assumed that the student's backgrounds and experiences shape their interpretation and meanings of the world. Schell and Janicki (2013) argued that students make sense of information and construct new knowledge from past experience making constructivist learning theory appropriate in studies with students that have an existing level of higher education.
3. Literature noted that different student populations have different preferences based on their past experiences (Kantar, 2014; Yoo & Huang, 2013), and the intent of the study assumed that those preferences would be identified. Further, it was assumed that millennial nursing students in an online RN-BSN nursing program have unique preferences that are different from other age groups seeking to complete their bachelor's degree in nursing online.

These assumptions were used to encourage students to share openly their thoughts and feelings regarding their preferences, as well as their past and current experiences. It was recognized that students' perspectives may be influenced by vague memories and opinions. Lastly, there was an adequate number of students

available to participate in the study, and it was the assumption that the sample of millennial nursing students in this study represents the millennial RN-BSN population.

Limitations. The following is a list of potential limitations that were considered to potentially influence or impact the interpretation of the findings of the study. It was anticipated that the following limitations may be present in this study:

1. It was not possible to conduct all interviews through a face-to-face meeting since students are online and may not live close to the university; therefore, telephone and video conferencing were possible alternative options. The inability to identify body language and facial expression may present a limitation to the interview process.
2. Qualitative data may be subject to alternate interpretations (Hatch, 2002). The researcher was aware of the complex nature of the qualitative research design and understood that interview data is based on personal experience and opinions of the participants; therefore, it is essential to be objective and systematically analyze each interview, in the same manner, to identify meanings in the responses.
3. The study used a small sample of nursing students enrolled in an online RN-BSN program in the Illinois. The sample size and the uniqueness of the program, offering live virtual lectures, may alleviate the study findings from being transferred (Fusch et al., 2017) to all millennial RN-BSN students.
4. Participants of the study may have had the instructor in past or for future coursework. This could potentially lead to respondent bias and students may feel that they cannot be as open or candid with the researcher due to the student-professor relationship in the classroom and may feel that they would be penalized if they are honest. In addition, Turner and Thompson (2014) noted that conducting research at your place of employment could potentially lead to a bias of the researcher due to the deep understanding of the culture of the organization.
5. Students know and can articulate their opinion regarding their preferences in activities and assignments in online courses and were truthful and honest.
6. The interview candidates available were dependent on the age of students enrolled in the programs at the time of research and affected the sample size. Also, not all available course offerings in the program are offered every semester; therefore, the study was limited to the courses offered during the research period.

7. The data gathered from semi-structured interviews reflected subjective student self-report and was not a reflection of actual validation assessment of student learning.

Delimitations. The following are the delimitations for this study:

1. This study was confined to one research site, is bounded in time and space (Fusch et al., 2017) that makes it much easier to saturate the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015).
2. A delimiting factor may be that nursing profession is predominately female; therefore, it does not provide a cross-representation of gender.
3. A lack of representation from other generations in the same program may be a delimiting factor.

Summary and Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Rapidly changing science and technology have placed more demands on nurses than ever before forcing nursing education curriculums to be evaluated and changed to meet the needs of the profession (AACN, 2015a). With the growing group of millennial nursing students dominating nursing programs and the current workforce, it is imperative that their preferences be identified to improve teaching and learning (Goodman, 2016; Robb, 2016). This generation has only known a world of technology and the literature reviewed identified gaps where there was a need for further research that identifies specific preferences of the millennial generation and online learning (Robb, 2016; Simonds & Brock, 2014; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015).

Interaction online is critical to the promotion of student learning, with instructional delivery methods being a key piece (Chang et al., 2015; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). The literature reviewed showed that the millennial generation has distinct differences that set them apart from the generations that came before them (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; DeVaney, 2015). A further review found that students in different age cohorts also have distinct preferences in teaching and learning (Crews & Neill, 2014;

Smith, 2013; Suell & Whitsett, 2013). Currently, in the year 2017, millennials are the largest group of nursing students, and technology has allowed for the growth of online RN-BSN completion programs. In addition, the IOM's recommendation to increase the number of bachelor's prepared nurses by the year 2020 (AACN, 2015c) identified a need to improve student retention and learning in online nursing programs (Gazza & Hunker, 2014). This knowledge led to the emergence of the following research questions: 1) How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs; 2) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs; and 3) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Based on the Constructivist Learning Theory that the student builds new knowledge from prior experience (Kantar, 2014), it is not known what this group of students' previous experience is that can be best used to gain new learning. It is also not known what learning activities and assignments are preferred by millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN nursing programs to improve learning and those that hinder learning. The findings provided guidance for the choice of qualitative methodology and specifically case-study research that allowed the researcher to further explore and uncover the preferences of this unique group to promote learning.

Chapter one provided a brief background of the study, problem statement, significance to nursing education and the profession, and the nature of the study. A discussion of how methodological triangulation was demonstrated in the study was included. This was completed through review and analysis of data collected from in-

depth semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observation, and program document reviews. The chapter also highlighted the research questions and linked theoretical framework. The chapter concluded with a definition of terms, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Chapter two includes a literature review of current research including definition and history of nursing education and nursing program options, traditional and online course activities and assignments, delivery methods for online learning, prominent millennial generation characteristics, discussion of millennials and technology, as well as millennials preferences in communication. Chapter three follows, and contains the methodology, research design, and procedures chosen for this study. The data collection techniques and the triangulation of the data for validity is also provided. Chapter four includes the results of the data collected and analyzed in this study and provided the reader with both written and graphic results of the study findings. Finally, chapter five contains the interpretation and conclusion of the results generated from the contextual experiences of the study participants and how the findings relate to the existing body of research related to the dissertation topic.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Chapter and Background to the Problem

Chapter two presents a theoretical foundation for the study that focuses on Constructivism Learning Theory and Social Constructivism that provided the framework for the study. In 2015, it was reported that there were over two million RNs employed in the United States with an anticipated rise in the nursing workforce to over three million in practice by the year 2022 (Aller, 2017). The need for more nurses and the IOM's recommendation to advance the level of education within the nursing profession to 80% or more holding a bachelor's degree in nursing by the year 2020 (Goodman, 2016) has propelled the need for RN-BSN programs to provide engaging curricular components that facilitate academic success (Conner & Thielemann, 2013). Aller (2017) noted that more than 47,000 RNs were returning to the classroom to complete a BSN, and most of the nursing classrooms, both face-to-face and online, are millennial generation students (Robb, 2016; Suh & Hargis, 2016).

The literature review begins with an examination of historical and current perspectives on nursing education, both traditional and online. Next, the review provides an in-depth discussion of characteristics of the millennial generation of learners and the generation as a group including shared life experiences. Instructional delivery methods commonly used in higher education today, as well as, common activities and assignments used were reviewed. This is followed by a review of key themes found in the literature and studies reviewed that include an in-depth examination of themes that have emerged in recent research. Finally, there is a discussion of methods and instrumentation found in

the publications surveyed and how those findings exemplified current practices utilized in higher education classrooms.

The literature reviewed found the nursing education classroom is complex, including multi-generational cohorts, that produce challenges for teaching and learning (Hampton & Pearce, 2016; Toothaker, 2014). Existing empirical research has demonstrated a need to understand the biggest cohort currently filling the classrooms in higher education (Toothaker & Taliferro, 2017). There was a gap identified during the literature review regarding millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments in online RN-BSN nursing programs (Montenery et al., 2013; Robb, 2013). Engagement with the millennial generation and their academic success can be directly related to the mismatch of methods used by faculty to teach this group and that research in this area was lacking. New technologies and their use in the delivery of curriculum can enhance learning for millennial students, but there is not enough empirical evidence to direct the need curricular changes (Montenery et al., 2013). A further gap in the research was noted by Simonds and Brock (2014) and Therrell and Dunneback (2015) that found that as traditional campus-based programs move online, and the millennial generation dominates the higher education classrooms, research is needed to determine and understand the preferences of the millennial generation.

Phillips and Trainor (2014) posited that there is a growing body of research on the educational preferences of the millennial generation and the need for educators understand this group of learners to educate them effectively; however, Simonds and Brock (2014) conducted a study that sought to identify the best way for students to learn online, and it was found that different age groups responded differently when asked

preferences in online learning. Although the study was quantitative in nature, the findings suggested that future studies were needed to identify other specific cohorts and their needs. Robinson and Stubberud (2012) and Chang et al. (2015) noted that given the rate of change in technology, preferences of students should be researched to develop online methods. Huss and Eastep (2013) conducted a mixed methods study and surveyed 1,085 students (half were millennials) regarding their preferences in online learning activities and communication, and identified that students had distinct preferences in online activities in the group who were studied. Recommendations of the study were to further research specific student populations. The following paragraphs will address historical background of nursing education, discuss the millennial generation of students, and describe and explain themes found in the most recent research related to the topic of study.

Research Sources and Strategy

The sources of literature used in this review were peer-reviewed journals regarding the millennial generation, online student learning preferences, and nursing education. Most of the references used in this study were in the last five years. Any sources used that were over five years were chosen to establish seminal research on the millennial generation and their preferences. The initial research strategy was to search journals in the Grand Canyon University library using all potential academic journals. Eastern Illinois University's Booth library was also utilized for online journal searches, as well as the physical library at Eastern Illinois University; books and journal articles were loaned and utilized from this source. Databases utilized in searches were CINAHL Complete, ERIC, EBSCOhost, Ovid, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Book searches using

key words were completed on Amazon.com. The researcher also utilized Google Scholar with continued searches of the terms, *nursing education, millennials and online education, millennials and online preferences, online learning, and online communication* searches were established to continually deliver new articles to a designated email for review of relevance to the study. Finally, the search engine Google was used to conduct broad searches of literature that may have been missed in library searches. The searches provided the literature for this review.

Conceptual Framework

Researchers in the literature have identified that technology has grown at an amazing rate over the last few years that has changed the traditional delivery of higher education and has allowed learning to occur without the restriction of time or space, moving a large number of traditional face-to-face classes online (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Huss & Eastep, 2013). This change in educational delivery has influenced the growth of online RN-BSN programs to allow an RN with a two-year ADN to advance their degree with flexible online classes, and still be able to work in their chosen field (AACN, 2015c; Conner & Thielemann, 2013). This and the knowledge that currently, the majority of the population in the United States are millennials (Fry, 2016), as well as nursing students filling seats in nursing programs (AACN, 2015c) has initiated the need to identify preferences of student learning activities of this specific group. Drouin et al. (2013) argued that with so many online pedagogical activity options, it is important to identify the preferences for student learning in regard to these activities.

In an attempt to identify these preferences, Constructivism Learning Theory has been chosen to guide this study. Constructivism Learning Theory is based on the idea that

people construct their own knowledge through their personal experience (Al-Huneidi & Schreurs, 2012, p. 4). Constructivist Learning Theory was born from the field of education and draws from the developmental theories of Kelly in 1991 and Piaget in 1977. Hunter and Krantz (2010) discussed Piaget's suggestion that students create new knowledge and create frameworks that build on from previous experiences. In this theory, learners gain new knowledge from the basis of previous knowledge and life experiences. Through these different experiences, students assume different meaning and value that is then applied to their learning (Hunter & Krantz, 2010). Teachers operating under this paradigm believe that they may construct new knowledge by building on what they already know. The IOM and Carnegie Foundation posited that it is imperative that students moving from an ADN program to a BSN program need seamless transition (AACN, 2015b; Caputi, 2016).

Educators utilizing the constructivist framework seek to build curriculums and assignments that build on previous experience and alleviate circumstances where students are repeating previously learned knowledge. The aim is to construct new knowledge through the understanding of what knowledge the students bring to the program (Legg et al., 2009; Schell & Janicki, 2013). Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, built further on Piaget's Constructivism theory by developing the Social Constructivism theory that suggested that learning is highly dependent on cultural, social, and individual interactions (Bryant & Bates, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) believed that social interaction had a significant influence on cognitive development, and learning was highly dependent on these interactions because individuals were inseparable from them.

Major (2015) expanded on the ideas of Constructivism in that learning could be mediated by technology tools and that learners interacted with technology and each other. Major dubs this as “Socio-technical Constructivism,” and that learners simultaneously constructed knowledge using themselves or past experience, social interaction, and their tools, or technology. Using a Social Constructivism view emphasized the nature and role of the interaction, as well as the theoretical foundation that guided the choice of pedagogy utilized in delivering course material (Bryant & Bates, 2015), and for this reason was used to guide this study. Social Constructivist Theory is guided by the belief that learners construct new knowledge from old through experience, collaboration, and online pedagogy (Bryant & Bates, 2015; Schell & Janicki, 2013). Zucca (2014) and Yoo and Huang (2013) suggested that today’s adult professional students do not come to the classroom with no knowledge and a need for the teacher to give them the knowledge, but come as a diverse group with much-acquired knowledge and skills.

The study was conducted to identify preferences for online activities and assignments in online RN-BSN classes that millennial nursing students prefer, and identify as a hindrance to their learning. This was guided using the Constructivist and Social Constructivist framework by exploration of the participants’ previous experience. Constructivists believe that new learning is built from the context of previously acquired learning and allows the student to construct new knowledge that is transferable into the nursing workplace (Hampton & Pearce, 2016; Kantar, 2014). Kantar (2014) argued that student learning required conscious and voluntary involvement to engage in the process of activating their interests, needs, and desires. Therefore, identifying prior knowledge and incorporating social collaboration can develop new learning constructs.

Hampton and Pearce (2016) believed that utilizing constructivist learning methods had the potential to promote learning outcomes that resulted in higher quality nursing practice. This study intended to explore the preferences of ways to learn based on past experiences and preferences of students to learn and collaborate through online activities and assignments. This study specifically answered the questions, 1) How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs; 2) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs; and 3) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Challenges in the online classroom can arise when students of all different ages and technological experience come together to learn. Schell and Janicki (2013) argued that researchers studying students with an existing level of education can best be explored using the Constructivist model of learning. Students come to RN-BSN completion programs with substantial knowledge and experience, and this study intended to expand the body of literature regarding the use of the Constructivism framework in nursing education. Hampton and Pearce (2016) indicated that Constructivist Learning methods in nursing education could be useful to improve learning outcomes, but identified a need for further studies that support the effectiveness of constructive learning methods in nursing education. This study contributed to this gap in the literature, as well as building on the conceptual framework of Constructivism by identifying the preferences of millennial nursing students, exploring their prior experiences in online learning, and identifying the assignments and activities that might hinder learning. This new knowledge contributes

support to the theory of constructivism in relation to the specific cohort of millennial online nursing students.

Review of the Literature

Phenomena. This study focused on the importance of understanding learning activities and assignment preferences of millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN nursing programs. Also, this study focused on assignments and activities that were perceived to hinder learning. In a study conducted by Woods et al. (2011), it was found that millennial learners brought a unique set of characteristics to higher education such as academic skills and personal preferences that were different from previous generations leading to the necessity of faculty to move away from traditional didactic strategies. Schell and Janicki (2013) suggested that faculty should disregard old and outdated teaching strategies using the constructivist model that constructed new knowledge and process material using the technological preferences that they were accustomed to in their everyday life.

Currently, the ADN prepared nurse is the most common degree of nursing education in the United States (Conner & Thielemann, 2013). With the high demand for continuing education in nursing and bachelor degree prepared nurses, to fill leadership positions, many RN-BSN completion programs are available; however, it is critical to identify the needs of nursing students moving from ground programs to online completion programs. Boton and Gregory (2015) stated that the millennial generation has always had access to the use of computers and the internet, and this has impacted the way they communicate and learn. Boton and Gregory found that retaining students in online

courses directly related to several things with one being the utilization of constructivism and preferred online pedagogies.

Nursing education. This section of the literature review will describe the most current trends in nursing education, as well as provide the reader with an understanding of the different paths to becoming an RN. There are three different paths to becoming a nurse: 1) three-year diploma program typically administered in hospitals; 2) three-year associate degree, that is usually obtained through a community college, and 4) four-year baccalaureate degree that is offered at senior colleges and universities. All three approaches allow the student to sit for the NCLEX-RN licensing exam to become a RN (AACN, 2015d).

A baccalaureate degree encompasses all the coursework included in an associate degree program or a diploma program, as well as additional coursework that prepares the nurse for a broader scope of practice. These include such courses as, research, public health, nursing management, social sciences, professional development, and humanities (AACN, 2015d; Conner & Thielemann, 2013; Zerwekh & Zerwekh-Garneau, 2012). Not only does this degree allow the nurse to obtain research skills, higher level thinking and judgment skills, it positions nurses to continue their education by moving right into graduate education upon completing the degree (Zerwekh & Zerwekh-Garneau, 2012).

A major call for nurses to become more educated has been noted by many nurse organizations in recent years, as well as recommended by the IOM (2011) in a landmark report, *The Future of Nursing*. This was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) who later in 2012 expanded this initiative through an expansion titled, *Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action* (RWJF, 2012). The work of IOM

initiative and campaigns brought about coalitions in every state that are helping to push for higher education for nurses; ultimately, transforming the healthcare system (RWJF, 2012).

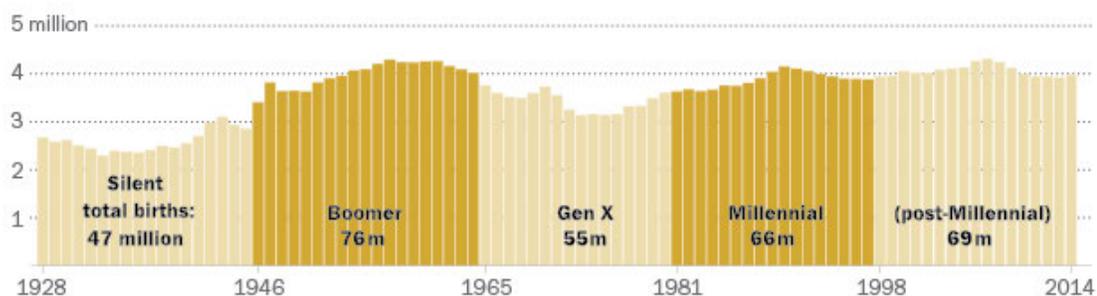
The following discussion presents strong arguments for advancing nursing education to a minimum of a baccalaureate level. One argument by the AACN described the RN as the leader or coordinator of the care of patients in any healthcare setting. In this role, they are members of an interdisciplinary team that includes pharmacists, occupational and physical therapists, and physicians, all of whom must hold a master's degree or higher to practice. Since RNs are the primary care-givers and care coordinators, they should not be the least educated of the healthcare team (AACN, 2015d). Conner and Thielemann (2013) presented scenarios where RNs were working in rural health care where communities were heavily dependent on ADN nurses who autonomously provide care to patients. They argued that research indicated that there were improved patient outcomes when nurses hold a bachelor's degree. Another argument is that ADN nurses are consistently placed in leadership positions without the preparation to be successful. These nurses are lacking the knowledge of leadership concepts, health promotion of communities, research, and foundations in disciplines outside of nursing. Goodman (2016) identified a significant practice-education gap and that less than a baccalaureate degree will not prepare a nurse for today's nursing role, and argued that pursuing a BSN degree can greatly expand a nurse's scope of practice. Further, a BSN degree can be enhancing leadership and management skills, cultural competencies, and potential growth within the nursing profession.

In response to the call to action for more educated nurses, RN-BSN completion programs are growing in the United States. RN-BSN programs are designed for RNs who hold an associate or diploma degree in nursing. These programs typically award credit for coursework previously earned, take approximately one to two years to complete, and include flexible class scheduling that allows the nurse to work while completing the coursework (Zerwekh & Zerwekh-Garneau, 2012). According to the AACN (2015b), there are 679 RN-BSN programs. Plante and Asselin (2014) explained that this option is quite attractive to the nurse who would not otherwise have the opportunity to attend face-to-face classes due to the demands of work and family. Goodman (2016) agreed with Plante and Asselin in that it is a desirable option for the working nurse, and a way to significantly increase the education of the nation's nurse workforce; however, it is imperative that universities evaluate curriculums and work to provide a seamless transition for ADN nurses entering an RN-BSN completion program.

Millennials. This section will define and describe the generation that this study was based. This generation was often referred to by many names, such as “millennials”, “Next Generation”, “Generation Y”, or “Y”. Although exact years may differ slightly, the current traditional-aged students include the millennial group who are described as the generation being born between 1982 and 2002 (Billings & Halstead, 2016; Rickes, 2009), and Fry (2016) described this group as being born between 1981 and 1997, are the largest living generation in America today.

Births Underlying Each Generation

Number of U.S. births by year and generation



Source: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services National Center for Health Statistics

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Figure 1. Births by year and generation.

This generation is defined not only by their age but shared experiences and events that helped to shape their attitudes and behaviors (DeVaney, 2015). An early event that made an impact was the September 11 terrorist attacks followed by the continued participation in wars on foreign soil. The introduction of the global economy and the subsequent weakening of the economy was also another strong influence (DeVaney, 2015; Roberts, Newman, & Schwartzstein, 2012). A major trait that sets this generation apart from all other generations is its diversity and acceptance of diversity, being more diverse than any other generation (Billings & Halstead, 2016; Crappell, 2012; DeVaney, 2015; Kotz, 2016; Rickes, 2009; Roberts et al., 2012). Kotz (2016) indicated that millennials have grown up in a culture where there are many different religions, races, and ethnicities. Incidentally, this makes tolerance and respect for others' differences, as well as civility in the classroom, highly valued to this group.

Educationally, this group is the most educated American generation (DeVaney, 2015). They know of no time without an internet, but they have also experienced the

introduction of online education and its continued weaving into the landscape of higher education with no signs of stopping (Roberts et al., 2012). Millennials are comfortable with this delivery of information due to their deep understanding of technology. This group was often referred to as “technologically savvy,” or more easily, “tech savvy” (Billings & Halstead, 2016; DeVaney, 2015; Pardue & Morgan, 2008; Roberts et al., 2012).

It is clear through research that millennials are the first generation to have a complete and intimate relationship with technology. Two icons of the millennial lifestyle, cell phones, and online social networks, also grew up alongside the generation (Devaney, 2015; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Millennials, defined as spanning the birth years of 1982-2000 by most authors, have been entering college and the workforce since 2004 and will continue to do so until 2020. There is substantial evidence that leaders and educators should capitalize on this group’s technological prowess. Dixon, Mercado, and Knowles (2013) found that generation Y (millennials) expect peers and managers to keep up with cutting edge technology (p. 63). It would be in the educator’s best interest to meet these students where they are, bringing them the information in the way that they are used to receiving it (Balda & Mora, 2011; Farrell & Hurt, 2014; Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Montenery et al., 2013).

Millennial digital natives and digital immigrants. This section of the literature review was intended to further help the reader to understand the millennial generation’s relationship to technology and compare this generation to other generations. Many authors described this generation as “digital natives” (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; Balda & Mora, 2011; DeVaney, 2015; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Woods et al., 2011). The term

digital native was used to describe the millennial generation because, as previously discussed, they have been using technology their entire lives. They do not know the world without technology and this characteristic sets them apart from every other generation in college and the workforce today. Other generations were described using the term digital immigrants, as they may be proficient in the use of technology; however, it was not something that they were exposed to at an early age. With this knowledge in mind, it is a concern that many nursing educators today feel that the same lecture that worked for generations that preceded the millennial generation will continue to work. Not only do nurse educators need to consider this fact when determining the best practices for the college classroom, but all college educators. There is a legitimate reason to believe that adjustments are needed in the delivery of content that includes technology (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Montenery et al., 2013). This emphasis can only help to promote new nurse's success in a career that utilizes technology in every aspect of patient care. Crappell (2012) explained that this is a benefit to companies, as this generation possesses unequaled ability to be connected.

Instructional delivery. The following section contains a discussion of the evolution of traditional to online instructional delivery found in the research. Instructional delivery of coursework in higher education that has been traditionally face-to-face in a meeting place such as the classroom has changed over the past several years with the advent of correspondence studies or distance education, or distance learning to the internet, and many advances in technologies (Major, 2015). Marmon et al. (2014) indicated that United States colleges and universities are adding more online courses every day, adding more opportunity and flexibility for people to attend college. It is also

noted that currently there are three modes of course delivery in higher education, face-to-face where the class meets in a designated place and time on a regular schedule, hybrid courses that incorporate some face-to-face and some course instruction online, and then courses delivered solely online through a learning management platform (Marmon et al., 2014). Major (2015) described the importance of technological tools in the delivery of online instruction in that technology mediation has educational consequences, and should not be thought of as simply the place that it takes place, but as the medium for learning.

Instructional methods were defined by Jorczak and Dupuis (2014) as procedures and techniques intended to promote learning of specified outcomes. These methods are comprised of three functions: (1) presentation of information, (2) specification of learning activities, and (3) assessment. Learning activities are ways to present knowledge to students to assist them in meeting the learning objectives of the course. Instructional environments may consist of: (a) online, (b) face-to-face, or (c) hybrid. All environments use similar methods (Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014). This study was intended to determine the preferred activities and assignments of millennial RN-BSN nursing students in the online learning environment and those that hinder learning.

In an attempt to fill a perceived gap in the literature, a study by Kotz (2016) examined classroom preferences of young millennials ages 15-16, and although the classroom was not online, some themes emerged that helped to define and address the needs of this generation. The study asked 63 high school students in the Midwest three survey questions about their classroom experience. These were, “What could we as teachers do differently to make students’ experience better in the classroom?” “What other tools do students need to be successful in the classroom?” and “What could I

personally do better as a teacher?" The results of the article focused specifically on the first two questions. Kotz (2016) found that this group preferred learning activities that related topics to real world issues and topics that interested them, and they wanted the activities to be fun and include technology. Also, it was found that it was important for students to see the assignment as relevant. They also preferred to work and collaborate in small groups or learning communities versus large groups. Finally, the group valued convenience, with all necessary tools and equipment readily available. Kotz recommended continued studies in different educational settings to determine the specific needs of this age group of students.

Online education continues to grow and changes higher education with online education being a large piece of current strategic planning at colleges and universities (Harris & Martin, 2012; Tichavsky, Hunt, Driscoll, & Jicha, 2015). Students have perceived ideas of and perceptions of online learning through experience or perceptions, and considering these can help instructors to build effective online learning environments (Tichavsky et al., 2015). With this in mind, there are many online activities used in the online environment.

There remains in the literature some uncertainty regarding the choosing of an online course and comparison of activities comparing the preference for online versus face-to-face courses. Tichavsky et al. (2015) found that the students ultimately preferred face-to-face classes because they perceived that there would be less communication and interaction in an online environment. The result of these findings suggested that perceptions be considered when designing activities in an online course.

Traditional and online nursing course activities. This section of the literature review is to familiarize the reader with the different prominent activities used in the traditional and online nursing classroom. Specific pedagogies introduced and the research regarding them discussed. Learning in nursing education has traditionally occurred in the face-to-face classroom (Horsfall, Cleary, & Hunt, 2012). The most common pedagogy used in all higher education classrooms has been passive learning that takes place during a lecture from the instructor where students sit in a classroom and listen with very little interaction. This has been described as the teacher-centered model where it is assumed that the teacher has all the information and will provide it to the students (Billings & Halstead, 2016; Schacter & Szpunar, 2015). Horsfall et al. (2012) described this pedagogy as emphasizing student recall of concrete, technical and measurable information, and outcomes. Other common pedagogies found in the traditional face-to-face nursing classroom are multiple choice testing, case study, simulations, and group work.

Traditional classrooms have students listening to the teacher lecture, completing assignments, and taking tests. This delivery of knowledge was based on the idea of memorization (Rotellar & Cain, 2016). Rotellar and Cain explained that not only does memorization decrease the likelihood that a student can apply what they have learned in the clinical setting, but also it allows the student to come to class unprepared and keeps the accountability for learning with the instructor rather than the student. Introducing new pedagogies and active learning activities into curriculums can shift the responsibility for learning to the student, and help students to prepare for highly demanding work environments (Carr, 2014; Crookes, Crookes, & Walsh, 2014; Rotellar & Cain, 2016).

In recent years, much contemporary pedagogy has been developed and found their way to the nursing classroom (Horsfall et al., 2012). New classroom pedagogies have changed the face-to-face classes function, although lecture is still a mainstay of higher educational classrooms. These new pedagogies have made way for a more student-centered approach where learning happens through active interaction with the teacher, as well as other students (Billings & Halstead, 2016; Horsfall et al., 2012). Chang et al. (2015) indicated that active student strategies could enhance learning and encourage student involvement from the instructor have been shown to facilitate higher learning outcomes.

Caputi (2016) suggested that pre-licensure nursing students are unfamiliar with nursing and lack even basic nursing knowledge; therefore, they are different from post-licensure nurses who have experience and knowledge in nursing. Careful and meticulous planning of all nursing curriculum must be a priority. Many recent changes such as the nursing and faculty shortage, healthcare reform, and technology create challenges for nursing education and demand a shift in teaching and learning at colleges and universities across the country (Billings & Halstead, 2016). Currently, many higher education courses, as well as nursing courses, continue to move from the face-to-face setting to online course offerings (Adwan, 2016; Drouin et al., 2013; Kim-Godwin & Martinez, 2016; Schacter & Szpunar, 2015).

A review of the literature found research on the different pedagogies could be transferred from the face-to-face classroom to the online setting both in higher education and some studies specifically in nursing education. Simonds and Brock (2013) identified the most common ways to learn in the online classroom and developed a survey to study

these preferences in online courses (See Table 1). The list presented does not include all possible online learning activities, but was used as a guide to discuss the most common strategies used to deliver information to the student online. Some strategies such as email and telephone conversations fall under the discussion of communication. In an attempt to gain insight into strategies employed in online courses that promote learning, Simonds and Brock (2014) used quantitative statistical analysis to find the results. Overall, findings noted that different age of students valued different methods of learning in the online setting, as well as the finding that experience with prior online courses did not play a role in the preferences chosen. This will be discussed further later in the literature review.

Table 1

What Are the Best Ways to Learn in Online Classes?

Different ways to learn in online classes
Live chats led by the instructor (text only)
Live chats led by students (text only)
Live lectures/audio sessions (may include audio, video, text, and discussion)
Watching archived lectures asynchronously
Instructor comments in online discussion boards
Student comments in online discussion boards
Emails from the instructor
Emails from students
Exploring web links/online materials
Viewing pre-recorded video lectures
Listening to pre-recorded audio files
Reading lecture notes
Telephone conversations with the instructor
Telephone conversations with students
Participating in online small group projects
Reading Power Points
Reading course texts and articles

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Lecture in the higher education classroom, whether face-to-face or online, continues to garner a great deal of attention in the research. Serdyukov (2015) explained that online education has been around for quite a few years now, but still does not have its own pedagogy, and online courses continue to be a face-to-face course that was simply placed online. Often, the Power-Point lecture used in the face-to-face classroom was placed online for the student to view in text-only without any narration; it can also be with a voice over from the instructor, a video of the lecture that was given in a face-to-face course, or primitively a text only document of the lecture (Smith, 2013). In a qualitative case study conducted by Olson and McCracken (2015), the researchers compared two classes, one with asynchronous activities and the other with synchronous and asynchronous activities that were a synchronous meeting time with a lecture, the researchers found no significant data to suggest that there was a benefit to adding a synchronous online lecture as it did not promote community within the course or improved learning outcomes.

Group work. A classic teaching methodology that has been used for many years in the traditional face-to-face classroom, the group project, has moved to the online learning environment (Adwan, 2016). Adwan noted that in the virtual world, this type of assignment can be more challenging when students do not know one another, as well as the separation of time and space, and potential delays in communication.

Hickman and Wocial (2013) posited that there has been a paradigm shift occurring in higher education that is moving learning from a passive approach to an active one and encourages actively engaging the learner. Caputi (2016) recommended strategies to engage nursing students online, as well as their taking more of the

accountability for their learning. In an attempt to improve collaboration and student participation in an online nursing research course, a team-based learning (TBL) model that had previously been piloted in a face-to-face nursing course was tried in an online RN-BSN program in a northeastern public university. In this model, students were placed in groups or teams and consisted of group and individual readiness assurance tests to determine student accountability, peer evaluation, PowerPoint lecture followed by multiple-choice tests, mini critiques of research studies, team discussion, and individual research critique paper. At the end of the four courses with TBL implementation, the findings were positive that enhanced engagement and communication were noted, as well as student learning. The findings ultimately found that critical thinking was improved, and this leads to higher quality nursing care. The recommendation was to incorporate similar group work into other classes and to further examine learning outcomes. Adwan (2016) agreed with the concepts that Caputi (2016) described that well thought out group guidelines such as monitoring, managing, enhancing group projects and assignments in a way that ensured successful outcomes rather than frustration were imperative.

Adwan's (2016) study was conducted with the premise that peer evaluation in online group work would improve outcomes. The study used a convenience sample of mostly female students in an undergraduate health informatics course over four semesters. Class sizes ranged in number from 55-75, and random groups of five to six were formed. The students chose the groups to join based on health informatics topics that they were interested. The instrument used was an online self- and peer-evaluation form that was based on the group assignment rubric and consisted of all the activities that the group was expected to perform. Students were asked to evaluate themselves and their

peers following assigned activities. Students were assigned a score and received feedback following each evaluation and high performers were praised. Findings of the study suggested that students had a positive view of the peer feedback and that the feedback process improved participation in students who tended to lag in participation. One finding was that students were unsure if the peer evaluation and feedback helped student engagement within the group. Results were strong enough for recommendation to implement peer evaluation strategies in online group work in order to improve outcomes. Similar support for the use of TBL in nursing ethics was found by Hickman and Wocial (2013) as a way to improve critical thinking and problem solving, and actively engaging the learner. Although Hickman and Wocial (2013) did not do a formal study, they used TBL to teach health ethics to undergraduate nurses for nine semesters. The authors noted through the results of the readiness assurance tests, that students displayed higher moral competence that was the goal of the course, as well as overall higher course evaluation scores.

Contradictory to the literature that favors group work, Russo (2013) found in a study of 204 millennial speech communication students, that they did not prefer group work. In fact, only 24.2 % agreed that they “prefer group work over all other teaching methods,” and 37.8% agreed that they “look forward to opportunities to work on class projects with peers.” Although they did not prefer group work, 83% of students did agree that they “did like the opportunity to hear what other students had to say while participating in group work” (p. 14). Russo explored this particular characteristic found in the literature on millennials because her own experience was not consistent with the literature. Overall, Russo wanted to better understand the current students in this age

group and use the information to improve teaching and learning. Recommendations by Russo were to interview more students in this age group and use open-ended questions to gather data that would provide guidance and support learning in this age group.

Group discussions/discussion boards. The purpose of the discussion board and online chats is to re-create the traditional class discussion in the online classroom (Blackmon, 2012; Hill, 2016). Although discussions can be employed through synchronous means, typically they are utilized in an asynchronous manner that students post messages and responses (Goggins & Xing, 2016; Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014). This type of learning is described as being a benefit to students because responses are not time sensitive in that they can take time to review and rescan information prior to responding that improves knowledge retention and allows all students to participate that is not possible in the traditional classroom discussion (Goggins & Xing, 2016; Hill, 2016; Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014). Skogs (2013) further posited through research that students who tend to shy away from discussions in the face-to-face setting are more active online, and Wen-Yu Lee (2013) noted that online discussion is the most used technology in higher education.

Wen-Yu Lee (2013) suggested that little has been revealed in previous studies about student performance or learning when online discussions are implemented. In an attempt to identify the relationship between students' approaches to learning, perceptions, and contributions to online discussions, and their academic performance, questionnaires were completed by 111 Taiwanese students in an online *Ecology and Human Society* course. The course was designed to include not only discussion forums as an integral part of the course, but also group activities and lectures in a face-to-face setting. The research

instrument consisted of two separate surveys that made up the questionnaire, Approaches to Learning Biology Questionnaire (ALB) and the Perceptions of Asynchronous Online Discussion Questionnaire (PAOD). The study found that students' perceptions did play a role in their number of online messages posted in the course, as well as a good predictor of learning. The results revealed that students' approaches to learning, as well as the perceptions of online discussion, predicted higher academic achievement. Wen-Yu Lee recommended identifying and promoting different perceptions in online course activities to improve learning. Although this study was not conducted in the United States, the results supported the use of discussion boards in higher education as a tool to improve learning achievement.

In a more recent extensive search of the literature, Goggins and Xing (2016) found that students in past studies reported discussion boards as having little value or benefit to learning course content. In an attempt to better understand how students, participate and learn in asynchronous online discussion forums, a quantitative study was performed by Goggins and Xing. In that study behavioral factors, such as participation, collective efficacy, or the student belief that they could accomplish a task successfully, social ability, that is connectedness in the online environment, and environmental factors, such as the functionality of the online system used, were studied. The study consisted of 24 students in an online graduate course in a large Midwestern University. All participants completed all assigned activities and the data consisted of the last two weeks of the course that students worked collaboratively in groups using a discussion board to complete a project. The findings were consistent with prior studies that found learning to be directly related to the amount of time students spent reading and participating in posts

rather than simply the number of posts made by the student. Ultimately, the study found that the number of posts that the student reads had the best predictability for student success in the course; reading time, time delay, and number of posts followed this. The study also found that social ability and collective efficacy impacted time spent reading and responding to posts and found those characteristics to influence student performance. In addition, the study found that system functionality had no impact on student participation or learning. Goggins and Xing recommended more in-depth exploration of the link between participation and learning in asynchronous online discussions, as well as with participants from other disciplines to increase generalizability.

Asynchronous delivery. The two ways of overall delivery of activities and assignments in online education are asynchronous and synchronous. This section will discuss each in detail and with regard to recent research. Synchronicity comprises the major difference in classroom environments (Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014). Learning in a traditional classroom utilizes synchronous presentations and activities that an instructor can recognize issues with an understanding of knowledge presented based on facial expressions or feedback from the class and making changes in real time. Whereas, online courses utilize an asynchronous approach for the majority of the coursework and in some courses, this is the only delivery method (Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014; Smith, 2013). Smith (2013) indicated that this type of delivery offered the most flexibility for both teacher and learner, and allowed learning to occur anywhere and at any time.

In a study by Jorczak and Dupuis (2014), assessment outcomes were compared in a classroom that delivered identical material in a face-to-face class and an online asynchronous class. The study comprised of 104 college students in an introductory

psychology class who were randomly assigned to either an asynchronous online course format or face-to-face meeting with nearly identical material. The study found that online students did statistically significantly better on exams, $t(102) = 3.56, p = .001$. The correlation between exam scores and online discussion participation points was 0.36 ($p = .002$), while the correlation between exam scores and all other (non-discussion) learning activities was 0.37 ($p = .002$). The results suggested that there was a moderate correlation association between discussion, other learning activities and exam performance. The only differences between the two classes were the in-person presentation of course information by the instructor. The research suggested that the ability for online students to have constant access to course information, discussions, and assignments allowed for slower processing, and review ability promoted better learning and better exam results.

Smith (2013) acknowledged that there were many challenges to teaching online versus face-to face; however, benefits such as profitability to the institution, flexibility, and convenience for adult students made it a challenge worth undertaking. Smith also recognized that best practices for face-to-face courses were well established, and it was important to establish best practices for online instruction as well. The goal of Smith's study was to provide guidance for instructors delivering online asynchronous classes. In the study, 80 graduate teacher education students in a Southeastern United States university were given a survey asking their preferences in methods delivered in an asynchronous course. Excluding two outliers, the median age of the student was 23 years of age. The survey asked the students to rate how well they learned with each of five different delivery methods, PowerPoint (or similar) presentation with narration, text-only documents, videos of classroom lectures arranged by topics, PowerPoint presentation (or

similar) without narration, and videos of whole class lectures. The results were that video lectures of discrete topics to be the most preferred by the students in the study (2.75), this was followed by PowerPoint with narration (2.69), PowerPoint with no narration (2.44), and then coming in similar and least preferred, text only documents (2.19) and videos of whole class lectures (2.13). The students also preferred brief, no more than 15.5 minutes per activity and students wanted to see instructors parse the information for clarity. The results of Smith's study were that students had distinct preferences for asynchronous delivery methods, and because online education with asynchronous deliver is only growing, it is pertinent that higher education instructors identify preferences and define best practices for their online courses.

In an attempt to identify the more effective asynchronous method instruction preferred by online students, Suell and Whitsett (2013) surveyed 93 participants following an online course to determine their preferences. The study specifically examined the methods used in the course. These were PowerPoint with voice over, discussion boards, video lectures with closed captioning, and tests/quizzes. The article did not acknowledge the age of the participants, but 35 were undergraduate and 58 were graduate students in the college of education. The participants were asked to rate each method in the order that they found it to be most effective. The results of the study found that discussion boards, that were also the only active learning activity, were significantly most rated. It was noted that only four out of ninety-three students did not like discussion boards. Therefore, the researchers concluded that activities that promoted collaboration and active learning be incorporated into online courses. A similar study by Kim-Godwin and Martinez (2016) studied student perceptions in an online RN-BSN course. The

findings reinforced that peer collaboration and evaluation enhanced perceived learning in the online course. Suell and Whitsett (2013) recommended that further research in different populations such as age and ethnicity, as well as different types of interactive learning activities, should be investigated.

In an attempt to fill a gap in research, Wegmann and McCauley (2014) explored asynchronous methods and online communication. Their literature review stated that an asynchronous environment gave students an opportunity to take more time to formulate answers to questions and search for additional information to support their comments and thoughts. Support for this concept was also found by Hill (2016). Specifically, Wegmann and McCauley studied discussion board structure and increasing engagement and participation in asynchronous online course delivery. Teachers in a Master's of Education in reading program at two different universities were the participants in the study. The researchers used the observation approach to systemically analyze the naturally occurring situations in the online discussion threads. Students' postings were categorized and classified based on specific codes for words or phrases. The study's findings indicated certain methods that instructors could implement to improve connectedness in their online discussion boards and improve communication through discussion boards. Although the study's findings are not relevant to this study, the observation method used in the research gave good direction for the use of observation to determine preferences in online education.

Synchronous delivery. As opposed to asynchronous, where students and faculty are online at different times, synchronous online learning involves students and faculty members interacting with each other in real time, just as they would in a face-to-face

course (McDaniels et al., 2016). Although online learning is growing at a very fast rate across the nation in colleges and universities, synchronous learning constitutes a small fraction of the delivery options in online learning, as well as in the research literature (Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014; McDaniels et al., 2016; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). For this reason, little research was found on synchronous learning in online education.

There were a few reasons noted in the literature for colleges and universities to not choose to use synchronous delivery and included: a) that incorporating this method of delivering course materials is costly due to the technological infrastructure needed, faculty development, and student competence (Marmon, Vanscorder, & Gordesky, 2014; McDaniels et al., 2016; Olson & McCracken, 2015); b) the literature has revealed that students choose online learning for the flexibility it offers and the ability to work while going to school and not being tied to a strict meeting schedule (Hill, 2016; Martin et al., 2012; Smith, 2013; Suell & Whitsett (2013), adding a required synchronous piece may be a burden to students who have time constraints or lack the bandwidth at home to navigate or participate in synchronous activities, and are then required to utilize public access technology such as libraries or computer labs to participate in synchronous activities (McDaniels et al., 2016; Olson & McCracken, 2015); and c) although technology and video conferencing is used for virtual meetings with increasing frequency in corporations as a means of achieving connectedness (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014), it has not been utilized as much in education because of the element of unpredictability that it presents. Power and internet outages that can cause connectivity issues in many areas of the country that may use satellite internet can be frustrating for instructors and students to participate in

asynchronous delivery and can be a significant obstacle for incorporating synchronous delivery into online curriculums (Olson & McCracken, 2015).

Although the use of synchronous activities is not as popular, several studies found that a synchronous environment can create a strong sense of connectedness or community among online participants (Martin et al., 2012; McDaniels et al., 2016; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). In the study by McDaniels et al. (2016), the researchers sought to offer a face-to-face training for post-doctoral students online with the same rigor and resulting learning outcomes as would be afforded in a traditional face-to-face class. The researchers also felt that offering an experience that developed a community within the classroom as was experienced in the traditional delivery method was paramount and a challenge due to the physical distance between students. Participants had the option of participating in synchronous delivery, as well as asynchronous delivery of the material, and the majority of the 39 participants had experience with synchronous online course delivery. The results of the study found that overall; the synchronous online classroom produced a connection between students and created a sense of community in the class. It was noted that some in the class had a negative experience with synchronous delivery due to poor video and audio connections during course sessions.

A further study reiterated the positive response to synchronous delivery of coursework. Zucca (2014), in an attempt to understand the needs of adult professional online students, assessed a sample of online courses for business students for demographics, needs, and geographic distribution. The study assessed 55 class templates with similar construction including synchronous and asynchronous activity. The synchronous interaction activities were mainly chatting and online lectures with

PowerPoint; whereas, the asynchronous were mainly discussion boards, but also reading assignments, practice questions, and exams. The results of the study found that entirely synchronous delivery of activities and assignments in an online course was not the best option for every student. Technology offers an opportunity to explore different models of the online classroom and universities need to explore the specific needs of the adult online student. Zucca (2014) recommended further studies with other disciplines to identify specific needs that could guide course design and improve student learning.

Impact of prior online experience. This section of the literature review will identify studies in the literature that researched student outcomes online regarding the student's previous experience. It was found that the research is mixed on the impact of online experience to student preferences and learning. Along with the findings in the literature on students' preferences for different types of activity and assignment delivery is the notion that students' preferences may also be affected by their past experience (Kotz, 2016; Simonds & Brock, 2014; Tomos et al., 2013). Results of the studies discussed next supported the notion that past experience plays a role in student preferences and also contributed to the need to further study millennials and their preferences.

Huss and Eastep (2013) described a satisfied online student as being a determining factor of the quality of the online course itself. In their mixed methods study, qualitative and quantitative research was used to explore perceptions of students at a Midwestern university. Each of the 1,085 students in the study was in at least one online class in the semester the survey was administered and 70% of the participants had taken at least one or more online classes prior to the semester being studied. One prominent

finding of the study was that many of the students chose an online course because it was more convenient or there was not a face-to-face class available, not because the students believed that online coursework was better educationally. The study also found that communication was very important to students. They indicated a preference for prompt and frequent communication with email being the overwhelming preference for class announcements. The study also found that students overall did not prefer group projects, but did prefer small group discussion boards. The results of preferences from students regarding delivery of content, students preferred content that included audio and visual messages from the instructor rather than text only of text and audio. Although the age range of the participants in the study was 18 to 30 with 44% being over 30, this study did not identify preferences of millennials. However, Huss and Eastep (2013) concluded that findings were so strong that students had specific online preferences that it would be beneficial to do further studies that isolated specific disciplines and groups in order to determine the preferential mediums.

In an attempt to fill the research gap and determine if past experience in online courses changed the perception of the students in regard to the quality of the class, a comparison of novice students (taken three or fewer) online courses and experienced students (taken six or more) online courses was completed by Hixon, Barczyk, Ralston-Berg, and Buckenmeyer (2016). They found that there was a difference in the perceived quality of the course based on the experience of the student. There were 3,160 participants in the study with 23.7% being ages 18-25, and the greatest percent (42.5) being between the ages of 26-44. The participants in the quantitative study were given an electronic survey where they were asked to rate 43 items related to their perception of

quality in online courses. The study found that there are distinct differences in the expectations and needs of students with differing online experience. It was concluded that past experience did impact the students' perceptions. Hixon et al. reinforced that all online learners were not the same and that further research into other various characteristics, as well as experience and preferences of online learners, would be beneficial.

Drouin et al. (2013) noted in their literature review that a finding from the research of Bornstein (1989) labeled the "mere-exposure effect," that was described as a psychological effect that led people to have a more favorable opinion of something that they had already been exposed to, was a real and somewhat consistent phenomenon, and could be the explanation for experience playing a role in preferences. The findings of the study by Drouin et al. reinforced previously noted study findings in that the students' preferences for different types of lecture formats in online learning were significantly influenced by their previous or concurrent online lecture experiences. However, contradictions were found in the literature review in relation to prior experience having an effect on student preferences.

A study conducted by Simonds and Brock's (2014) found that researched online learning activity preference contradicted these studies. In their study, there was found to be no significant statistical difference between the number of online courses noted and the preferences for particular learning activities. However, they did find there was a statistical significance between age and preferred online learning activities. It was noted that younger students preferred live chats and group projects, and the older students preferred asynchronous types of activities such as recorded lectures. The study consisted

of 66 participants with an average past experience of five online classes, and the three groups of age ranges were twenty-one to thirty (38%; n=25), thirty-one to forty (23%; n=15), and forty-one to seventy (39%; n=26). The study findings recommended taking into consideration generational and digital learning preferences in the online classroom. Simonds and Brock suggested that it could not be assumed that everyone in the digital generation would prefer the same learning activities; therefore, they encouraged further exploration of the students' learning needs in the online environment.

Communication tools that promote learning. In reviewing the final theme of this literature review, communication tools as activities to promote learning in online courses will be discussed, as well as recent literature regarding different types of communication in online courses. Communication preferences of millennials will begin this discussion. Belair (2012) posited that communication was vital in class whether it be virtual or traditional face-to-face; however, communication in the virtual classroom was inherently different. Understanding the communication styles of the millennial generation and learning their preferences could optimize the effectiveness of communication with them (Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock, 2012; Farrell & Hurt, 2014). Considering the discussion of millennials use of technology and nearly constant communication through technology, it was not surprising that this same group of individuals preferred constant feedback from their leaders (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; Ferri-Reed, 2014). There appears to be a need to speak the “language” of the millennial (Farrell & Hurt, 2014).

A final preference of the millennials found in the literature was the need for clear and concise expectations to be communicated along with timely feedback (Billings &

Halstead, 2016; Ferri-Reed, 2014). A term used by Ferri-Reed was *open communication* and was described as giving millennials direct and honest feedback. In addition, millennials preferred specific and clear directions that allowed them to complete work effectively. In exploring the literature on educating and managing this generation, an overall need to include this type of communication in dealings with millennials in organizations is the preference and will breed success (Dixon et al., 2013; Ferri-Reed, 2014). Clear and thorough communication may need addressed in nursing programs and intentionally included in the processes to improve student achievement. Further, timely responses to student questions and feedback on activities and assignments was a strategy noted to improve communication and ultimately improve outcomes. Faculty in higher education may consider purposeful communication strategies in online classrooms.

Major (2015) suggested that communication in education is a way to transfer knowledge and ideas, and it is a critical component in the teaching and learning process, as well as being different in the online classroom than the traditional classroom. A review of the literature identified some differences in communication in the traditional class versus the online class and indicated that online courses could be impersonal and lacking meaningful verbal cues such as voice intonation, as well as facial expressions and body language (Cunningham, 2015; Belair, 2012; Plante & Asselin, 2014). However, Quinn (2015) argued that even technological communication in a face-to-face classroom must be well thought out and utilized because reminding students of upcoming tests and activities or changes in instruction verbally in class is not sufficient to disseminate information and ensure that all students get the information needed.

Methods of communication. Methods of communication can also be asynchronous and synchronous in the online classroom, these are email, blogs, discussion boards, text chatting, phone calls, and video calling (Belair, 2012). Belair found preferences for communication technology to be different depending on the situation, and that when given a choice between email and instant messaging online, students chose email. Several studies of virtual students reviewed by Belair led to implications for communication in that situation. Recommendations were for research to further study communication preferences in different online settings to improve practices. Chang et al. (2015) suggested a need for similar studies due to the rapidly changing technology available in online courses.

Email. The email was a predominant focus of study found during a review of the literature. In the study of convenience by Chang et al. (2015), it was found that out of 213 graduate and undergraduate participants surveyed that overwhelmingly 97% preferred course email for communication and clarification of information. The students, who were predominately female and between the ages of 18-60, were surveyed using a Likert scale of options for course communication including, email, course announcements, audio announcements, video links of the instructor talking, posts on discussion boards, class blog posts, group texts, tweets, and online video conferencing to be significantly less appealing to students as an option, with course announcements being the second preferred at 77% and posting on a discussion board was third at 51%. Chang et al. (2015) concluded that using email to communicate with students was a current preference for a vast majority of students online. This was echoed by Robinson and Stubberud (2012) who found students to highly value email compared to other online communication tools.

A study by Quinn (2015) compared verbal student reminders of upcoming due dates with email and verbal reminders and text and verbal reminders, and students preferred texting to email. The study had 76 participants in a class that included lecture and a lab component. It was noted that all students had an email account provided by the institution, and only 56 of the 76 provided cell phone numbers for the study. A chi-squared statistical test was used to determine the time between when the student received the reminder and when the student took the assigned quiz in each of the reminder groups. A survey was conducted with students using a Likert scale consisting of questions exploring their use of text and email, as well as preferences. Overall, 85% of the class found reminders helpful with 74% preferring the option of out of class text messaging as a way to communicate with professors. The study found that verbal plus email, and verbal plus text message reminders were equally effective; whereas, the group that only received verbal reminders were less likely to take the weekly quizzes.

Social presence. Another recurring theme noted in the literature was the need for a social presence online that was directly related to communication within the online course (Cunningham, 2015; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Whiteside, 2015). Social presence was defined as the feeling students have when they are communicating and connecting with real people in a class that create a sense of community (Cunningham, 2015). Plante and Asselin (2014) conducted a literature review to identify best practices and strategies that would create an online learning environment that displayed caring behaviors and promoted social presence. There were several communication strategies noted that promoted communication and social presence online. The first was that using smiley faces, emoticons, and abbreviations such as “LOL” (Laughing out loud), could take the

place of social cues lost when conversing through text. Next, the use of common human phrases such as “take care,” or “hello,” was a way to communicate in a way that made the student feel connected, and finally the mixing of asynchronous text communication and synchronous communication such as video chatting improved learning through communication, feelings of isolation, as well as benefitted students with language barriers. The results were that “faculty messages that are respectful, positive, encouraging, timely, and frequent foster social presence and caring behaviors while also allowing for caring interactions, mutual respect, and finding meaning in relationships” (Plante & Asselin, 2014, p. 1)

In a case study by Skogs (2013), the researcher explored the subject lines of discussion forums and student preferences, but in doing so, also identified the interconnection between discussion boards (discussed previously), communication, and social presence in online courses. The study found that subject lines could aid in coherence within the course, connecting messages and participants, and creating a social function that improves social presence and online learning. The study only used one discussion group; therefore, it could not be generalized, but Skogs called for continued research into student preferences and obtaining communication strategies that would improve online learning.

Methodology. The field of higher education is rich with empirical studies; therefore, researchers have many factors to consider when selecting an appropriate research design. Different approaches to research were noted when reading through the literature sources prior to selecting the design for this study. The majority of the methodologies and designs found in this literature review were quantitative or mixed

methods in nature. While numerous quantitative and mixed-methods studies have been completed on various aspects of online learning activities and assignments in the online classroom, by students, and by instructors, the researcher believed that the in-depth personal observations and experiences of students were not addressed. This study intentionally explored the millennial nursing students' experiences and their opinions on what learning activities and assignments are preferred or believed to hinder learning, and to generate more specific knowledge on the influence of learning activities and assignments for millennials enrolled in online RN-BSN programs.

In a quantitative research study on how to engage online learners, it was found that the use of surveys was limited to statistical significance and could not speak to the rationales behind the results of the study (Yoo & Huang, 2013). In the research reviewed, there were very few studies that were strictly qualitative, and few studies dedicated to nursing students, with none of them addressing millennial nursing students in the online classroom. This finding was noted with quantitative and mixed methods studies throughout the review as well. In addition, recent mixed method studies that allowed open-ended questions to be answered at the end of the survey recommended that future qualitative studies be done to enhance the qualitative findings (Hixon et al., 2016; Robb, 2013; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015).

Many studies reviewed addressed certain learning activities or assignments in an online course specifically or preferences in all age groups, or addressed millennial students in face-to-face classrooms or online; however, none addressed the preferences of millennial online nursing students in RN-BSN programs. A study by Simonds and Brock (2014), in an attempt to find the preferred online learning activities of students by age and

experience, utilized a survey that yielded statistical data. The survey gave the participants an option to add personal comments in the survey if they chose, but this did not identify the how and why the students preferred the learning activities and assignments they chose. The mixed methods study by Simonds and Brock was the only study found that sought to identify student online learning preferences by age, but many, including Simonds and Brock found that students' perceived preferences were significant to their learning (Billings & Halstead, 2016; Russo, 2013; Suell & Whitsett, 2013; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015). Therefore, this research sought to reach a greater depth of understanding regarding the preferences of the millennial online RN-BSN student and qualitative exploratory single case study methodology was used.

In one of the few qualitative studies in this review, Turner and Thompson (2014) identified qualitative research as a method that allowed the researcher to act as the instrument used to study the phenomenon and allowed the researcher to collect, translate, and analyze the information that then led to themes and patterns. Case study research was a type of qualitative methodology that allows the researcher to investigate a phenomenon in its natural setting using multiple sources (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). The literature review revealed a need for a deeper understanding of the preferences of this group of millennials that are filling so many seats in RN-BSN online classes, and will soon constitute the majority of nurses caring for this country. Qualitative exploratory single case study methodology was utilized to further understand the needs of this cohort.

Instrumentation. Numerous tools were available to gather data from participants when creating this study. Instrumentation was identified throughout the research in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies. Forty-one of the empirical articles

reviewed were noted to use surveys and strictly quantitative or mixed methods with the use of surveys and interviews as the most common. Most of the research studies called for further research and a deeper understanding of millennials and their preferences. Drouin et al. (2013) following the results of surveys, recommended the need to more clearly examine preferences, as well as students' perceived benefit of delivery methods. Other qualitative studies utilized open-ended questions (Kotz, 2016; Robb, 2013), interviews with open-ended questions (Turner & Thompson, 2014), case studies (Skogs, 2013), and participant observations (Wegmann & McCauley, 2014).

There was an abundance of studies that looked specifically at different online learning activities and assignments, most notably, the difference between synchronous and asynchronous delivery methods. Only one of the studies identified was a qualitative case study and none of the studies regarding online student preferences by age or otherwise was qualitative. The one case study by Skogs (2013) looked at asynchronous threaded discussions only and did not interview participants as to why they chose certain discussions to participate. It is also noted, that many of the quantitative studies recommended future research that should focus on further understanding the preferences of online students in order to promote learning. Therefore, qualitative exploratory single case study methodology and gathering data from multiple sources were deemed to gain a richer understanding and fill the research gaps.

This study envisioned the millennial student through a different lens, and more specifically, the millennial nurse enrolled in online RN-BSN programs through a different lens than previously studied. The focus on this study was to identify and understand perceptions of millennial online RN-BSN students through case study

research. Collection of data for the study was chosen in an attempt to delve deeper into the preferences previously studied in this review by gathering information through multiple sources that included interviewing millennial RN-BSN students. This study utilized semi-structured interviews of participants who were of millennial age and enrolled in an RN-BSN online program in the spring semester 2017, as well as, those who have taken at least one other online course prior to the semester in which this research was conducted. Additional data included observation of the online nursing classes in the RN-BSN program that were offered spring semester at Eastern Illinois University and program document reviews. These additional sources were included to identify evidence of learning activities and assignments in the classroom setting and course documents.

Summary

The literature review presented many aspects of instructional delivery and activities and assignments in traditional and online courses. With the quickly growing number of online courses across colleges and universities across the United States, it is necessary for programs to consider the need for new pedagogy based on theory (Serdyukov, 2015). Impacting the growth of online education is the flood of millennial students and their unique experiences and preferences for communication and technology in online courses (DeVaney, 2015; Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Montenery et al., 2013). To further address the focus of the study, the literature review noted that RN-BSN nursing programs are growing and seats are frequently filled with millennials. It was found that overall the literature revealed the importance of providing students a voice and in order to improve learning in the online classroom, their needs must be addressed.

There are many ways to learn online through different delivery methods, as well as activities and assignments (Simonds & Brock, 2014; Tichavsky et al., 2015). Studies were conflicting on the best methods to learn online identifying gaps in the literature. Many studies explored student preferences in the face-to-face and online classroom. Therrell and Dunneback (2015) found that face-to-face millennial students have very specific preferences for learning in the classroom, and it was recommended that with the different delivery methods in the online classroom, there was a great need to explore this cohort in the online classroom and identify their needs as well. Another gap noted was the many studies that examined student preferences and findings identified the need to do further research that more specifically addressed different age groups and experiences (Kotz, 2016; Simonds & Brock, 2014; Smith, 2013). This was echoed with the studies reviewed for asynchronous and synchronous delivery with findings that supported both delivery methods, and both methods were found to have positive and negative aspects of the delivery choice for students; however, overwhelmingly the results found a need to further research specific online groups to better understand their needs (Hixon et al., 2016; Olson & McCracken, 2015).

This study attempted to begin to fill these noted gaps in the previous research by exploring a specific subset of students in the online classroom today. This study answered the following research questions that emerged from the literature: (a) How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs; (b) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs; and

(c) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

This study addressed the research questions through the guidance of the Constructivism Learning Theory based on the concept that people construct their own knowledge through their past experiences (Al-Huneidi & Schreurs, 2012). It was found that utilizing this theoretical framework could help to guide teaching and learning in the online setting (Schell & Janicki, 2013). With available research lacking in empirical examinations concerning the preferences of millennial RN-BSN students, but the strong finding that students do have preferences that need to be explored, it was determined that a qualitative exploratory single case study would be the best design to deeply understand the needs and experiences of this group.

Empirical research provided guidance for what was not studied, but further research was needed. The majority of the empirical research in this literature review was quantitative or mixed methods in nature. Qualitative research methods are used less frequently than quantitative methods; however, this method can provide the opportunity to explore and understand complex and multifaceted situations that quantitative methods cannot explain (Anderson et al., 2014). The phenomena and the focus of the study is the importance of understanding learning activities and assignment preferences of millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN nursing programs, as well as, to gain an understanding of assignments and activities that are perceived to hinder learning at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. The qualitative exploratory single case study design was chosen, rather than quantitative or other qualitative methods due to the ability to obtain a greater understanding of the

phenomenon (Unicomb et al., 2015). This study utilized semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, classroom direct observation, and document reviews of the course and program information in an online RN-BSN program in Illinois. This literature review reflects an in-depth review of recent literature related to online learning and the millennial student. This study's research design, data collection, and analysis are further developed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

It was not known how or why learning activities and assignments are preferred by millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN nursing programs. Also, it was not known how or why assignments and activities have the perception to hinder learning for millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) recognized the valuable contribution qualitative research is to the field of nursing, and specifically identified the value of qualitative case-study research. By binding the case study to the topic of millennial nurses preferences in learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN classes, the researcher was able to explore the following research questions: (a) How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs; (b) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs; (c) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Case studies are an appealing method of inquiry because they are an inductive investigative strategy that through data collection and analysis provides richly descriptive data and a deeper understanding of the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The

researcher utilized semi-structured interviews of students enrolled in an Illinois University's RN-BSN program in the spring semester 2017. In addition to the interviews, direct classroom observations of the nursing classes offered in the spring semester were conducted, and document reviews from the RN-BSN program were completed. Direct classroom observations and document reviews were employed to identify common learning activities and assignments utilized and the preferences for learning activities and assignments to verify and validate the data collected through interviews.

Chapter three addresses methodology and research design used in this study. The following sections in this chapter will address the rationale for this study, description of the setting, description of the participants, summary of data needed, overview of research design, methods for data collection, potential analysis, and synthesis of data, ethical considerations, and issues of credibility. The chapter concludes with a summary that identifies significant points in the chapter and transition to chapter four that presents the data analysis.

Statement of the Problem

It is not known how and why millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs perceive certain assignments and learning activities as facilitating or hindering learning in online RN-BSN programs. In addition, it is not known how millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs identify preferred learning activities and assignments at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois.

The number of higher education institutions offering online courses continues to increase (Drouin et al., 2013), and United States colleges and universities continue to increase the numbers of online classes offered (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Yamagata-

Lynch, 2014). The flexibility to work full-time and have families, while furthering education is an advantage for students and an alternative to traditional face-to-face classrooms (Yoo & Huang, 2013). Suh and Hargis (2016) described the millennial generation as being the largest generation in college and the workforce today. It was also noted by Fry (2016) that statistically the millennials are now the largest group alive today. Each generation brings different characteristics and preferences where learning is concerned (Suh & Hargis, 2016). Robb (2013) indicated that increasing the number of RN-BSN prepared nurses could be beneficial to communities, but doing so means that the learning needs of this generation need to be identified to promote successful completion of required coursework.

Research is needed to explore learning activities and assignments that are preferred by all online students and those assignments and activities that are perceived to hinder learning (Drouin et al., 2013; Tomos et al., 2013). However, Robb (2016) argued that to promote learning and prepare nurses to successfully care for complex patients, there needs to be an increase in the number of bachelor degree prepared nurses, and by doing so identify their learning needs. Nurses prepared at the bachelor's level not only have more education, but gain in-depth understanding of community health, leadership, research, and critical thinking through coursework. This level of education allows them to better care for acutely ill clients in any nursing setting. Blackmon (2012) echoed the importance that researchers study students' preferences and satisfaction in online courses so educators can implement changes that better meet their needs. Understanding the needs and preferences of the millennial nursing student can assist nursing faculty in

developing challenging online course work and improve student outcomes, and ultimately increase the number of bachelor's prepared nurses.

Research Questions

The millennial generation has always had access to use of computers and internet, and this has been found to have an impact on the way they communicate and learn (Boton & Gregory, 2015). Research found that retaining students in online courses was directly related to several things and included utilization of constructivism and preferred online pedagogies. The high demand for nurses to obtain a bachelor's degree and the increasing number of millennial nurses filling seats in online RN-BSN programs has made it critical to understand the needs of millennial nursing students in online nursing programs.

The goal of this study was to explore the perceived learning activities and assignments preferred by millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs and to explore the assignments and activities that are perceived to hinder learning. The study answered the following questions:

- RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs?
- RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?
- RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Millennial nursing students with previous online learning experience were identified and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews after securing permission from the university of study (see Appendix A), institutional review board

(IRB) at Grand Canyon University (see Appendix B), and the university of study (See Appendix C). Semi-structured interview questions allowed the participants to expand upon their thoughts and experiences. Through the interview process, answers to the research questions emerged. A better understanding of the needs of this cohort was reached and preferences identified that can be used in the curricular and course design of RN-BSN courses, and promote student learning. Perceived hindrances were also identified through the interview process and these can be avoided in curricular and course design.

In-depth semi-structured interviews with millennial online nursing students at the RN-BSN program at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois were completed (See Appendix D). Following the interviews, direct observations in three classes at the university during the spring semester were completed to compare and validate the data found in the interviews. The courses were observed and activities and assignments reviewed (See Appendix E). In observing the classroom, activities and assignments that were used in these classrooms were identified. The participation and interaction of the students and instructors were noted and compared to the data collected in the interviews. Further perspectives were reached through document reviews of the RN-BSN program, these included the program handbook, program requirements, course syllabi, course calendars, and any supplemental instructions pertaining to activities and assignments to achieve methodological triangulation (See Appendix F). This information revealed knowledge of what was expected of students prior to the course and what common activities and assignments were planned to be utilized in the online RN-BSN

program. The researcher explored if, in fact, they were used, and compared the findings to the interview data and the classroom observation data.

Research Methodology

Yin (2016) described epistemology as the researcher's beliefs regarding the nature of knowledge and how it is derived and created (p. 335). Regarding the epistemology of qualitative and quantitative research, there are differences in the way researchers come to understand a phenomenon, and how it shapes one's beliefs. Both quantitative and qualitative research have several different methods that can be used for the purpose of describing and explaining a phenomenon. However, quantitative research methods are the numerical representation of the observations found during data collection. Quantitative data can bring an advantage to the researcher in that simple observations become more explicit and can have quality (Babbie, 2013). This differs from qualitative in that the nature of qualitative methods is focused on not just describing a phenomenon, but understanding. Qualitative research findings bring richer detail to the data, and attempt to identify the meaning or cause and effect of the phenomenon involved (Vaughn & Turner, 2016).

Technology is changing and advancing quickly, and students have specific preferences in how they learn online; therefore, it is necessary to understand the different needs of generational cohorts in higher education (Huss & Eastep, 2013; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015). Tetnowski (2015) explained that an organizing framework of a study classifies the study as either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed based on the research questions being asked about a phenomenon. Anderson et al. (2014) discussed that both qualitative and quantitative methods have inherent characteristics that approach the

research in different ways. Quantitative methods explain a phenomenon through numbers and statistics, whereas, qualitative research explains a phenomenon through words that identify patterns and trends. Those patterns and trends tell a story that helps to understand the phenomenon being studied (Hancock and Algozzine, 2016). Further, Palinkas et al. (2015) posited that quantitative research methods test and confirm hypothesis and qualitative methods explore and explain, gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Although the phenomenon of this study could be addressed through quantitative methods, it would lack the explanation behind the numbers. The case study research design can be used to describe a group of individuals or events, or a single unit or system (Tetnowski, 2015). This study used a qualitative exploratory single case study design to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois.

The case study approach is useful when it is sought to understand a group, event, or activity in depth and captures the complexity of the phenomenon through the exploration of multiple data sources (Aczel, 2015). Cronin (2014) indicated that case study research is particularly useful due to its ability to rigorously research a phenomenon and can yield multiple perspectives as it explores different aspects of the phenomenon through the research design. Case study research can include one case study unit or multiple case study units. This study focused on one case study unit, which is the RN-BSN nursing program at an Illinois University.

The case study design requires an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon through the gathering of data from multiple sources (Tumele, 2015). This study utilized three data collection methods; (a) semi-structured interviews; (b) classroom direct observations; and (c) program document reviews. Semi-structured interviews of 11 millennial nursing students in an RN-BSN program that meet the eligibility criteria were conducted (See Appendix D). Eligibility criteria for this study was: (a) must be enrolled in the RN-BSN program at Eastern Illinois University; (b) must be born between 1982-2000; (c) must have taken an online course previous to being enrolled in spring 2017 semester. Concurrently, along with semi-structured interviews, the researcher used direct observations of classes that were offered in the spring semester at the program being studied. Activities and assignments in those classes were observed and reviewed qualitatively (See Appendix E). Further perspectives were reached through document reviews and analysis of the RN-BSN program (See Appendix F). These documents were viewed qualitatively to identify patterns and themes in relationship to the goals and objectives of the courses and the nursing program. Employing three data collection sources demonstrates methodological triangulation of the data and further credibility of the study results.

Research Design

The research method utilized for this study was qualitative and the design was a single case study. This design allowed the researcher to delve deeper, and allow a more insightful examination of the phenomenon being studied. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions

of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois.

In case study research, there is potential of doing a single case-study method as well as a multiple case study. The single case study was described by Yin (2016) as a study that explores only at a single case or system. Utilizing the basic research method, a qualitative exploratory single case study design was chosen, rather than quantitative or other qualitative approaches, to explore the activities and assignment preferences and the assignment and activities that are perceived to hinder learning for millennials in RN-BSN programs at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. While numerous quantitative and mixed-methods studies have been completed on the different learning activities and assignments and students' perceived preferences in the online classroom, very few were qualitative in nature. This study sought to identify the in-depth personal experiences of students that can be achieved through qualitative research, to generate more specific knowledge on the preferences of millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs and their perceived relationship to learning.

Quantitative research was not chosen because, as noted in the literature review, findings of the quantitative research about online learning activities and assignments yielded much information about what students specifically preferred, but lacked the in-depth exploration and understanding about how or why they preferred them. Babbie (2013) mentioned that quantitative research involves assigning data numerical value and completing statistical analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that quantitative research, in the use of evaluating an intervention, such as learning activities and assignments, may be useful. However, if one seeks to explore the complexity of a single

case and capture viewpoints on the phenomenon, a qualitative case study method was recommended (Tetnowski, 2015).

The data sources utilized for this qualitative exploratory single case study was semi-structured interviews, classroom direct observation, and program document reviews. The purpose of interviewing as a data collection tool in qualitative research is to better understand the students' experience, as well as allowing the researcher to interpret the experiences. Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, and Pedersen (2013) noted that the collection of semi-structured interview data as being a consistent empirical method of qualitative research and garners rich data. Semi-structured interviews of 10 millennial nursing students in an RN-BSN program that met the eligibility criteria was planned, with 12 participants responding to the invitation and 11 completed (See Appendix G). Eligibility criteria for this study was: (a) must be enrolled in the RN-BSN program at the University of Study; (b) must be born between 1982-2000; and (c) must have taken an online course before being enrolled in spring 2017 semester.

Concurrently, along with member checking, the researcher conducted direct observations of archived classes that were offered in the spring semester at the program being studied. Activities and assignments in those classes were observed and reviewed to identify what learning activities and assignments are being offered in the RN-BSN online classroom (See Appendix E). Further aspects were identified through document reviews of the RN-BSN program (See Appendix F). Employing these three data collection sources established triangulation of the data and furthered credibility of the study. Methodological triangulation or employing multiple data sources or aspects allows data to be collected from different dimensions of the same phenomenon, and allows many

different perspectives to better understand the phenomenon (Denzin, 2012). The qualitative data from these sources allowed the researcher to identify themes within the boundaries of the study's research questions.

A case study explores a specific case or phenomenon. The phenomenon in this study focused on the importance of understanding learning activities and assignment preferences of millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN nursing programs, and those activities and assignments that were perceived to hinder learning for millennial nursing students enrolled in RN-BSN programs that are fully online. Several sources identified millennials as having a different set of traits and preferences due to their intimate relationship with technology throughout their lives (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; DeVaney, 2015).

Qualitative case study research was found to understand real-life experiences of an individual group and use it to represent other cases like it (Cronin, 2014). Yin (2016) indicated the case study as a method of getting close to the subject of interest through interviews or observations that will gain knowledge and allow elaboration and generalization of the subject. In this study, the group was millennial online bachelor's degree nurses and how they prefer to learn online. Boton and Gregory (2015) explained that the use of case study research is a way to not only determine preferences of learners, but also to explore the participants' point of view. A qualitative exploratory single case study was utilized and an online RN-BSN program in Illinois was used. This study explored one case study unit, which is the online RN-BSN program at one Illinois University. This single case study unit was chosen because of the design of the online program that provides students with both synchronous and asynchronous activities and

assignments. Literature reviewed was thorough in discussion and findings of both synchronous and asynchronous online delivery pedagogies and therefore a program that utilized both was chosen.

Qualitative research designs are used less frequently than quantitative designs; however, this method can provide the opportunity to explore and understand complex and multifaceted situations that quantitative methods cannot explain (Anderson et al., 2014). As previously described, there are many qualitative methods that can explore specific phenomenon further. Phenomenology was not the chosen methodology for this study, because as Yin (2016) discussed, this method to examine a specific experience, or used to illuminate an event or occurrence of interest (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 89). Ethnography was not an option for this study because although the millennial cohort shares similar life experiences that could lead to similar attitudes and behaviors (DeVaney, 2015), and are very diverse, coming from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Kotz, 2016), this study is not looking specifically at the cultural background that lead to their preferences. Likewise, Narrative Inquiry was also not chosen, because as Anderson et al. described, it assesses a small number of participants and explores in detail a specific life experience. This study also does not seek to develop a new theory because of the inquiry; therefore, Grounded theory was not chosen.

Exploring preferences, and assignment and activities that were perceived to be preferred in online RN-BSN programs to either promote or hinder learning was the intent of the study. Semi-structured interviews were completed with 11 participants meeting the eligibility criteria. The purpose of interviewing was to better understand the students' experience, as well as allowing the researcher to interpret the experiences. Merriam and

Tisdell (2016) believed that interviewing provides the researcher more depth and understanding of an experience than a survey. Further, to achieve methodological triangulation in the study, three classes in the program utilized was observed for activities and assignments, and course and program documents were reviewed for validation of the data collected in the interviews.

Population and Sample Selection

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. For the researcher to provide a convincing account of the phenomenon being studied, one must select participants based on their knowledge and experience (Cleary et al., 2014). The term population describes the group that has the desired characteristics and a research population is generally a large collection of individuals or objects that are the focus of a scientific query. It is for the benefit of the population that research was done. The general population of this study is all millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs in the United States. However, due to the large sizes of populations, researchers often cannot test every individual in the population because it is too expensive and time-consuming. This is the reason why researchers rely on sampling techniques (Kukull & Ganguli, 2012). The target population for this study is all millennial age nursing students enrolled in one RN-BSN program in the Midwest.

Purposeful sampling was described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as a strategy used when the researcher seeks to learn more about a specific subset of the population

and therefore purposefully gathers a sample that meet the criteria to be studied. To gather a sample in this study, the researcher identified all students in the program to be studied that met the eligibility criteria. The eligibility criteria for this study was that participants must be enrolled in the program at the unit of study, be born between 1982-2000, and have taken an online course prior to the semester the study was conducted. There were 19 students that met the criteria for participation in semi-structured interviews. Of the 19 students that met the criteria, participants were further chosen based on the number of online nursing courses that had completed. Precedence for extending invitations was first given to students that had taken three or more online courses in the case study unit. It was planned to then extend invitations to students who had taken less than three courses until the number of participants reached ten. Initial invitations yielded 12 students, with each having taken more than three courses, therefore, further invitations were not extended.

The optimal number for a qualitative case study noted in the literature is vague on exact numbers. The literature recommended sampling until a point of saturation or redundancy. This being a point that new information or insights are no longer forthcoming from new participants (Hatch, 2002; Yin, 2016). In a study by Mason (2010) that looked at Ph.D. studies, using qualitative interviews, it was concluded that sample size and saturation are irrelevant, and the quality of data collected is the measurement of its value. The study contained review of 560 studies with the mean sample size being thirty-one and argued that small sample sizes, as small as one interview, can yield rich data. Fugard and Potts (2015) found a broad range of recommendations of qualitative interviews to be 12 to 101, but also consideration for amount of material to be analyzed should guide the number of interviews. Also noted, was the need to consider the

experience of the researcher and the experience of the participant in relation to the data to be collected (Fugard & Potts, 2015; Mason, 2010). Purposeful sampling was implemented to gather a sample of experienced participants and therefore, the planned sample for this study being 10 participants, were felt to be sufficient. This was congruent with the requirements for Grand Canyon University's College of Doctoral Studies. The criteria set forth by Grand Canyon University is a minimum of 10 in a sample size for qualitative case study research, and recommends a target sample of 20 in order be successful in attaining the minimum number. Ultimately, 11 participants were interviewed, following a test interview, and it was noted that no new information or ideas emerged after the eighth interview.

A complete list of persons available in the realistic population was obtained through the creation of a sampling frame, which in this case, was a list of the study population available to the researcher. The researcher then utilized the sampling frame to identify students that were eligible to be invited to participate in the research. In this qualitative exploratory single case study invitations were first extended to the students in the sampling frame that had taken three or more online nursing courses in the case study unit as the sample for this study.

Study site permission. To conduct interviews at the unit of study, it was necessary to obtain site permission. The site authorization process included gaining permission from the nursing department chair and the Dean of the college of sciences at the university (See Appendix A), as well as following the proper process for the university's IRB department. The process was a formal process within the university IRB department. A college-generated form was completed electronically with a summary of

the research study attached then sent to the university IRB committee for review (See Appendix C).

Confidentiality. Confidentiality refers to the researcher's agreement to handle, store, and share research data to ensure that information obtained from and about research participants is not improperly divulged. Individuals may only be willing to share information for research purposes with an understanding that the information will remain protected from disclosure outside of the research setting or to unauthorized persons (Hatch, 2002, p. 123). Yin (2016) discussed that researchers should demonstrate an awareness of their own beliefs and ideas when determining how to deal with confidentiality. Confidentiality was of utmost concern throughout this study. The learners were millennial online students currently enrolled in an online RN-BSN nursing program at a university in Illinois. Because the researcher interviewed the students, it was imperative that students' identities were not made known, and for data collection purposes each student was assigned a number.

Interviews were recorded and stored on an internal and external hard drive on a password-protected computer in a locked home office. All identifying information was removed from the field notes, and field notes are being stored in a locked cabinet in the locked home office desk of the researcher. Signed consent forms were kept in a separate locked cabinet. Key codes were also kept in a separate locked file cabinet, as well as an electronic copy on a separate computer than field notes in order to maintain confidentiality. All collected data will be maintained for three years following conferral of the degree. The researcher is also an instructor at the university site utilized; therefore, may have taught participants in a previous course or will again in future courses. The

participation in this research study will in no way affect students' future assessment. The researcher will refrain from any discussion indicating that a specific student may have participated in this research.

Participant recruitment. Recruiting human subject participants in research studies can be a major challenge to the researcher. This challenge can be due to the complexity of the process such as identification of participants and thoroughly explaining the study's intent to secure participants, as well as the researcher's personal demographics (Yin, 2016). Yin described characteristics such as gender, race, or personal traits or roles the researcher has being a potential deterrent for participants in the recruiting phase of the study. A sampling frame was created to identify the students that met eligibility criteria. Babbie (2013) asserted that the sampling frame is a representation of the target population to be studied and although it may change, it should be as accurate as possible.

There were 19 students that met the eligibility criteria and identified as potential participants in the sampling frame. The students identified in the nursing program as meeting the purposeful sampling guidelines received invitations via e-mail from the researcher to participate in this research study. Participants were identified using purposeful sampling. Criteria established for purposeful sampling should directly reflect the desired outcomes of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria for participants in this study were as follows: (a) a RN of millennial age; (b) enrolled in the RN-BSN program; and (c) taken at least one online course prior to the semester that the study was conducted. Respondents to the e-mail invitation then received the appropriate consent form via mail and email with instructions to return the completed forms to the researcher

after completion (See Appendix H). Each participant was given the opportunity to address questions or concerns by email or by telephone prior to scheduling the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and participants were given the option to opt out or to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Following the participant consent, arrangements were made to contact the participant to establish a time and/or place for the interview. Most of the interviews were conducted by telephone due to geographic location of the participant, with only one interview conducted face-to-face.

Sources of Data

Qualitative case study research is valued for its ability to use natural context to study a phenomenon, and in multiple case study, compare those cases (Houghton et al., 2013). The phenomena defined for this qualitative exploratory single case study is understanding millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred).

The phenomena defined for this qualitative exploratory single case study was the perceived learning activities and assignments preferred by millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs and those assignments and activities that are perceived to hinder learning. It is also imperative that the researcher take great strides to establish validity and reliability, as qualitative research is based on assumptions. Validity and reliability or the credibility of a study can be established by the careful design of the study and the way that the data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted; however, most important is the necessity to triangulate the data that is the best practice of this study.

This study initially ensured credibility through the collection of three sources of data that included: (a) semi-structured interviews with participants selected using purposeful sampling; (b) direct observations of the online classroom in the RN-BSN program; and (d) document reviews and analysis of program materials.

The research data was collected from Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois and data was not collected without site authorization to collect the data from the unit of study, as well as, permission from IRB at Grand Canyon University. In this study, the data collection was centered on millennial nursing students' preferences for activities and assignments in online courses in RN-BSN programs, and the sources of data were focused on evidence of activities and assignments noted in course observations and document reviews, as well as responses from semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews were described by Yin (2016) as conversational in nature and the researcher does not take a uniform behavior, but rather talks with the participant in a more social nature. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) offered different types of interviews; a highly structured interview consists of predetermined questions that do not explore participants' thoughts or feelings on the subject. The opposite is an unstructured interview that consists of flexible open-ended questions, and resembles a conversation rather than an interviewer guiding the interview. The nature of the semi-structured interview falls between the two in that the interview was guided by a predetermined set of questions that are open-ended and flexible in nature. A strength of the semi-structured interview is that although the interview is somewhat guided by predetermined questions, the interviewer can ask or address

questions in any order, and can explore new topics as they arise from the participant's responses.

Hatch (2002) explained that a weakness of semi-structured and unstructured interviews is that an interview without a specific question set can end and not all questions the research hoped to address may be addressed. It is also noted that unstructured interviews are extremely difficult to facilitate for the novice researcher and having a set of questions to guide the researcher is a benefit to the semi-structured interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is noted that this researcher did not have previous interviewing experience and as noted by Hatch (2002) it is imperative to practice the interview process prior to participant interviews, as Hatch also noted, often interview questions may not be adequate or worded well and this issue can be identified in a practice interview. After the development of the interview questions (See Appendix D), the interview questions and process were tested on a student that did not meet the eligibility criteria. The field test was conducted on a student that attended the program but did not meet the age criteria. Conducting a field test allowed the researcher to identify the appropriateness of the interview protocol question guide. The interview protocol was found to be sufficient, but it was noted that the test interview and subsequent interviews tended to take on their own path exploring thoughts and ideas and encouraging the participant to further explain by sharing scenarios. Initially the interviews followed the questions but then were guided by the participant responses.

It was intended to conduct a total of ten interviews from the study site; however, 13 students were extended an invitation with 11 ultimately scheduling an interview. One face-to-face interview was conducted in the researcher's private office at a time

convenient for the participant. Due to geographic location of participants, which is the nature of online students in the program studied, 10 interviews were conducted by telephone at a convenient time of the participant. Telephone interviews were also conducted in the private office of the researcher. The participant was placed on speaker phone and the interview was audio recorded with a hand-held recording device. The criteria for participants in this study to be invited were as follows: (a) an RN of millennial age; (b) enrolled in the RN-BSN program at the case study unit, and (c) have taken at least one online course prior to the semester that the study was being conducted. The interview questions in this study were guided by scripted pre-developed questions, but participants were allowed to freely share and move from topic to topic rather than explicitly follow the scripted questions, this strategy was used to delve deeper to uncover rich themes and patterns (See Appendix D). Hancock and Algozzine (2016) recommended identifying themes as interviews progress and utilize findings to change open-ended questions or direction of conversation in future interviews. Following the first two interviews, it was noted that participants were unsure what was meant by assignments or activities or needed a reminder about potential activities. Examples of assignments that they may have experienced were pulled from the list by Simonds and Brock (2014) (See Table 1).

The interview questions were informed by the social constructivist theory, as well as, guided by a previous survey utilized in the research of Simonds and Brock (2013) and Simonds and Brock (2014) (See Table 1). Semi-structured interviews were designed in this study to answer the research questions: (a) How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN

programs?; (b) how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?; and (c) how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

It was intended to engage participants in a topic of discussion and allow for participant to discuss and share experiences and thoughts in their own words. Babbie (2013) noted that although questions are intended to be open-ended, often inappropriate or incomplete answers may be given and further probes or request for elaboration is needed to fully understand the participant's stance. The researcher prepared follow-up questions to further probe for more information when such instances arose. Interviews were obtained through the medium of choice for the participant. If participants were available for a face-to-face interview this was the preferred method; otherwise, the interviews would be conducted by telephone. The interviews were recorded and participants were made aware of this during the consent period, as well as, at the beginning of the interview. When interviews were not conducted face-to-face, the interviews were conducted on speaker with a recording device next to the telephone to preserve the interaction. Interview notes were taken on an interview guide for each interview (See Appendix D). Hatch (2002) recommended the use of field notes, as well as the recorded interview to prevent the researcher from missing information. Reflective journaling throughout the interview and analysis process was employed.

Member checking was also employed following the transcription and review of each interview. Yin (2016) described member checking as gaining feedback from those you have interviewed and those you have collaborated with. Fusch et al. (2017) posited

that there is potential for the researcher to bring bias to the study results through the inclusion of the researcher's personal perspectives in the interpretation of the data. Each participant in the study was initially asked to verify verbatim transcripts of the interviews. In addition, member checking was further carried out through the process of summarizing each interview in relation to the research questions and sharing those summaries with each participant. All participants verified and confirmed their agreement with the summary of the data collected.

Online classroom direct observations. Observations are common sources of data in case study research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Direct observation is a research technique utilized to understand the context of a situation by observing it as it is naturally occurring (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It was planned to view two online classrooms in the RN-BSN program at the university being studied. In the spring semester of 2017, there were three nursing courses offered to online RN-BSN students, and access to all three classes was obtained. This direct observation allowed the researcher to experience what the participants experienced and to confirm the use of activities and assignments in the online classrooms. It also gave the researcher an understanding of how assignments and activities are being used, and comparison of the actual assignments and activities used and their preferences identified through the interview process could be explored. The number of classroom observations was three nursing classes at the university. The classes that were observed were Theoretical Foundations of Professional Nursing Practice, Professional Seminar, and Research in Professional Nursing Practice. Online RN-BSN course design in the case study unit is asynchronous with the option of attending a synchronous online class meeting each week. If students were not available to

attend, they were provided with an archived recording of the class meeting. Courses offered, were 16 weeks in length and coincide with the traditional university spring semester.

The researcher had the opportunity to view the entire course archives of the 16-week period they were offered. This included the ability to view archives of class meetings that occurred. A technological problem was encountered in the Professional Seminar course where recordings of class meetings were lost. In this case, collaboration with the course instructor provided information regarding activities conducted in the courses and the typical number of students that attended during the semester. In addition, course emails between students and instructors were not available to view due to the potential personal nature of some emails; therefore, instructors provided information on the use of emails within their online classroom as a source of communication and information sharing. All course archives were available for viewing indefinitely until necessary data was obtained. Field notes were collected to determine millennial student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred).

The information obtained contributed to answering the research questions: (a) How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs; (b) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs; and (c) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs? In addition, the information provided the researcher a general idea of common assignments

and activities used in the online RN-BSN classroom and were compared with the information garnered from the interviews.

The researcher first gained access to the online classrooms through the technology department at the university. During the online classroom observation, the researcher used the observation protocol (See Appendix E) to gather data about assignments and activities utilized in the course, as well as identifying any specific instructions, guidelines, and instructor role in each activity and assignment utilized. Direct observations of the nursing course archives were observed. Observed courses were completed in May 2017 and data was collected in June 2017. The classes were systematically reviewed from the start of the course, viewing all course announcements, welcome instructions, activities or assignments, as well as syllabi and course calendars to get an understanding of what students would expect to complete in the course. This was then followed by a review of each week or module in the course identifying activities and assignments, communication and collaboration between instructors and students, and feedback given. Finally, course meetings, or what students referred to in interviews as *lectures*, were reviewed for activities, communication, number and age of students in attendance. It was noted that the courses at Eastern Illinois University contain a weekly synchronous lecture. This activity, and any other synchronous assignments and activities use, were observed as well to identify student participation and interaction in the activity. The information garnered in the direct classroom observations was used to compare to the data collected in the semi-structured interviews to validate the information shared by the participants.

Document reviews and analysis. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described document reviews as a natural addition to the research study, and a resource that can be of interest to the study. These are typically a part of the research activity and available before a study begins. Many documents were reviewed in the unit of study to verify the information obtained in the semi-structured interviews and the classroom observations. First, the university's website was reviewed for documents related to activities and assignments such as program requirements, specific course requirements, and the program handbook. It was sought to identify what objectives would be met in the program and what activities and assignments that potential students may expect to encounter if they enter the nursing program. Next, the syllabi for each course were reviewed in relation to the expectations to verify if the activities and assignments were in fact being used. Although due to time constraint it was not feasible to observe all courses in the program and review every document, it was noted that in fact the courses did offer many of the assignments and activities outlined in the program documentation, and each course viewed provided activities and assignments to meet the objectives of the course. The artifacts review form was utilized for every document reviewed for this study (See Appendix F). The information was also used to compare the themes and information found in the interviews and classroom observations. All artifacts, transcribed interviews, and observation notes were stored in a secured storage cabinet in a locked home office. All digital files were stored on a on a password-protected computer.

Validity and Reliability

Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 237). Yin (2016)

describes the goal a qualitative research study is to design a credible study. To produce a credible study, the researcher must consider the trustworthiness of the study, which involves assuring authenticity of your data sources through thorough note taking and data collection, and methodological triangulation, which is discussed later in this section, and validity. Validity was described in qualitative research by Lawrence (2015) as the appropriateness of methods and choice of data collection to make the study valid. Norms of validity and rigor in quantitative research are not equally applicable in qualitative research. Concerns of validity arise with qualitative research due to the potential subjectivity and bias of the researcher (Lawrence, 2015).

Validity. Lawrence (2015) indicated that for a qualitative study to be valid, it must consist of a distinctive sampling method, as well as specific data collection and analysis processes that can enhance validity. Validity can be enhanced through different methods of triangulation, multidimensional analysis, and verification from participants. Noble and Smith (2015) echoed these strategies, as well as noting that even though there is not a universally accepted criteria or terminology in place, it is still possible to utilize strategies to enhance credibility. Yin (2016) agreed that credibility and validity of research can be assured through properly transcribing and reporting data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further posited that there are three strategies that may be utilized to ensure credibility or validity of a qualitative research study, these being: (a) triangulation, or the use of collecting multiple sources of data, (b) member checks, that allows respondents to validate the information retrieved from interviews, and (c) data saturation, which is reached when the researcher feels the information received is repeating and no new information surfaces.

In addition, Tumele (2015) explained that to establish validity of a qualitative case study, one must reduce subjectivity of the researcher. This also can be accomplished through triangulation of the study. Validity of this study was established using: (a) audio recorded interviews, (b) field notes, (c) step-by-step thematic analysis, (d) member checking by allowing participants to verify interview transcripts and summaries, (e) peer debriefing to assure the coding process was accurate, (f) collecting and comparing three sources of data, and (g) reaching a point of data saturation in the data collection process.

Triangulation. Triangulation in qualitative research is to ensure validity and credibility of the research conducted by comparing two or more different data sources (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Triangulation can be reached and bias alleviated through four different methods: (a) investigator triangulation that correlates data findings from multiple researchers, (b) methodological triangulation that correlates multiple data collection sources, (c) theory triangulation that correlates different theoretical designs, and (d) data triangulation that correlates different sources in the same method (Fusch et al., 2017). This study employed the use of methodological triangulation to add depth to the findings and ensure validity and reliability.

Three different methods/data source collection were used to explore the same phenomenon. Houghton et al. (2013) described the use of multiple sources of data as confirming the data for completeness. Completeness is the concern of gathering multiple perspectives on one phenomena; therefore, maximizing the in-depth findings of the qualitative study and potential transferability. This study used three sources of data, semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observations of archived online courses, and document reviews to triangulate the data and confirm completeness.

Data saturation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed saturation of data as the point in data collection when no new ideas or insights into the phenomenon are reached, as well as, the point in the data analysis where no new categories or themes are produced. In data analysis, this is the point when the researcher begins to hear and identify the same responses from interview data and further analysis does not reveal new information. Fusch et al. (2017) described this as the point when further coding is not possible and there is enough information for the study to be replicable. Further, Palinkas et al. (2015) posited that emphasizing on data saturation produces a comprehensive understanding of the information. This study utilized the concept of purposeful sampling to identify students with a significant amount of experience in online nursing courses and therefore data saturation, or the point where no new information was revealed was noted after eight interviews.

Transferability. Yin (2016) described transferability as the notion that findings from a qualitative study may be transferred to another situation; however, uniqueness of certain situations may decrease the ability of the study to have the same implications under different conditions (Fusch et al., 2017). Transferability of a study is up to the reader, rather than the researcher to determine. However, providing sufficient descriptive data or completeness of the data presented allows the reader to make a judgement of the possibility of transferability (Houghton et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Reliability

When analyzing the term reliability in qualitative research, Aczel (2015) described it as a measurement method that suggested a study could be collected each time with the same phenomena. It is also noted that qualitative research brings up potential

issues with reliability, simply because one cannot adjust for subjectivity, and reliability does not ensure accuracy (Babbie, 2013). Reliability was described by Tumele (2015) as an important aspect of qualitative research and dictated by the method's structure and design that consistently produces the same results with re-execution. Campbell et al. (2013) explained that reliability in qualitative research as the ability to be reproduced and the ability to code the same data the same way with multiple coders that may interpret data differently with in-depth semi-structured interviews. Reliability of coding was addressed using four doctoral prepared professors with research experience and online teaching experience to review the transcripts and codes for plausibility. Coder agreement was reached through discussion of participant responses and potential themes. Initial themes were changed based on ideas from other coders.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posited that what makes a study rigorous or trustworthy is the design of the study. Triangulation offers benefits including diversity and quantity of data that increased confidence in the data (Houghton et al., 2013). Yin (2016) further promoted the use of methodological triangulation of data and its importance to qualitative research in describing its importance in increasing the credibility of a study. Anderson et al. (2014) argued that the use of multiple case studies allows for the comparison of data across sites, and that this type of research increases robustness and representativeness.

Data from three sources were compared, the first was semi-structured interviews. An interview protocol was created that addressed demographics and documented that the participant met the eligibility criteria for the study (See Appendix D). It first used ice breaker questions to get to know the participant further and build rapport, then followed

with open-ended questions that sought to answer the study's research questions: (a) How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs; (b) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs; and (c) How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Next, data collection included direct classroom observations of archived courses from spring 2017 that consisted of the researcher receiving permission to view online classes in the RN-BSN program at the case study unit. An observation protocol was created to identify the different activities and assignments utilized in the different online RN-BSN classrooms and compared to the information regarding preferences for different assignments and activities in the interviews. It was developed to identify if the activities and assignments discussed are in fact prominently used in the online classroom, as well as identifying collaboration and communication utilized in the classroom as compared to first hand reports of these activities and assignments collected from semi-structured interviews (See Appendix E).

Finally, document reviews and analysis from each program and course were conducted to triangulate the data and confirm completeness. Document reviews examined overall program requirements, syllabi, and course documents to verify if objectives and guidelines were clear, as well as what assignments and activities were being used to meet the objectives in the online RN-BSN program and courses. An artifact or document review protocol was used to collect this data (See Appendix F).

Data Collection and Management

After receiving proposal approval from AQR, the researcher applied for and secured IRB approval through Grand Canyon University IRB department. After receiving approval from the IRB at GCU and the university utilized in the study, the researcher worked with the university site to gain access to the students for interviewing. Simultaneously, the researcher worked with the course scheduler to identify available nursing courses offered during the semester of research and followed the process to gain access to observe the pertinent and available courses. Following the approval from all involved departments, data collection began.

The researcher took measures to protect participants' rights according to GCU IRB. Security and confidentiality of participants were assured through the development of an informed consent (See Appendix H). This consent form specifically identified that participants were provided detailed information regarding the nature of the study and would be allowed to ask questions, participants were all voluntary and were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and their privacy would be protected. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained using number designations for the identities of participants. Interviews were recorded and stored on an internal and external hard drive on a password-protected computer in a locked home office. All identifying information was removed from the field notes, and the field notes stored in a locked cabinet in the locked home office desk of the researcher. Signed consent forms were kept in a separate locked cabinet. Key codes were kept in a separate locked file cabinet, as well as an electronic copy on a separate computer than field notes in order to maintain confidentiality. All collected data will be maintained for three years following conferral

of the degree. After three years, all paper copies will be shredded, and all electronic copies will be deleted, as well as any identifying file names affiliated with this study.

Once the site authorizations were received and the authorization to conduct research from GCU IRB was obtained, all students in the nursing program being studied that met the purposeful sampling criteria were sent an email invitation to participate in the research study. Respondents to the e-mail invitation received and signed the appropriate consent form (See Appendix H), and was returned to the researcher upon completion. Participants were then contacted via email or telephone to set a time and place to conduct the interviews. Interviews were conducted by telephone or face-to-face. All interviews were recorded electronically, as well as through note taking during the interview. Hard copies of signed consent forms were obtained from each participant, as well as, verbal consent prior to each interview recording as noted in the verbatim transcripts.

It was recommended by Yin (2016) that a copy of the research questions for the study be with the researcher at every interview, observation or document review to keep the researcher focused on the study and to re-direct an interview if needed. An interview protocol document with each participant code was created for each interview to help guide or re-direct the interview if the interview would get off track and need re-direction to the interview questions. Following the review, the audio file was forwarded to rev.com for immediate transcript creation. Interviews were reviewed immediately following the close of each meeting to highlight and capture important information relevant to the study. After each interview took place, the analysis process followed. Field notes on emerging codes and themes and overall feelings of how the interview process went, as

well as potential changes to future interviews were kept in a designated notebook.

Interview recordings and notes will be kept for three years, and then destroyed following that three-year holding period.

Direct classroom observations were managed in a similar way as the interviews. The researcher viewed online classrooms and took detailed notes of the findings. The online classroom was viewed in an asynchronous manner; therefore, there was ample time to review aspects of a class more than once, and to go back and review again if it was found that information was missed. This is also true of document reviews, as much of that information is public information and viewable at any time. Documents that were pertinent were printed to use as reference. Further information that was not clear through direct classroom observation or document reviews were discussed with the instructors of the courses and the program director of the program to assure accuracy of data collected.

It was made clear to the students in the study that participation was voluntary, and the option to opt out or to withdraw consent and discontinue participation was available at any time without penalty. It was also made clear to the participants that there were no known risks of participating in this study. In addition, participants were made aware that in no way would participation affect future grades in the program.

Data Analysis Procedures

This qualitative exploratory single case study was guided by the questions: (a) how do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs? (b) how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online

RN-BSN programs? and (c) how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

The research questions provided the foundation for the development of the semi-structured interview question protocol (See Appendix D), observation protocol (See Appendix E), and the artifact review (See Appendix F). The pertinent qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews generated descriptions regarding the preferences for online activities and assignments in the online classroom as well as experiences that predicted how and why participants perceive certain assignments and activities to promote or hinder learning. Descriptions included experience with face-to-face learning and how it shaped their current preferences as well as specific reasons why activities and assignments were perceived to promote learning or hinder it. In addition, the data from the direct classroom observations which validated the use of certain activities and assignments, and the valued collaboration, feedback, and relationship development among students and their instructors were confirmed. Document reviews of the program and courses further authenticated the use of activities and assignments in the online nursing classrooms and gave further support to the thoughts and ideas shared by the participants in the semi-structured interviews and noted in the classroom observation.

Once all semi-structured interviews were transcribed; each interview was consolidated in a word document separately and printed for data analysis preparation. Transcripts were labeled according to the participant's numerical code and placed in folders and locked in a file cabinet. After each transcript was received, it was reviewed and then emailed to the participant for initial review of all verbatim transcripts. All initial transcripts were acceptable to participants with no disagreement noted. The only

feedback received on two of the transcripts were clarification on a term used that the transcriber was not familiar with. Madill and Sullivan (2017) argued that undertaking member checking could validate the participants' thoughts and ensure that the interviews captured the participants' point of view. Following the participant review of the verbatim transcripts, each participant was asked to review a summary of their thoughts and viewpoints in relation to each research question. Each participant agreed with the summary of the researcher. All data was collected initially utilizing the protocol developed for this study, then combined and transferred to a word documents that were printed for review. These documents were placed in a folder and kept in a locked file cabinet.

A thematic approach was conducted for this study's data analysis. Hatch (2002) described the process of data analysis as a systematic way of searching for meaning. Once meaning has been gleaned from the data obtained, it can then be shared with others. Qualitative data analysis, and specifically thematic analysis, is discussed by Vaughn and Turner (2016) as a way to analyze and communicate the findings of qualitative research. This type of analysis allows a researcher with a qualitative method and design to translate observations through themes and codes that enhance the clarity of the results. In this study, multiple data sources were used including: semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observations, and document reviews to answer the research questions. The data for this study was organized to correspond with the research questions (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Fugard and Potts (2015) described thematic analysis as a frequently used choice in the data analysis of psychology, healthcare, and social research. In analyzing the single case study in nursing research, thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis

is an inductive process of encoding qualitative information and findings from the data collection, and then developing themes from the list of codes in relation to research questions to construct a tentative answer to the question (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). The compilation of the codes identified were culminated into a codebook, and from there, themes were generated. Guest, MacQueen, & Namey (2012) explained that themes found in the data collected can capture depth and meaning, and ultimately may lead to interpretation of certain aspects of the phenomenon.

Data analysis began with a period of reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews and reviewing field notes to identify patterns and meaning that were related to the three research questions. Data was analyzed through the employment of an inductive coding process. Guest et al. (2012) described the inductive process as one that searches unique response from open-ended questions to identify ideas and themes across interviews. This qualitative exploratory single case study used an inductive analysis to identify new concepts and explanations from results of the study. First, analysis for this study consisted of preparing and organizing data inductively by hand coding, developing themes and categories in relationship to the analysis objectives before providing analysis through narratives (Guest et al., 2012; Yin, 2016). Hand coded data was transferred to word documents on the computer and organized into initial codes, then groups of codes, and further separated into themes. Vaughn and Turner (2016) suggested that coding qualitative data can be challenging, but identifying topics and themes can provide focus and results in meaningful information. Second, the codes were grouped together based on similar ideas and concepts and reviewed for common patterns. The groups of codes were then used to identify and develop overall themes (See Appendix I). The final step was to

link the findings of the analysis and themes to the phenomenon, research questions, and theoretical framework to interpret the data. Verbatim transcripts were also uploaded into the MAXQDA software program to further search for coded words and phrases and to further verify accuracy of hand coding.

Analysis of this qualitative exploratory single case study included pattern matching and theme identification for the interviews, direct classroom observation, and document reviews separately, but relationships in patterns of all data sources identified and compared. Each piece of information attained was examined in relation to each research question in order to develop a tentative answer. The first step in the thematic analysis process was to transcribe the data found and analyze the information. As raw information was reviewed, code development began as ideas and concepts were discovered in relation to the research questions. Open codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) or level 1 (Yin, 2016) codes were assigned based on initial review. After further review of the data, codes were connected by like ideas and concepts into fewer more comprehensive groups of codes, level 2 codes. The level 2 codes were further revisited, reflected upon, and refined to themes that most accurately addressed each research question. The data for this study was organized to correspond with the research questions. In addition to the step-by-step process, repeated readings and review of the data in relation to the research questions were conducted to identify patterns and meanings in the data collected. Throughout the analysis process, thoughts and ideas that emerged from immersion in the data was noted in a specified section that was frequently reviewed when determining final themes for dissemination of the findings. Finally, a codebook was developed to define the themes. The process of repeated reading and garnering ideas was

repeated for the classroom observation and document review data sources and were reviewed separately and then together to achieve data triangulation.

Each piece of information attained was examined in relation to each research question to develop a tentative answer. As with the initial analysis of each case, the research questions were constantly revisited to garner the information that answered the research questions asked, and fulfill the purpose of the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). All data was kept confidential throughout the study and information was kept in a private area and a private password protected computer was used to store retrieved data and recordings. Although the researcher was aware of the identity of the participants, Participants' names were not used on data collection materials and their privacy protection was a priority of the researcher.

To further ensure that the data collection process was complete and credible, the triangulation process was implemented. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources of data collection. This brings multiple perspectives to the findings, and therefore, maximizes the richness of the data and ensures validity (Houghton et al., 2013). The collected data in semi-structured interviews was compared to data found in online classroom observations and document reviews. The data collection process for online classroom observations used field notes (See Appendix E) to gather data on activities and assignments utilized in the observed classrooms, as well as participation of the students and instructors in order to confirm information gleaned from the interviews. This data was organized into themes identified through analysis of the data.

The online classrooms observed in this study were asynchronous with the option to attend or review an archive of a synchronous class meeting at any time. Therefore, data

analysis for course observation was different than for the semi-structured interviews. Archives of the courses observed in the study could be accessed 24 hours a day, as well as reviewed for an extended period until necessary data was collected. Learning assignments and activities were added to the list of observations and re-evaluation of data collection needs was constantly assessed throughout the data collection process. Findings of learning activities and assignments available to students, student participation, and reasons students prefer certain learning activities and assignments were identified and integrated into the thematic analysis of the interviews. Collection of program document data followed the same systematic review process as classroom observation (See Appendix E). The collected data was organized into codes and then themes and reported. In this piece of the data collection process, the researcher observed evidence of common activities and assignments that students expected to be assigned in coursework, as well as qualitative analysis of information in relation to the goals and objectives of the coursework. This was then compared to evidence found in the online course observations and semi-structured interviews. From this data, common pedagogy used in the RN-BSN classroom and perceived preferences of students were identified.

Ethical Considerations

The application to conduct the study was sent to the IRB department at GCU for approval (See Appendix B). Participants were chosen through purposeful sampling. Only students who were of millennial age, an RN enrolled in the RN-BSN online nursing program, who had taken at least one previous online class, were invited to participate. Informed consent from each participant was obtained prior to the start of the study, after informing the participant of the details of the research, as well as, risks and benefits. The

data gained from interviews were kept completely confidential and the students were explicitly given the right to decline to participate or opt out of interview questions at any time. Each participant was informed of his or her ability to drop out of the study at any time through written and verbal consent information prior to each interview.

Ethical issues may sometimes arise during qualitative research and participants may become uncomfortable sharing details of their educational journey. However, minimal risks were expected and all due diligence was performed in order to protect the participants' privacy and conduct an ethical study through the following:

- Each interviewee was treated with utmost respect and their identity was kept anonymous.
- Research was conducted in a fair and honest manner and all opinions were encouraged and accepted in an unbiased manner.
- Interviews were recorded to ensure that information was not based on memory and potentially misinterpreted. These interviews were destroyed following the completion of the study.

No part of this study was conducted without IRB approval from GCU, as well as the site utilized in the study (See Appendices A, B, C). Paper data retrieved during this study will be stored in a private secure area for three years following completion of the study and conferral of the degree. Electronic data retrieved from the study will be stored on the researcher's personal password protected private computer hard drive. Information retrieved in the study will only be shared for this dissertation.

Limitations and Delimitations

The following limitations/delimitations to the methodology of this study were present.

1. It was not possible to conduct all interviews through a face-to-face meeting due to the geographic location of the participants and researcher. In addition, internet

connectivity in the rural area that interviews were conducted was limited at the time of the study; therefore, most interviews were conducted by telephone in a private room with the conversation conducted by speaker and a recording device placed next to the phone. The inability to identify body language and facial expression was a limitation to this medium for interviews.

2. Qualitative data may be subject to alternate interpretations (Hatch, 2002). It was realized that qualitative research design is complex and interview data is based on personal experience and opinions of the participants; therefore, it was essential to be objective and systematically analyze each interview in the same manner to identify meanings in the responses.
3. A small sample size of nursing students enrolled in an online RN-BSN program in Illinois was utilized; therefore, it may not apply to all nurses making it less generalizable to all millennial RN-BSN students.
4. All participants in the study had the researcher in at least one previous course. Although the participants of the study were not in a course taught by the researcher at the time of data collection, the potential for respondent bias where students may feel that they cannot be as open or candid with the researcher due to the student-professor relationship in the classroom or may feel that they will be penalized if they were honest was a potential limitation. In addition, Yin (2016) noted that this could potentially lead to bias of the researchers. In a situation where the researcher has prior experience with the student in the classroom and the student responses do not match past performance, could lead to bias of the researcher in collecting and analyzing the student's responses.
5. The qualitative exploratory single case study of preferences for assignments in RN-BSN nursing programs was limited to a sample size of 11 interviews. The small sample size limits the study in that the results may not provide the richness or depth of a larger study and therefore may limit the quality or validity of the study.
6. The interview candidates and information available was also dependent on the age of students enrolled in the programs at the time of research, which predicted the sample size. In addition, not all available course offerings in the program were offered every semester; therefore, the study was limited to the courses offered during the research period.
7. The information gathered was subjective student self-report and does not reflect actual validation assessment of student learning.
8. A delimiting factor was that the nursing profession is predominately female; therefore, it does not provide a cross-representation of gender. Only three of the 11 students interviewed in the study were male.
9. A lack of representation from other generations in the same program may be a delimiting factor.

The qualitative exploratory single case study of preferences for activities and assignments in RN-BSN nursing programs was limited to a sample size of 11 interviews from one university. In addition, course observations of activities and assignments were limited to the three courses offered during the research period. This means that not all available program course offerings were available for observation due to time constraints. The available courses offered in the spring semester 2017, for this research study, were Theoretical Foundations of Professional Nursing Practice, Professional Seminar, and Research in Professional Nursing Practice at the unit of study.

Choices were made to limit the scope of study. The delimitations of this study included: (a) the choice of the problem; (b) purpose; (c) research questions; (d) theoretical framework; (e) population; (f) the type of methodology. The problem in this study addresses the finding in the research that millennial student populations have different preferences for learning activities in the online setting.

Research questions chosen for this study were used to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred).

The study addressed the following research questions: (a) how do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs; (b) how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs; (c) how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Chang et al. (2015) suggested that students have distinct preferences for online learning activities that may be related to their life experiences and past online classroom experiences and understanding, these experiences can enhance the learning process with Crews and Neill (2014), as well as, Suell and Whitsett (2013) in agreement. Social Constructivism was chosen as the theoretical framework because understanding students' previous experiences and preferences can influence new knowledge, and the online classroom is a mixture of learning through connecting to others and learning from them through technology (Major, 2015). Bryant and Bates (2015) solidified the choice for the Social Constructivist approach by explaining that learners construct new knowledge and make sense of the world around them through interaction with others such as text and social media.

Limiting the sample and population size allowed the study to focus on millennial nursing students' preferences for activities and assignments while developing a manageable study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016), as well as Yin (2016) recommended the sample size to be determined by saturation of information received; therefore, when themes repeat themselves or redundancy is noted, the sample size is adequate. In an attempt to identify a specific number for this study to reach saturation, ten interviews were determined to be the minimum number to be conducted, with the plan to conduct more interviews if necessary to reach saturation. Additionally, Cleary et al. (2014) stated that purposeful sampling of participants with experience and knowledge on the topic being studied allows the researcher to study small numbers intensively. This delimitation strategy is utilized to collect the data necessary to reach saturation in a small study.

The design of the study was developed with the intent to transfer the data collected in the study to other RN-BSN online programs. The sample was purposeful in that the study sought participants who met the minimum eligibility criteria and were born between the years of 1982-2000, be registered nurses enrolled in one of the two RN-BSN programs in the study, and have taken at least one online course prior to this research. Participants chosen to participate first were participants with more experience in online nursing courses and had taken three or more online nursing classes. The study was further delimited to one university in Illinois. Cleary et al. (2014) justified the use of a limited study size for the novice interviewer in qualitative research because too large a sample size can lead to a large amount of data that is non-conducive to an in-depth analysis needed in a qualitative study. A definitive guide to the acceptable number of interviews necessary to reach saturation was not located in the literature; therefore, Grand Canyon University guidelines of at least 10 participants for a qualitative case study was used as the initial target number. Initially 12 interviewees were identified, with 11 committing to interview. Purposeful sampling was utilized to identify participants with significant experience in online RN-BSN courses. Palinkas et al. (2015) identified the employment of purposeful sampling as a way to produce rich data and gain data saturation. The number of interview participants required in a qualitative study is an iterative approach that depends on the point of data saturation rather than the number of participants (Fusch et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015) It was intended to increase the number of interviews needed in order to reach data saturation in this study; however, data saturation was reached after eight interviews.

Validity that is inherently decreased by limitations can be increased through choice of method. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that using more than one site or case and using purposeful sampling could make the findings more transferable to the reader of the study; however, transferability is always left up to the reader to decide (Fusch et al., 2017). The design used for this study ensured a deep and contextual understanding of the millennial students' preferences for different online activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs. Yin (2016) noted that limitations of a study, as well as the uniqueness of qualitative study, create concern as to the transferability of the study. The researcher was aware that the nature of this study might not enable transferability, but rather new information that would add to the body of knowledge and propel future studies.

Summary

This chapter presented a specific explanation of this qualitative exploratory single case study. It was not known what the preferred learning activities and assignments for millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs. Also, was not known how/why millennial nursing students believe certain assignments and learning activities facilitate and hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. Past research found that the millennial generation is different from other generations and have different ideas and preferences on how best to learn in the online classroom (Robb, 2016). However, there is a lack of research concerning the millennial generation and more specifically online millennial RN-BSN students.

The literature review verified that very little research in nursing education, and a limited amount of education research on this problem was found to be conducted to date. According to the founders of the Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), students create new knowledge and create frameworks to build on from previous experiences. Hunter and Krantz (2010) suggested that theorists believe that learners understand new knowledge from the basis of previous knowledge and life experiences, and that through these different experiences students assume different meaning and value that is then applied to their learning. Further, Vygotsky (1978) believed that students gain a great deal of knowledge from social interaction that has a significant influence on cognitive development. Vygotsky argued that learning is highly dependent on interactions with others because individuals are inseparable from each other.

This chapter detailed a thorough description of this study's research methodology. A qualitative exploratory single case study research design was employed for this study. Case study research allows the researcher to more deeply understand and explore a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study design was to explore the perceived learning activities and assignments preferred by millennial nursing students in the online RN-BSN nursing program at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois. The rationale for a qualitative exploratory single case study design was to use data results to better understand this unique cohort of students and use the data to improve teaching and learning in online nursing courses. Tumele (2015) described case study research as a good choice of methodology when the study focuses on exploring the phenomenon and asking *how* and *why* questions. To explore the phenomenon and address the problem

statement, the single case study research design was guided by the following three research questions:

- RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs?
- RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?
- RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Fusch et al. (2017) described the necessity of triangulation in a qualitative study to ensure the results are valid or truthful, and transferable. Methodological triangulation was employed through the collection of multiple data sources to garner a deeper understanding of the needs of the specific group in the study and answer the research questions. Data in this study was collected from direct classroom observations, program document reviews, and semi-structured interviews of students in this group were used to create an overall holistic picture of the research problem.

Field notes from semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observations, and document reviews were used to answer the research questions. Cronin (2014) noted that the use of triangulation of data methods in qualitative case study research mitigated the bias that may emerge in single data collection research; therefore, triangulation is necessary to completeness or validation of the study findings. When defining the term validity in qualitative research, the use of the words dependability and trustworthiness closely corresponds to the concept of validity in quantitative research. Houghton et al. (2013) indicated that traditionally internal and external validity were necessary, but it is

most important in case study research to have credibility and rigor. Therefore, reliability and validity are both necessary and qualitative studies should center on trustworthiness and credibility, as well as demonstrating reliability that is the ability for the study to be repeated. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that a study design itself does not ensure rigor, but rather in the quality and integrity of the techniques utilized, as well as the ethical stance of the researcher. Further, thorough and rich data presented allow the reader to determine transferability of the study (Fusch et al., 2017)

Data collection included three sources: (a) semi-structured interviews from purposely chosen students, (b) online direct classroom observation, and (c) document reviews. A small sample size of 11 participants from case study unit was used; therefore, hand coded thematic analysis was used to manage the data as it became available. Data management is crucial to the analysis of the study, and much time was spent in organizing data. In this study, the researcher read and re-read data collected, mined the data to identify codes, created a codebook, merged codes and developed themes for each research question. Codes were described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as one word or short phrases assigned to various aspects of the data for easy identification. This style of management was utilized throughout the data analyses process.

Involvement in this study was strictly voluntary, and participants were given the option to leave the study at any time without consequence. Throughout the qualitative exploratory single case study, utmost care was taken to preserve the protection and confidentiality of the participants. Babbie (2013) noted that often in social research, participants reveal personal issues and share opinions that are specific to them. It is imperative that the researcher be acutely aware of the agreements made between the

participant and the researcher to conduct an ethical study. The participants received and signed a consent form prior to the study, with consent reviewed on the day of the interview allowing for any questions or concerns to be addressed with each participant. All information obtained during the study was kept strictly confidential, and the results of this research study will be eventually published as a dissertation. Potential limitations/delimitations of study included the impossibility to conduct all interviews through a face-to-face meeting, small sample size in one university, and the confirmation that participants of the study had the instructor in past coursework. Yin (2016) noted that this could potentially lead to bias of the researchers. It was reinforced to the participants that there would be no future penalties in future course due to participation in the study. The guidelines for protection of everyone that participated in the study by the IRB and Grand Canyon University were utilized.

The researcher discussed the problem, phenomenon, research questions, design of the study, sample, and setting for the research study, as well as the data collection methods and methods used for data analysis and synthesis. Potential limitations, ethical considerations, validity/reliability, rigor, and issues of trustworthiness and completeness were discussed regarding the qualitative exploratory single case study design. Chapter 4 includes an in-depth discussion regarding the data collected for the study. There is also a complete discussion of analysis procedures regarding the data collected for this study, as well as the details from the analysis. Following the analysis of the collected data, there is dialog regarding conclusions and implications derived from the results of this study.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences for activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred) as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. The aim was to seek an understanding of the preferences of this specific group and more effectively engage and instruct students in the online nursing classroom. Also, the aim was to explore and understand in-depth the phenomenon of consistent growth of online classrooms and the growing millennial population in higher education and their specific preferences through their thoughts and opinions. Qualitative data can provide the opportunity to explore and understand complex and multifaceted situations (Anderson et al., 2014). Qualitative research seeks to understand how people interpret their world by exploring feelings and thoughts about the lived experience. Literature reviewed and data gathered through qualitative research provided a more comprehensive exploration into the perceived preferences of millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs to answer the research questions. The qualitative exploratory single case study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs?
- RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?

RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

The implementation of a qualitative exploratory single case study design allowed the researcher to explore the different academic experiences and preferences noted by the millennial generation (Woods et al., 2011). The triangulation of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews validated the results of the study. Chapter 4 will provide an in-depth description of how the researcher collected and analyzed data and addressed the three research questions. The study provided a detailed description of the participants' demographics, followed by a discussion on data analysis and triangulation procedures. The study will then discuss the results of the data analysis addressing the study's research questions. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Descriptive Data

This section provides details regarding the description of the sample population that was used to explore the phenomenon in this study. The study was conducted with the use of 11 participants. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants for this study using one RN-BSN program in Southeastern Illinois. First, participants that met the eligibility criteria for the study were identified through search of program enrollment data at the university. The specific criteria were that the participants had to be born between the years 1982-2000, have taken at least one online course prior to the semester that the study was going to take place, and be enrolled in the RN-BSN program during that semester. The search for students resulted in 19 potential students to participate in the study. Fifteen out of the 19 participants were purposefully chosen to extend an invitation to participate in the study because they had taken at least three or more online courses

and it was felt that more experience would yield richer data that could thoroughly answer the research questions.

After IRB approval was obtained (See Appendix B), the 15 participants chosen were extended an invitation through email using the invitation letter for interviews (See Appendix D). Twelve of the 15 participants responded and shared personal emails and telephone numbers where they could be reached. Ultimately, after emailing and calling, 11 participants responded and agreed to schedule an interview. One student responded to the initial invitation, but did not respond to a follow-up phone call and email to schedule an interview. Consent forms and a copy of the invitation letter for interviews, along with a self-addressed stamped envelope were mailed to each participant for their convenience.

Following a test interview, eleven semi-structured interviews were completed in a two-week period culminating in 191 pages of typed transcripts. Each interview took place in a private home office and lasted an average of 45 minutes, with one lasting an hour and 15 minutes, and one lasting only 35 minutes. One audio-recorded interview was completed face-to-face; all others were completed by telephone using the speaker phone mode with a recording device next to the phone. Most interviews were audio-recorded by speakerphone due to the geographical distance between the participants and researcher.

The program utilized enrolls students from all over the state of Illinois and only one participant lived within one hour of the researcher. The age range of the participants was 25-35 years, with the work experience as an RN ranging from 1-6 years. The group consisted of 7 Caucasian females and 1 Mexican female, and 1 Mexican male and 2 Caucasian males. Ten of the 11 participants were graduates of an associate degree program, with one graduating from a diploma program. All participants had completed

four or more online nursing courses in the program with overall total online course experience ranging from 8-20 previous courses.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to collect information on how and why millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs perceive assignments and activities in the online classroom to promote learning or hinder it. Yin (2016) described an inductive approach to data collection in that concepts emerge from that data, and in contrast, a deductive approach is guided by concepts. An inductive approach was used to allow codes and themes to naturally develop rather than a deductive approach that used pre-conceived ideas to guide the student through questions about specific assignments and activities. These exploratory open-ended questions generated thick descriptions of current qualitative data in answering the research questions as they relate to the lived experience and current obstacles that the millennial RN-BSN student encounters in reaching the goal of a bachelor's degree in nursing. Thick descriptions of the data generated involved thoughts, opinions, and storytelling of experiences that they perceived promoted or hindered learning in the online classroom. Data was initially coded using frequency of codes or code repetition to recognize common ideas and develop themes (Guest et al., 2012). Frequency of codes was then compared to research questions to identify relevant themes (See Appendix I).

Further data was collected using classroom observations of the three nursing classes that were offered in the spring semester 2017. First, permission was received through the IRB at the research site, followed by permission from the director of the college of sciences and the director of nursing and faculty in the program. Access was given to the archives of the completed courses and the classroom observation protocol

(See Appendix E), as well as collaboration with course professors, was used to verify assignments and activities utilized in the classroom. The courses were observed for the use of assignments, student participation, faculty/student and student/student communication and faculty feedback. One source of information that was not available to view was faculty/student emails, due to their potential personal nature. Information regarding the general use of email was identified through information received from the instructors of the course. A piece of specific course information was not available for view in one course. Due to a technical issue, course lecture recordings were lost and irretrievable in the Professional Nursing course. In this instance, the researcher relied on the instructor's recollection of participation and activities experienced in the live lectures for the course. The final source of the data collection was the review of course documents. The artifact review document (See Appendix F) was utilized to identify and verify evidence of activities and assignments and alignment with objectives that students were expected to experience in the courses and program. Artifacts reviewed were the program handbook, course syllabi, course calendars, and the program website. Data was collected over a two-week period of time in June 2017. Thirty-six pages of typed field notes were collected during direct classroom observations and document review and analysis.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics by Participant

Age	Gender/ ethnicity	Area of nursing	Reason for seeking degree	Number of years worked as an RN	Number of nursing courses/total courses	ADN/ Diploma Program	Online/ f2f/ hybrid
32	Female/Caucasian	Rehabilitation	Advance degree	3	5/8	ADN	Face-to- face
25	Female/Caucasian	Obstetrics	Advance degree	1	5/9	ADN	Face-to- face
31	Female/Caucasian	Emergency	Advance degree	2	6/13	ADN	Face-to- face
35	Male/Mexican	Cardiovascul ar Intensive Care	Advance degree/ Required	2	8/10	ADN	Face-to- face
29	Female/Caucasian	Intensive Care	Required	5	4/6	ADN	Face-to- face
27	Male/Caucasian	Interventional Radiology	Required	3	8/15	Diploma	hybrid
25	Female/Caucasian	Rehabilitation	Advance degree	2	8/20	ADN	hybrid
34	Female/Caucasian	Obstetrics	Advance degree/ Required	6	5/9	ADN	Face-to- face
26	Female/Caucasian	Medical/ Surgical	Required	5	6/10	ADN	Face-to- face
27	Male/Caucasian	Intensive Care	Advance degree	2	6/10	ADN	Face-to- face
26	Female/Mexican	Rehabilitation	Required	2	6/10	ADN	Face-to- face

Data Analysis Procedures

Thematic analysis was the approach selected to analyze the data for this study. Thematic analysis is a method that moves beyond simply identifying words in text, but rather is used for identifying and describing ideas within the data (Guest et al., 2012). In conducting a thematic analysis, a step-by-step process of analysis was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, the transcripts and field notes were read and thoughts and ideas on

how the information answered the research questions were made in the margins. Next, open codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) or level 1 (Yin, 2016) codes were assigned based on initial review. After further review of the data, codes were combined into fewer more comprehensive groups of codes (level 2 codes). The level 2 codes were further revisited, revised, and refined to themes that most accurately addressed each research question. The data for this study was organized to correspond with the research questions. In addition to the step-by-step process, repeated readings and review of the data in relation to the research questions were conducted to identify patterns and meanings in the data collected. During the analysis process, ideas and musings were marked for coding that related to the three research questions and a codebook was developed. The process was repeated for the three sources of data and was reviewed separately and then together to achieve methodological triangulation.

For this qualitative exploratory single case study, a qualitative inductive analysis was employed where raw data was identified and further developed into broader concepts and categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Along with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) step-by-step analysis, the five-phased process developed by Yin (2016) helped to guide this analysis. Yin (2016) describes analyzing qualitative data as a five-phased process. The five phases include first, the *compiling* phase, involving sorting through the data collected and formally arranging in a useful order. This is followed by the *disassembling* phase involving a re-organization or breaking down of the data into parts and assigning labels. Next, the data is re-assessed and revised into different groupings as necessary and is the *reassembling* phase. It is noted that steps two and three may need to be repeated. The fourth phase is the *interpreting* phase and involves creating narrative and meaning to

the data. The final phase is the *concluding* phase that involves interpretation and development of further questions derived from the interpretation phase.

The analysis for this study consisted of preparing and organizing data inductively by hand coding, developing themes and categories in relationship to the analysis objectives before providing analysis through narratives (Guest et al., 2012; Yin, 2016). A code in qualitative inquiry represents a component of a theme and is often a word or short phrase that identifies a meaningful segment (Guest et al., 2012). Yin (2016) explained that a code is an assignment of words or phrases that represents raw data that captures meaning of a phenomenon and usable in developing themes. Coding then allows for the action of connecting codes to identify patterns in the data.

Two levels of coding were used in analyzing the data for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Yin (2016) described two levels of codes for analyzing qualitative interviews. The first can be a level one or open code that is comprised of initial codes or words or phrases in the raw data, with a second code comprising of a set of codes that were developed into themes. In analyzing the data, 60 level 1 initial codes were produced by going through each verbatim transcript and field notes line by line and noting key words and phrases that repeated throughout the data. These initial codes had meaning related to each research question and how and why millennial nursing students in RN-BSN online courses prefer certain activities and assignments online. It was noted that there was some overlap of codes that were linked to more than one of the research questions. After analyzing four of the 11 interviews, it was noted that dominant codes started emerging. After 8 of the 11 interviews no new ideas or codes emerged; however, it was noted that throughout the analysis, words or phrases would be noted that did not

have a clear connection to the research questions and therefore, it was determined to not include in the codebook. Guest et al (2012) asserted that these potential themes, although noticeable, does not mean they are noteworthy. As the analysis progressed, level 1 coding was completed.

The coding of the data then moved to level 2 where codes were re-read and compared for phrases and ideas that answered the research questions. The most common technique used in developing level 2 codes was the use of identifying repetition in codes. Guest et al (2012) indicated that if a code consistently occurs throughout or across transcripts, it is likely a theme. In addition, patterns were identified in the codes with the objectives of the study in mind. The codes were then combined and re-assembled into groups and themes which shared commonality of meaning to the three research questions and definitions were assigned (See Appendix I). For instance, the theme Lecture evolved through the consistent mention of live and recorded lectures across all interviews. Some of the comments were, “lectures really help me learn,” “Lectures help me focus in a face-to-face class,” and “lecture recordings allow for you to go back and listen later.” The frequency of the comments and discussion about lectures and their relation to learning noted relevance of the topic to answering the research questions. Another example of generating themes from codes was the theme Research Required. Many thoughts and comments were shared about the need to “find answers on their own,” “look for answers,” “write in their own words,” and “explore other sources than the book for answers” culminated in the overarching theme that the participants preferred doing research to get the answers rather than simple assignments. Participant 005 described a presentation as a research project and stated, “it helped to build my knowledge and it

makes me look up different information that I didn't know before and I think it was very helpful." Eight Level 2 category codes were grouped from Level 1 open codes (See Table 3).

Table 3

Level 1 and Level 2 Codes Emerging From Sources of Data

Combined Level 1 Initial Codes	Level 2 Category Codes
Prefer face-to-face classes	Preferences for Face-to-face activities
Prefer online	Influences to choose online learning/activities
Online is convenient	Instructor Engagement
Online is flexible	Clear Directions
Life and work prevents face-to-face programs	Thought Provoking
Must be accountable and responsible for your own learning online	Lectures
Family obligations	Uninvolved instructors
Lectures help learning	Assignments that do not challenge the student
Distractions at home	
Forced to pay attention in face-to-face	
Work schedule	
Engaging/interactive activities	
Revisit/rewind recorded lectures	
Auditory learner	
Hands-on learner	
Activities relevant to nursing practice	
Clear purpose	
Thought provoking	
Look for information on your own/research	
Engaged/available instructors	
Use of other sources web links/videos/articles	
Clear assignments/outlines	
Instructor feedback	
Prefer email	
Quick assignments that are not challenging	
Not good with technology	

Once initial codes were generated, all codes were reviewed, combined for like ideas, and then the process of identifying themes took place (See Appendix I). The next step of the process was to refocus and look for broader themes in relation to the research questions to be answered. It was initially found that there were overlaps in codes for the

research questions. In asking how and why students perceived preferences for online assignments and activities, it was noted that a reason given answered both why a student feels an activity may hinder or promote learning. For example, the idea of activities having a “clear purpose,” for assignments was noted by one student to promote learning a concept, whereas another student identified that not having a clear purpose for an assignment can create confusion and hinder learning the concept. This was considered when reviewing codes and grouping Level 2 themes into potential themes.

A theme or category is described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as a comprehensive representation of a group of codes. Level 2 grouped codes was devised by using an inductive approach that viewed the codes through the epistemological framework of the constructivist theory focusing on how the participants constructed their knowledge or made meaning of their experience. Each Level 2 grouped codes were entered into a word document and the codebook with a brief description or definition. The codes were then cut and pasted into folders for each theme identified for each research question in the study. Corresponding field notes were coded for easy return to excerpts and quotes corresponding to each theme. Once all relevant codes were grouped and reviewed again, transcripts, summaries, and themes were sent to two colleagues that are experts in the field of nursing education and hold a Doctorate Degree for feedback on plausibility of the final code grouping and themes based on the raw data. Once each Level 2 grouped codes were determined to have relevance, the codes were collapsed into themes and given a theme name (See Appendix I). The overall goal of thematic analysis in this qualitative exploratory single case study was to identify emerging themes that

corresponded to and answers the research questions to better understand millennial online nursing student needs and facilitate and promote learning.

Methodological (within method) triangulation. Methodological triangulation refers to the use of three different methods of data sources on separate occasions to converge to gain a thorough understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posited that triangulation is the best strategy in qualitative research to compare or cross-check data through the investigation of different sources that ultimately increases internal validity and credibility of the research findings. To study how and why millennial nursing students perceive certain assignments to promote or hinder their learning, the study used methodological triangulation in collecting data from multiple sources. Methodological triangulation was utilized to ensure evidence was convincing and confirmed through multiple sources in the qualitative exploratory single case study, allowing for validity and reliability of the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016).

This study specifically utilized three sources of data: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews and analysis. In triangulating the data, each source of data was analyzed independently; the semi-structured interviews were completed, reviewed, and coded first. After the semi-structured interviews were coded, the findings from the classroom observations and document reviews were compared and integrated into the codebook to be analyzed together. The classroom observation data was first reviewed for activities and assignments utilized and then compared to the responses from the participants in relation to the activities and assignments discussed in the interviews to verify that described experiences of the participants were observed in the online classroom. The program documents were further reviewed to validate common

activities and assignments that students could anticipate being assigned. This exercise in data collection further identified directions given, expected communication techniques to be utilized, and assignments and activities used to meet course and program. The result of the data collected in the classroom direct observations and document reviews substantiated the themes that emerged from the coded data confirmed the validity of the data collected in the semi-structured interviews. These findings are presented with tables in the results section of this chapter. The triangulating process provided comprehensive data and allowed the study to conclude results that addressed the three research questions posed by this study, as well develop conclusions from the data.

Validity. Validity in research is the assurance that a measure being used to reflect meaning, adequately reflects meaning or measures what it is intended to measure (Babbie, 2013; Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). In qualitative case study research, validity is concerned with the triangulation of data sources or establishing a chain of evidence (Tumele, 2015). Ensuring validity is about conducting a well-designed study that employs rigor and is conducted in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Yin (2016) suggested that triangulation is a key component for validity of a qualitative study due to the process of converging detailed and varied data from multiple sources.

Transferability. Further, establishing triangulation of the study can produce in-depth and thick descriptions of the data that create credibility and transferability in a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This allows the reader ample data to determine transferability to other similar settings (Fusch et al., 2017). Yin (2016) posited that transferability of qualitative research results is similar to analytic generalizability in

quantitative research. It was also thought by Yin that due to the uniqueness of cases in qualitative research, the reader can conclude the ability of the data results to be transferred or used as a working hypothesis to build new studies.

The study triangulated data from: (a) semi-structured interviews, (b) direct classroom observations, and (c) program and course document reviews. The results of the themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews and coded data were verified and validated with the direct classroom observations and document reviews, and confirmed the findings. The findings are presented with tables in the results section of this chapter. Along with triangulation of the data, field notes of the findings as they were related to the three research questions were kept identifying all pertinent data. Member checks or respondent validation is described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) as bringing summaries of the findings back to the participants of the study to verify the plausibility of the findings and further validate the study. This was employed and all verbatim transcripts, as well as, interview summaries of responses to each research question were presented to each participant for review.

Credibility refers to the value and believability of findings and is directly related to the ability to demonstrate engagement in data collection and demonstrated proof that conclusions were made only after sufficient evidence was identified and saturation was achieved (Houghton et al., 2013). In addition to triangulation to enhance credibility, this qualitative exploratory single case study also employed peer debriefing, member checking, and collecting data until saturation was noted. Employing strategies to establish credibility are what Guest et al. (2012) described as truth value of a study, and enhances believability.

Enhancing validity and credibility in qualitative studies involve conducting the research in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this qualitative exploratory single case study, the study adhered to ethical procedures. First, no part of the study was conducted prior to receiving IRB permission from Grand Canyon University. Second, each interviewee was provided informed consent both a paper copy mailed to the participant and a verbal consent prior to each interview and was recorded. Each participant was informed of the Potential risks were the concerns of participant confidentiality, as well as receiving sensitive client information from social work organizations. Strict confidentiality was maintained of all data collected during the research in accord with agreements reached with the participant while obtaining informed consent. The participant was informed they could speak freely and openly with no risk of future repercussions in future classes. Additionally, each participant was assigned a number to protect their identity and all information retrieved was kept strictly confidential and kept in a locked cabinet and/or personal computer with pass code protection.

The study established trustworthiness by utilizing methodological triangulation, peer briefing, member checking, data saturation, utilizing an audit-trail, and ethical procedures. The study used multiple sources of data collection to confirm findings. Findings from the study were taken back to the participants from whom they were derived and asked if they were plausible. The researcher engaged in a discussion with colleagues regarding the process of the study, the congruency of emergent findings with the data, and tentative interpretations. An audit trail was used with a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study. This is essential in

any sort of research; the researcher must present himself as having a considerable amount of ethics and integrity. When preparing the data collection protocols, the study considered the potential ethical issues that can be anticipated in the study such as informed consent, confidentiality, data collection and analysis, researcher/ participant relationship and reporting the final outcomes of the study. In addition, this study provided enough information ensuring the protection of human subjects. Protocols provided detail of the manner in which the study was conducted, followed by details of access to participants, informed consent, and storage of the data (Houghton et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The researcher, as the interviewer, adopted the same consistent behavior and demeanor when interviewing participants. The researcher reviewed with each participant the purpose of the interview, the approximate amount of time needed for the interview, and when the participant may expect to receive transcripts and summaries from the interviews (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Accordingly, the researcher reviewed with each participant the purpose of the interview, and the approximate amount of time the interview would take. Participants were informed that all responses would be kept strictly confidential after the interviews were completed.

The researcher engaged in member checking to correct errors of fact or errors of interpretation from the participants through email transmission of verbatim transcripts and summaries of interviews in relation to the research questions being answered. None of the participants voiced inaccuracies of overall responses and ideas conveyed; however, there were spelling errors noted and relayed to the researcher. The researcher recruited a non-participating individual to field test the interview process.

Results indicated that questions were appropriate to answer the research questions and that the researcher would need to be diligent with follow-up questions to gather more in-depth responses from participants. This process confirmed appropriateness in gathering the data to answer the study's research questions. The researcher also used the classroom observation form with a class not utilized in the study and the artifact or document review and analysis form with that course's documents to identify problems and confirm the forms ability to collect the appropriate data prior to the start of the study. Piloting the protocols assured that the study was doable. During the development of the protocols a panel of experts was used to review and discuss processes and potential outcomes of the study instruments prior to data collection and analysis. This process was both formal through sharing of information through email and informally discussing the progress of the study in passing or during collaboration in departmental meetings that the expert works.

Reliability. Reliability is the degree to which a research technique can be applied repeatedly and yield the same outcome (Babbie, 2013). Reliability is established through the process of developing case study protocol and following the protocol every time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tumele, 2015). Therefore, the study provided detailed and thorough explanations of how the data was collected and analyzed by providing an audit-trail. The researcher used a case study protocol as an audit-trail to establish replicability of the research procedures used in this case study. An audit-trail is a detailed outline of methods, procedures, and decision made in carrying out the study (Houghton et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking was utilized as a measure of quality assurance in the study that allowed participants to view and review the interpretations of

the study findings and present transparency of the research (Guest et al., 2012). Fusch et al. (2017) posited that thorough data collection and analysis, as well as including participants in the review of the data collected, is important to the transferability of a study. As Guest et al. (2012) noted, transferability is determined by the reader of the research findings, but presentation of thorough and in-depth findings allows the reader to identify transferability.

Tumele (2015) posited that qualitative researchers must develop and document the conduction process for a case study. The steps of this qualitative exploratory single case study addressed each procedure to support reliability within the study by using the case study conduction process as an audit-trial. The precise procedures of defining the case (what is being studied), selecting the type of design (single case study), and employing theoretical perspectives supported the reliability of this study. Furthermore, to strengthen the study's validity and reliability, member checking was used. Upon completion of transcriptions, and first analysis of the data, participants were forwarded a copy of their transcribed semi-structured interview and asked to review the transcription and analysis for accuracy. None of the participants identified inaccuracies and the study concluded no known errors in the data collection process.

Results

The following is a presentation of the results of analysis for the data collected while conducting this qualitative exploratory single case study. The research questions in this study directed the analysis of the data. This section is organized by the presentation of themes that answered each research question. The sources of data chosen for the qualitative exploratory single case study provided an exploratory view of the research

questions. As the data was analyzed and triangulated, the research questions addressed various perspectives regarding perceived preferences of millennial online RN-BSN students and how and why the preferences arise in this specific group. As 8 grouped codes collapsed into themes through data triangulation and analysis, results from the perspectives of the participants answered the research questions (See Table 4).

Table 4

Group Codes and Emerged Themes

Research Question	Groups of Codes	Emerged Themes
RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments?	More focus in face-to-face activities More accountability online Convenient Family obligations	Face-to-face preferred Obligations influence choice
RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?	Available/engaged/active Show your knowledge Look up answers Feel like you are in the classroom	Instructor commitment Lectures Relevance to practice Research Required
RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?	Minimal feedback Simple assignments	Not challenging Uninvolved Instructors

RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs? The purpose of this research question was to explore how millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in the online classroom. Questions asked during the semi-structured interviews were specifically designed to address this question. With the rapid expansion of online RN-BSN programs to increase

the number of bachelor's prepared RNs and the need to accommodate different learning needs of the millennial nursing student and seamless transition from ADN programs to promote success is pertinent (AACN, 2015b). Hence, the content of the interview questions to address this question related to how participants felt about online learning and the transition from face-to-face programs to completely online delivery of pedagogy. In addressing this research question, two themes, prefer face-to-face and obligations influence choices emerged from the data collected throughout the semi-structured interviews.

Table 5

Semi-Structured Interview/Classroom Observation/Document Review Alignment With Research Question 1 and Emerging Theme

Research Question	Experience	Interview Questions	Emerging Theme
RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments?	Was the previous program you attended delivered face-to-face, online, or both/hybrid?	Please tell me about your experience with the online nursing program. Do you like it?	Face-to-face preferred Obligations influence choice
	How many previous online courses completed?	Tell me about the kinds of learning activities that you are assigned to understand or learn concepts. Are these activities conducive to learning? Are their ones you like?	
		Tell me about the kinds of learning activities that you are assigned to understand or learn concepts. Are these activities conducive to learning? Are their ones you like?	
		What kind of assignments have you experienced? How facilitate your learning?	

When participants were asked about how their preferences for learning activities and assignments were developed students predominately chose to discuss their history of face-to-face courses and their preference for face-to-face options. Participants mentioned that they “prefer face-to-face courses” or “online is convenient but easy to get distracted” and “face-to-face provides more focus.” Six of the eleven participants identified a preference for face-to-face classes and only one definitively noted that they prefer online learning; however, ten of the participants alluded to the convenience and flexibility of online learning and the inability to commit to face-to-face courses at the time of the interview due to work and family obligations.

Emergent theme one: Face-to-face preferred. This theme became apparent and pertained to the preferences of the millennial age nurses that participated in the semi-structured interviews. The participants in this study agreed that face-to-face coursework was the preferred medium for learning in the higher education setting (see Appendix J). It was also noted that 9 of the 11 participants graduated from an associate degree nursing program that was strictly face-to-face, with two experiencing a hybrid format. In addition, the average number of online courses completed prior to the study was 10 courses (See Table 2). Participants described the traditional face-to-face learning environment as more engaging and interactive than the online environment and found online learning to be somewhat isolating, with participant 011 describing a preference for online presentations because of the ability to hear and interact with others and learn from them and is deemed valuable for learning. Participants when describing the transition from face-to-face to online described unease. Participant 004 stated: “One thing I was nervous about in the online classroom was that in the face-to-face classroom teachers

know my face and I can speak to them and show my initiative, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to have good report with the teachers online.”

Participants of the interviews described the shift in responsibility experienced after the transition to a solely online program. Online learning was found to hold students more responsible for their own learning. In the face-to-face classroom course meetings are used not only for lecture and interactive activities, but new information or reminders for future course assignments are received by the entire class at once and students are present to hear response of the instructor to other student questions. The online classroom requires the student to be motivated to find information on one's own and be diligent in identifying any new information of class changes. Classes do not actually meet and course content received through classroom lectures and activities; therefore, students must be motivated to do the work on their own and possess self-discipline to complete the objectives of the course. Participant 012 described how meeting in class makes it easier to stay focused and that sometimes it feels like online assignments can be “out of sight, out of mind,” making it necessary to become more organized to remember when certain things are due or need attention. Participant 002 also stated, “You can put work off when you are online.”

Participants further described completing online assignments as being more difficult because you do the work on your own time, often at home, where there are many distractions. It is easy to do other things around the house or focus on family or household chores than focus on the online classroom. Interviewees agreed that online activities are less engaging than the traditional classroom experience. Participant 004 stated: “I do feel more engaged in a face-to-face classroom. It is not as easy to be

distracted or to not pay attention.” However, even though students identified a preference for face-to-face activities, it was not found to be a preference in the direct classroom observations. The program of study offered a unique opportunity for students to attend a live interactive lecture weekly in the nursing courses and it was noted in the direct classroom observations that students did not regularly attend live classes. An average of 1-2 students were noted to attend the live class sessions each week with zero students attending some weeks. All live classes were recorded for the student to view at their convenience and it was unknown how many participants viewed the recorded sessions because the learning platform used did not track participants accessing the class archive.

Contrastively, participants in the study noted that they have technical skills that lend itself to learning by this medium. Many of the participants noted that they are a technical person or referred to themselves as “tech savvy.” One participant, 006, stated, “I grew up in a very tech age where I know how to navigate most of the things in the online program fairly quickly so I didn’t have any barriers jumping from face-to-face to online, and from previous online courses I had taken.” The consensus echoed the sentiment that the transition from face-to-face was easy due to experience with technology. Nurses utilize technology and navigate programs on the computer in every day practice and online learning is an extension of this. Participant 009 described how nursing continuing education such as advanced cardiovascular life support (ACLS) and cardiovascular resuscitation (CPR) were now being completed on a computer rather than in person at her organization. The participant predicted that many education activities will be trending toward the computer for learning in healthcare organizations. It was also noted in the review of the course syllabi, that each course contained detailed instructions

regarding technology and the skills needed to be successful in the online classroom and this information, along with past experience, participants felt prepared for the transition. This finding supported the constructivist learning theory in that students base their preferences on their past experience, which is rich in traditional learning activities in the face to face classroom, as well as the extensive use of technology. Further, this theme supports the previous findings of Drouin et al. (2013) that students develop preferences for content delivery from their past educational experiences.

Emergent theme two: Obligations influence choice. This emerging theme pertained to the outside forces that influence a student's choice for learning. The consensus of the participants in the semi-structured interviews was that the choice to embark in learning online and preference for certain online activities is influenced by personal obligations. Students first describe how work schedules predict engagement in other activities (see Appendix J). All students interviewed were working RNs, several noting that they work night shift, making it difficult to enroll in a traditional program. Families also influence choices, participant 002 stated, "I have small children. At this point I don't know that I would actually be able to go in and do face-to-face classes at this time in my life." Although, face-to-face activities are preferred, many noted the accommodating nature of the online classroom. Participant 011 discussed how her schedule working full-time nights in the Emergency Room was very unpredictable and there would be too many work conflicts to schedule off for school, and stated, "Because this program is online was a big advantage and a big draw for me." This was echoed by many students that use the terms "flexible" and "convenient" to describe the reasons for choosing online learning.

On the other hand, the participants valued the online format for allowing them to work, raise families, and further their education. Participants found that outside obligations influenced their preference for certain activities in the online classroom. Students in the program have a synchronous weekly meeting online that simulates a classroom. Although participants voiced preference for face-to-face activities, they rarely attended this activity citing family and work obligations. In a review of the archives of two courses in the online program, it was confirmed that students rarely attended the course. In the Introduction to Professional Nursing course, often a first course taken in the program, seven students were enrolled in the class and average class attendance for 11 total classes being three students with one course noted having four students attend. In the Nursing and Community class, there were nine students enrolled and an average of 1.5 students attending class, with one class having three students attend and one class having zero students attend. Participants valued the ability to watch the recording of the online meeting later that was convenient for their schedule. Participant 009 stated that with the online lecture, “I feel like I’m still in class just because you have the videos and we can participate.”

Participants also favored the online format for the ability to work at a pace that fit their schedule. One participant, 010, described that they did not attend the lectures, but watching the video of the lecture several days after and having completed the readings helped to solidify learning. The online environment allows for students to work ahead as well and students can do more school work when they are off work or free of family obligations allowing them to do less work when they have a heavy work schedule. Participant 011 noted the value of having all the materials online at home all the time.

She stated that she can “go at her own pace and if I need to go back and look at something, I have all the materials at home, I can go back and listen to a lecture again, even weeks later, I think that is a big plus to online learning.” And participant 003 stated, referring to face-to-face, “if you miss class, you miss class and that was challenging too especially having a family, and if a child gets sick, a thousand things can happen in class and you miss that class and probably lose the points and can affect your grade, but online classes, you find your time. That is the flexibility again that is very, very helpful and also to review for exams, we can always go back and see everything the professor said and that would also promote or enhance learning.”

The repeated theme from participants that the choice of online learning was influenced by the ability to be flexible and convenient was found during the direct observations of the online classrooms. This idea was supported through data collected in direct classroom observations. It was noted that all classes offered the ability to see future assignments in advance allowing the students to work ahead and not be tied to working in a constricted timeframe that is often a hallmark of the traditional classroom. It was also found that students were never restricted access to past information in the classrooms observed and students could re-visit materials, discussions, recorded lectures, and weblinks weeks after the initial assignment. This supported the literature review findings of Goggins and Xing (2016), Hill (2016), and Jorczak and Dupuis (2014) that online learning allows students to gain a deeper understanding of material and allows them time to develop ideas and responses to questions in discussion boards and other assignments that is not possible within the constraints of the traditional classroom. Further, the participant’s preference for choosing online learning support Crappell (2012) that noted

millennial students to have only known a time to be constantly connected and this is found in the online classroom. This also supports the constructivist learning theory that students develop preferences based on their past experience.

RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitated learning in online RN-BSN programs? The purpose of this research question was to explore how and why millennial nursing students in online courses determine that certain learning activities facilitate their learning. Questions asked in semi-structured interviews along with verification in the online classroom observation and document reviews were designed to answer this research question (See Table 7). The second research question developed for this study explored specific ideas and opinions as to certain assignments and activities that students preferred and perceived to facilitate their learning. Researchers in the literature identified the fast growth of technology in recent years moving traditional face-to-face courses to an online format, and therefore influencing the growth on online programs. Montenery et al. (2013) and Robb (2013) identified that millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments in the online classroom are not known and to better facilitate learning, these preferences need to be understood. Therefore, question number two centered on identifying perceived preferences of activities and assignments that facilitate learning. In answering the research question, four themes, instructor commitment, relevance to practice, research required, and lectures emerged from the data.

Table 6

Semi-Structured Interview/Classroom Observation/Document Review Alignment With Research Question 2 and Emerging Theme

Research Question	Observations/Document reviews	Interview Questions	Emerging Theme
RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?	What activities are included in the introduction of the course?	Tell me how the assignments you just described facilitated your learning?	Instructor commitment Lectures Relevance to practice Research required
	What assignments are asynchronous?	Please describe the instructor/professor role in assignments.	
	What assignments are synchronous?	Tell me how they improved your understanding.	
	What forms of communication are utilized in the online classroom?		
	Are assignments and activities assigned to meet the objectives of the course?		

When participants were asked questions regarding how and why they believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitated online learning, students often shared that the type of assignment didn't necessarily facilitate learning, rather the requirements necessary to complete assignments. Participants mentioned that they "prefer to look for answers on their own" or "research different sources to find the answers to the assignment." In discussing this question, it was found that the assignment or activity can be any of the commonly used assignments such as short answer, essay, paper writing, and presentations to facilitate learning if the directions require the student to look at other materials than the textbook or PowerPoint notes. One participant suggested decreasing the number of assignments that were deemed easy and required simply transferring

answers from a textbook or Power Point in favor of longer assignments with more research involved. Every participant interviewed eluded to assignments that required the student to search resources for a deeper understanding of the concept to be preferred and facilitate learning. In addition, participants identified the belief that all assignments should have a clear purpose and relevant to nursing practice.

Other prominent topics discussed were lectures, either recorded or live, with ten students addressing the benefits of having the option to review recordings of weekly lectures and the flexibility it allowed due to work and family obligations. One student noted that they watched lectures at midnight when their family was sleeping. An added benefit to the recorded lectures that was discussed, was the ability to stop and rewind lectures, which is not possible during a live lecture. Finally, instructor commitment to the students and their involvement in facilitating assignments and activities also emerged as a dominant theme. Students felt that instructors that were available for questions and clarification on assignments improved the learning outcomes of the students and due to the nature of online learning this was a key to facilitating learning.

Emergent theme three: Instructor commitment. This emerging theme pertained to the student's perceptions of how an instructor's involvement in many aspects of the activities and assignments in the online classroom facilitate and promote learning. Participants noted many opinions about the instructor or professor involvement (see Appendix K). From the class beginning or orientation, or regarding activities and assignments, participants noted a need for the instructor to give clear directions for students to follow to adequately complete the assignment and experience all the content available to understand a concept. When instructors provided step-by-step guides and

outlines for assignments, students recognized that they better understood the objectives of the assignment and therefore, could focus their attention on learning the concepts rather than using time to determine what steps were necessary to complete the assignment or activity. Participants also identified the use of rubrics by professors to communicate the objectives of an assignment or activity helped them to better understand the objectives and improve their understanding and grade. Instructors that offer students to turn in rough drafts of assignments was also mentioned as a strategy that promotes learning. Participant 008 describes that in her experience instructors that go over the assignment and answer questions is helpful as well as allowing the student to send the assignment early to look over and received feedback on what needs fixed or addressed, she stated, “this gives me feedback and I can understand the expectations of what I need to do.” This response was supported through direct classroom observation, and it was found that all three courses observed gave students the option of turning in a rough draft. Students were given somewhat extensive feedback, depending on the depth and completeness of the rough drafts, and encouraged to use feedback to improve the final draft of projects or papers assigned.

Along with clear directions and feedback, students voiced the preference for instructors and professors that are available to students. Participants in the study recognized the difference between seeing instructors regularly at class in the traditional setting and the potentially invisible nature of the instructors in an online course. Participants described that engaging with instructors and developing relationships with them in the online classroom was important to their learning and offset the fact they are separated by space and time and often not online at the same time. Students recognized

the value of instructors that are visible and active in the class discussions and share their thoughts and opinions to better understand the content. In addition, praise was noted for instructors that gave their home numbers and allowed them to call anytime, as well as keeping designated office hours that the student knew they could connect with the instructor during those hours if needed. This theme was supported in the review of course syllabi, as well as, direct classroom observation. The instructors of the courses reviewed gave home and office numbers to students at the beginning of the semester. Both instructors encouraged phone calls at any time and did not give guidelines as to when the student could not call the instructor.

Constant communication was encouraged by both instructors. In talking with the instructors, one noted that she allowed students to call at any time of the night or day if necessary to meet the needs of the student. Because personal email with the students could not be reviewed due to privacy issues, email communication could not be verified; however, one instructor noted that her practice was to periodically email students to “check in” with them throughout the semester. She felt this helped to build relationships with the students and therefore, decreased misinterpretation of directions because the students were comfortable asking questions. This supports the findings of Plante and Asselin (2014) that creating social presence through positive faculty messages can create a sense of community in the students. The findings here fill a gap in Skogs (2013) research that called for further study into student preferences in communication strategies that improve online learning.

Email was noted as the preferred means of communication in the group of students interviewed, with telephone being a backup if an emergency arose or clarity was

not reached through email. Participants noted the ease of email and the preference for instructors to respond in a timely manner. Participant 003 recognized the possibility of the written message being misinterpreted and may not be clear, which is the nature of online learning, but “being available by phone to clarify things whenever it isn’t clear in an email is important.” Again, this could not be verified through observation, but the course instructors verified that email was the preferred choice of communication in the online courses observed. This finding further confirmed email as the preferred form of communication in the online classroom and reinforced the previous study findings from Chang et al. (2015) and Robinson and Stubberud (2012).

The final component of this theme, giving timely feedback, was another recurring thought that students identified as a preference for instructors to improve understanding of concepts. This idea emerged in discussions for both facilitating and hindering understanding in the online classroom and was further developed in theme nine. However, regarding instructor commitment, participants felt that receiving feedback for every assignment, even if the feedback was simple such as a “good job,” validated that they understood a concept. Participant 008 described how receiving feedback for every assignment verifies what you did correctly or what needs further understanding. Any feedback is affirmation that the instructor reviewed it and knows that the assignment was completed appropriately and the concept was learned correctly. In direct classroom observation of the three online nursing classes, a variety of feedback was noted. In one course, there were several papers submitted with most receiving one word feedback such as “excellent” or “ok,” or no feedback was given. In the other two courses observed, and

taught by a different instructor, each assignment received feedback consisting of one or two sentences with specific information the student had shared.

The researcher did not have the ability to identify when the instructors gave the student feedback. In reviewing the coursework, only the date the work was submitted was identified. Huss and Eastep (2013) found students to be more satisfied with prompt feedback, and Alexander and Sysko (2013) and Ferri-Reed (2014) found that millennial students need constant feedback; however, the concept of timely feedback for assignments improving learning was not addressed in the literature reviewed and therefore introduces a potential for further study.

Emergent theme four: Lectures. This theme further addressed the how in research question number two pertaining to perceptions of certain learning activities that facilitate learning. Theme one spoke to the why and discussed the past experiences of the participants in face-to-face classes and preferences for traditional lectures where students can see and speak to the instructor, as well as other students, and build rapport and collaborate in the classroom. Synchronous or asynchronous online classroom lectures were identified as a learning activity that facilitated learning. Online students with most of higher education experience in the traditional classroom sought activities that emulated that experience online (see Appendix K).

The case study unit offers synchronous online meeting times or lectures weekly for each nursing course. The three classes observed held weekly virtual course meetings that consisted of question and answer or one to three-hour interactive lectures. Weekly meetings were held on the same night and time each week throughout the semester. In the review of the course archives it was noted that if the instructor was unavailable during the

meeting time, a lecture was pre-recorded for the students to view. The meetings were not mandatory and recorded. Participants noted that online lectures make the students feel like they are sitting in a classroom even if viewing a recording of the lecture. In fact, recordings were preferred over the real-time class meeting because of the ability to watch the recording at any time, stop and rewind the recording at any time, or revisit the recording anytime throughout the semester to prepare for tests and other activities. Participant 006 described the weekly lectures as adding another element to the online classroom unlike other online classrooms experienced that employ only discussion boards, assignments, quizzes, and tests. He further stated, "I do better auditory. Being able to have lectures recorded with this program has been amazing because I can sit there and listen to lecture and watch the Power Point."

Consensus among the participants was that the need to attend the live course was not necessary. Work schedules and family obligations made it unrealistic to attend scheduled meetings on a weekly basis; however, watching the recordings was sufficient. Participants felt that if there were students in the class that ask questions they could benefit from that, but easily email the instructor questions for clarification if questions arose while watching the recording. Also, it was noted that reviewing the lecture after completing the readings or reviewing the other materials enhanced learning. One participant, 010, noted that he rarely attended lecture due to work schedule, but felt that watching the recorded lecture after reviewing the week's content, "was a good concrete way to solidify all the material." This finding confirms the results of the study by Olson and McCracken (2015) that when comparing two classes, one with a synchronous live lecture, and one without, data did not find a benefit to the live lecture. The literature

reviewed did not address the advantages of a recorded lecture and could be a potential for future research.

Not only did participants note the perceived learning benefit of the lectures, but also the perceived benefit of feeling as if they had a connection with the instructor or professor. Participants felt that even recorded lectures where you see and hear the instructor promoted relationships between the instructor and student and promoted learning. Social constructivist theory, which was used to guide this study, posits that learners construct new knowledge from old experiences and collaboration (Bryant & Bates, 2015). All students noted previous experience and preference for face-to-face lectures and a connection with instructors which was emulated in the live or recorded lectures in the online classrooms observed. Participants discussed online classes where they never saw the instructor or heard their voice. Participant 009 expressed the benefits of the online lecture and shared a very contrasting experience in an online course where the instructor had no regular communication with the students. Assignments in the course were questions based on readings, discussion boards or course announcements were not utilized, and the only engagement noted was if a student emailed the teacher.

Data collected through semi-structured interviews revealed this theme, which was further verified through classroom observations. The course syllabi and calendars of all courses observed noted that the course would meet each week unless otherwise announced. Each week objectives were met through lectures, discussions, and website visits in the online course meeting. All meetings were recorded or pre-recorded for student review at their convenience.

Emergent theme five: Relevance to practice. This theme pertained to the belief that certain learning activities facilitate learning in the RN-BSN program. The data found that participants in the study felt that for assignments to facilitate learning, they needed to be relevant to nursing practice. It was identified that different participants in the study identified different activities or assignments that were pertinent to their learning depended on the type of nursing they currently practiced. For instance, a nurse that cares for patients at the bedside in a hospital felt that producing a video where they assess a patient to improve skills or listening to a recording of different heart murmurs facilitated their learning more than activities not related to their practice. Many activities and assignments noted by participants as preferred, but the common idea that surfaced was the reason for the assignment. Data collected did not identify specific activities and assignments that facilitated learning; rather it was found that the objectives of the assignment and their relevance to nursing practice facilitated learning. Students recognized that the activities and assignments were vehicles to reach learning outcomes and understand concepts and if the outcome had a clear purpose and improved practice, it was preferred (see Appendix K). Participants noted that volunteer hours for the Nursing and Community course proved to be valuable because they received real-world experience that was relevant, with participant 004 stating: “I am still volunteering at the place I volunteered.”

Participants completed pre-licensure associate degree nursing programs that required completion of many clinical or simulation hours to meet accreditation requirements (Billings & Halstead, 2016) and come to online programs with real-world learning experiences. As the constructivist learning theory asserts, students’ new learning

builds from the context of previously acquired learning and shapes how they prefer to learn (Kantar, 2014). Discussing topics and assignments that require exploring current nursing practice issues improved learning and improved nursing practice. Students noted that discussion board activities in non-nursing courses and often in nursing courses did not produce the intended engagement because the topics were irrelevant and did not have real-world application; therefore, students felt that it was not time well spent. This theme was further verified through course document reviews. Students in the Nursing and Community class were required to complete many hours in a community organization of their choice. Also, discussion boards and assignments were reviewed for topic content and found that they were related to the course objectives and stimulated discussion.

The second component of this theme is building new knowledge by building on previous knowledge facilitates learning, and allows students to share their thoughts and opinions in relation to their work experience. This was highly valued by the participants. Participants in the study were working RNs with a minimum of an associate degree in nursing and collectively one to six years' experience as a practicing RN. Based on the data that was collected, participants didn't mind revisiting some material because it re-enforced it; however, utilizing previous knowledge and work experience to build upon and gain new knowledge is valued. Students note that sharing their experiences facilitates learning, particularly in discussion boards. Participant 010 stated: "I like opinion questions a lot because they spark discussion." And Participant 011 identified that discussion questions that want your thoughts, input, or personal experiences, "I feel like I learn from other students and it makes me reflect on things I have learned." This statement was supported through direct classroom observation.

Discussion board assignments were found to be a common assignment utilized in the three online classrooms observed, particularly in the Professional Seminar course. Each week the instructor would pose a question to students regarding the concept and not only ask the student to address the concept, but address it in relation to their own nursing experience. It was noted that there was high participation in the discussion boards and each week students shared thoughts and ideas with each other continuously throughout the week. An example of a discussion board assignment in the Nursing and Community course that garnered much discussion between students started by posing the questions, “Would you consider becoming an "activist" on a public health topic that you are concerned about?” And the students were given further direction from the instructor: “In this DB (discussion board) I want you to talk about a public health topic you are concerned/passionate or even angry about. In 3-4 paragraphs: tell me and your classmates.” Each response by a student received at least one reply, with three students receiving six to ten responses that consisted of exchanging of opinions applicable to current nursing practice. This data did not support Goggins and Xing (2016) that found students to find little value in discussion boards. However, not all students praised the discussion board and this will be discussed in a later discussion, leading to the possibility of future studies on discussion boards, which Goggins and Xing suggested.

Emergent theme six: Research required. This theme pertained to nursing students in online courses preferring assignments that made them research or look for the answers to better understand concepts. Throughout the data collected, discussions about the benefit of researching topics outside of the textbook to learn concepts consistently emerged. It was found through semi-structured interviews that any assignment or activity

that possesses this component was valued and deemed to facilitate learning (see Appendix K). The discussion of researching or “finding answers on your own,” was noted regarding papers, short answer/essay, tests/quizzes, presentations, and discussion activities and assignments. Interviewee 004 shared the following in response that preferred assignments are “the ones where I had to look up research to write a paper were definitely conducive to learning because you actually have to look up and learn about it and read everything thoroughly to write a good paper that makes sense. I would say that probably is the most...because it is an assignment that you have to do on your own. I just found that I learned the most or could write the best paper with that strategy, having to do research and stuff like that.” This statement was supported by direct classroom observation and revealed that this strategy was used often in the online nursing courses and program overall. Each course required at least one assignment or activity that required the student to find current literature to meet the objectives of the assignment. The document reviews from the nursing handbook noted that students would expect to complete writing projects that required outside literature to meet program objectives. Conversely, semi-structured interviews revealed that participants did not feel that assignments that required reading the textbook or Power Point and copying answers over to a worksheet was conducive to learning and may hinder learning. Further discussion on this topic arose in regard to hindering learning, and instances of this type of assignment were observed in the online classroom; therefore, will be discussed further in theme seven.

The second component of this theme emerged from semi-structured interviews pertaining to activities and assignments that facilitated learning and verified by classroom

observations. Participants consistently noted that materials used in conjunction with readings and lectures improved learning. Participants' preference for additional materials in the online classroom was supported through findings in the direct classroom observations. In the three classrooms observed, each week of the class that a new concept was presented at least one other resource was noted for the students to review. In some weeks, the materials given were required to review in order to complete an assignment and others were supplemental material only. The use of web links, articles, and videos to further explain a concept were the most common materials used with activities and assignments in the online nursing classroom. Participants discussed how these extra materials allowed different concepts to be understood from a different viewpoint or medium. Different learning styles such as auditory or hands-on were mentioned throughout the data from the semi-structured interviews, and offering alternative materials to the textbook improves understanding. Participant 006 stated: "links enforce learning." And participant describes the extra links, such as the American Heart Association, as information that "feels like it is real life, you are getting a professional side as well, which we need because we don't speak to our patients the same way as a nursing text." Participants agree that other materials assigned gave a different perspective than the textbook and required to research a further research a topic, and helped to learn. Literature reviewed did not address the value of providing additional materials outside of the textbook and therefore could be an option for future research.

RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in the online RN-BSN programs? The purpose of this research question was to explore how and why millennial nursing students

in online RN-BSN programs believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning. Questions during semi-structured interviews were designed to answer this question using classroom observations and document reviews from the courses and program to verify the use of certain activities and validate the responses. The literature reviewed uncovered many sources that validate the notion that millennial students bring unique experiences and perceived preferences for communication and technology to the online classroom (Devaney, 2015; Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Montenery et al., 2013). It was also noted by Huss and Eastep (2013) that a satisfied online student can be a factor in determining the quality of the online course itself, and therefore, the content of the semi-structured interviews was centered on addressing what activities and assignments were perceived as hindering student learning and potentially creating dissatisfaction in the course. In addressing this research question, two themes emerged, not challenging, and uninvolved instructors (See Table 9).

Table 7

Semi-Structured Interview/Classroom Observation/Document Review Alignment With Research Question 3 and Emerging Theme

Research Question	Observations/Document reviews	Interview Questions	Emerging Theme
RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?	What activities are included in the introduction of the course?	Tell me how the assignments you just described were not useful.	Not challenging Uninvolved instructors
	What assignments are asynchronous?	Please describe the instructor/professor role in assignments.	
	What assignments are synchronous?	Tell me how they hindered your understanding.	
	What forms of communication are utilized in the online classroom?		
	Are assignments and activities assigned to meet the objectives of the course?		

When participants were asked about how and why they felt that some assignments and activities hindered their learning, the discussion and data collected was not as plentiful as the data collected when discussing preferences. However, one theme that emerged was the idea that some assignments and activities and “simple,” “quick,” or “not challenging.” Six participants agreed that learning activities and assignments that did not require extra effort or research hindered their learning because thinking and understanding were not promoted in these activities. In addition, it was felt that instructors that did not get involved in the class through communication and feedback could hinder learning. Six students mentioned minimal or no feedback as a hindrance to learning because the participants felt that they did not get confirmation that they

understood the assignment. Students felt that simply completing an assignment and receiving an acceptable grade did not mean learning outcomes were met. Therefore, the usefulness of an assignment is not dictated by the type of assignment, but by the direction in completing the assignment and the instructor involvement and feedback throughout the process.

The idea of clear direction was discussed in theme three and participants perceived that a committed instructor was one that gave clear and adequate directions for a student to complete the assignment correctly and garner understanding of the concept. The researcher noted that participants completed predominately face-to-face coursework previously and therefore their experience entailed sitting in a classroom and listening to directions with the option to ask questions and receive immediate feedback. This class delivery mode also allows students to have frequent contact and collaboration with the instructor or professor as well as fellow classmates. According to Kantar (2016) based on the constructivist learning theory, new learning is based on past learning experiences and could explain the perception that learning outcomes cannot be met without clear and in-depth direction.

Findings of direct classroom observation potentially support the need for clear directions from the instructor or professor. In one class, it was noted that very minimal direction was given to students in the online classroom. The syllabi reviewed did not go into detail on assignment directions and these were not noted in the modules. It must be noted however, that this was the class that due to technical reasons, the recorded lectures could not be viewed. It is a possibility that the directions were relayed in the classroom. In addition, this was a culminating senior course for the program and discussions of

assignments and expectations were given to the students throughout the program, and noted in the nursing program handbook. In the two other classrooms observed, the professor posted detailed directions and rubrics for each assignment and discussed in detail during the weekly lecture. In addition, as discussed previously, direct classroom observation identified both in-depth feedback for assignments including marked-up papers that included narrative about the student's performance on the assignment, as well as assignments that received no feedback or one-word responses only. Again, the perception that learning is directly related to direction, feedback, or overall involvement of the professor or instructor was not revealed in the literature review and therefore suggests further research is needed.

Emergent theme seven: Not challenging. Participant 004 discussed a scenario that an entire online course experienced was designed in a manner that required only reading the text and later answering questions based on the reading. The participant stated, "The tests you were taking were very easy and I didn't really take a whole lot away from that." This emerging theme pertained to activities and assignments in an online course that the participants did not deem as challenging. Consensus in the data retrieved from the semi-structured interviews did not identify specific assignments and activities as too easy or less challenging, rather the ease of completing the assignment as the main determining factor that an assignment wasn't a challenge and didn't improve learning, in fact these scenarios were thought by some to hinder learning because the time spent could have been spent completing activities that facilitated their learning (see Appendix L). This opinion was noted with short/answer, discussion boards, and multiple choice. The participants felt that any assignment that you pulled information directly

from written information to answer questions without needing to research or think about the answer was not challenging and therefore did not facilitate learning. This supports the suggestion of Caputi (2016) that pre-licensure nursing students lack basic knowledge and need curriculums that help to learn basic concepts, whereas post-licensure nurses have experience and knowledge and need challenging curriculums that build on that knowledge and force students to analyze.

Several participants specifically identified this theme with discussion boards that included the requirement of answering a question and completing a specified number of posts to other students. Participant 006 stated: “I feel like discussion posts are just going through the motions or checking a box. I understand (the purpose), but it doesn’t reinforce content.” Participant 012 stated also stated, in relation to discussion boards: “I just feel like there is not actually a good enough report between online students a lot of the time to be able to get a good discussion, and that I feel like a lot of the time it’s just a requirement that you have to fulfill.” Hill (2016) described the purpose of discussion boards as a way to emulate face-to-face discussions in the online classroom and Wen-Yu Lee (2013) noted that discussion boards are the most used activity or assignment in the online classroom. However, as previously noted, direct classroom observation found examples of extensive discussion in this pedagogy, as well as, discussions with minimal discussion. Goggins and Xing (2016) found that students in past studies reported little value in discussion boards but other scholars found discussion boards to be beneficial in that all students must participate in the discussion and therefore is a potential to consider and possibly retain a concept (Hill, 2016; Jorczak & Dupuis, 2014).

As theme six identified students desire to understand and know the data through challenging assignments that help to solidify understanding of concepts, conversely, simple, quick, or easy assignments that take little effort were not desired in the group of participants interviewed. Direct classroom observation of the classrooms did not support this theme. It was found that in the classroom observations of three classes in spring semester 2017 that this type of assignment was not utilized and the nature of the weekly assignments required were of a short answer or essay nature that required students to identify processes and share opinions about the scenarios to complete the assignments. These assignments required students to review the readings and often supplemental material to develop ideas and answer questions posed.

Another recurrent idea regarding time and simplicity of an assignment surrounded a computer program used in the Nursing and Community course that simulated a community. Three of the participants identified the activities and assignments within this program as being time consuming due to the navigation of the technology and arguments were made against the program for assignments being too easy and not improving learning of concepts. Participant 004 stated: "We had to do this Sentinel City thing, it was like a fake town that you had to go through and do all these things. That was probably my least (favorite activity), I don't want to say a waste of time, but I don't feel like I learned much from that." And participant 005 concurred, "I don't think that (Sentinel City) was helpful at all. I feel like I am playing sims or something. I don't know how it was helpful. I feel like everything else in the program was helpful but that. I feel like it was time consuming and not necessary." It is noted that not all participants were enrolled in the Nursing and Community course in spring 2017 that utilized this program. It was noted

that the program was in fact used and the syllabi identified many assignments within the program throughout the semester.

The researcher did not have access to the Sentinel City program in the archive of the course viewed. In discussing the courses with the instructor of this class, the instructor discussed that this was the first time to use the program and that it was new to the instructor as well. The instructor verified that technological issues were a problem at different times throughout the semester and agreed that navigation and completion of assignments could be time consuming for the student. This was noted in a discussion about Sentinel City by participant 011 that stated: "I spent more time concerned with the technology, because it didn't work seamlessly." This theme contradicts the constructivist learning theory in that millennials have only known technology and therefore will build new knowledge and preferences based on those experiences. Further, this type of program was not discussed in the literature reviewed. The students in this study did not find benefit in the program that used technical simulations to relay information, and the value of programs like this in the online classroom may need further attention of research.

Emergent theme eight: Uninvolved instructors. This theme arose from a continued discussion throughout the data collection of the semi-structured interviews related to feedback from instructors. As discussed in theme three, participants felt that feedback from instructors, before assignments and activities regarding questions about direction, during assignments and activities to validate correct completion, and after assignments to verify that the students understood and took away the correct information

the assignment intended was highly valued in the group interviewed for this study (see Appendix L).

Participants' consensus was that instructor interaction was important to learning. It was identified that when assignments were completed, big or small, and the instructor didn't respond in any way or give feedback on the assignment, students felt that the information they learned was not verified to be correct and hindered learning. This was true also for instructor's interaction on discussion boards. Participants noted that getting a good grade without feedback to validate it, also hindered their learning. Participant 011 described the importance of feedback and wanting to know if what they presented is correct, and stated: "I feel like, without feedback, is kind of an interaction that, I guess to me, lets me know I'm on the right track or maybe feedback makes me consider it different side of something or different part of something that I wouldn't have otherwise thought about. So, I think it is valuable in learning. I have been in a class where I got an A, but zero feedback, that was nice to get a good grade, but you are supposed to be there to learn. So, I didn't feel like I learned as much without the feedback." Instructor or professor feedback was previously discussed in theme three and classroom observation supported that some instructors or professors gave extensive feedback on certain or all assignments and others gave very little or no feedback on some or all assignments.

Participants agreed as well, that feedback is not only important, but it needs to be timely. Several participants identified scenarios where an instructor would not respond to a student in a timely manner arguing that responses to questions about assignments days after the question was asked, forces students to guess at how to complete the assignment. Further, participants complained about vague instructions to activities and assignments

that hindered the ability to complete the assignment correctly and gain an understanding of the concept being studied. These comments also supported the previously discussed theme 3 that student's feel that the delivery of clear directions directly impacts the overall understanding of concepts through activities and assignments.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the description of the data collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the collected data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used for identifying a collection of themes and patterns within a data set is a frequent methodology choice for analysis in psychology, healthcare, and social research (Fugard & Potts, 2015). In conducting a thematic analysis for this single case study, a step-by-step procedure was followed to analyze the data: initial read through of data, re-reading and generating initial open or Level 1 codes, grouping codes to Level 2 codes, searching for themes, re-visiting and refining themes in relation to research questions, defining themes, and writing up findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The data for this study was organized to correspond with research questions. A process of re-reading and re-visiting ideas, codes, themes, and pattern searching guided the inductive coding process that allowed themes to naturally occur from the collected data. An inductive approach was utilized to allow significant and frequent themes to emerge from the data, rather than an inductive approach that searches for known or preconceived concepts (Yin, 2016). An external review of the tentative interpretations to increase validity followed the development of the initial and grouped codes and tentative themes (Guest et al., 2012). Four Ph.D. prepared university professors with online

teaching experience were utilized to review the raw data, codes and themes, and determine plausibility of the themes prior to further development of the findings and narrative.

Two levels of coding were used in analyzing the data for this study, Level 1 or open codes were initially developed from the raw data using various words or phrases noted to be important to answering each research question. In analyzing the data, 27 Level 2 codes, and 8 Level 2 were identified through an inductive process of reading each verbatim transcript line by line and comparing to the field notes. Words and phrases that repeatedly arose through the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were noted until no new codes emerged from the data. Once it was determined there were no new codes, the codes were grouped into Level 2 codes which involves combining like codes into groups in relation to the research questions (Yin, 2016).

Eight Level 2 codes were grouped from Level 1 initial codes with feedback from colleagues verifying plausibility of the codes in relation to generating answers to the research questions. Level 2 grouped codes were typed into a word document with a brief description then organized by research question. When completeness of the groups was determined, theme names were given to the groups (See Appendix I). Once the analysis of all collected data was complete, each research question was addressed by the developed themes with verification and validation of data found in the classroom observations and document reviews.

Level 2 codes were developed in relation to research questions asked in the study. The first research question, How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments, garnered two codes, Face-to-Face Preferred, and

Obligations Influence Choice. The second research question, How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs, garnered four codes, Instructor Commitment, Lectures, Relevance to Practice, and Research Required. The final research question, How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs, garnered level 2 codes, Not Challenging and Uninvolved Instructors.

Limitations. Limitations to the analysis and results were identified in this qualitative exploratory single case study. A limitation of this study was with the research design. A single case study design of 11 millennial age nursing students in one online RN-BSN program in Illinois is a small sample size, considering the large number of RN-BSN programs in the state. Further, only two participants were males, and only two participants identified themselves as an ethnicity other than Caucasian. Although purposeful sampling was employed to identify participants with more experience in online courses to gather richer data, the readers may not feel the data collected represented other RN-BSN programs or was broad enough to answer the phenomenon.

A limitation of the study may be from the personal assumptions the researcher carries to the study as an assistant professor at the unit of study. While interpreting the data for this study was made to ensure conclusions were free of bias, it was still possible for a degree of bias to have influenced the study's conclusions. The researcher has encountered all participants of the study in past courses and therefore a potential risk of research bias existed. In addition, data generated through interviewing by an inexperienced researcher could be interpreted as a source of bias because it can be easy to

influence the nature and the tone of questions and inadvertently leading the participant to answers through inflection in tone when asking questions (Yin, 2016). Response bias and bias on the part of the researcher was overcome through the incorporation of multiple sources of data, peer briefing, member checking, and validation of sources.

A potential limitation to the data analysis of this study was the inexperience of the researcher with inductive thematic analysis. The potential result of inexperience is the inability to identify patterns and themes in relation to the research questions. Further, analysis was completed by hand coding of the transcribed data with use of software program to word and phrase search to enhance efficiency and consistency in the coding process (Guest et al., 2012).

The study had data collection limitations. Interview questions were developed through collaboration with the academic quality reviewer at Grand Canyon University, as well as reviewed by an expert panel of nursing professors that teach online RN-BSN courses. A pilot semi-structured interview was conducted prior to the participant interviews; however, the researcher was a novice at collecting data from in-depth interviews, and some valuable data may have been lost due to the inability to encourage and extract thorough responses to better answer the interview questions. Trust may have been a potential limitation with the semi-structured interviews. Interviews are often intimate encounters where building a relationship is essential for open conversation in semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2016). It is possible that the participants were uncomfortable sharing all that the study had hoped to explore. There was no way of telling how much thought the participant provided when answering the questions.

Chapter 5 contains a summary and conclusions of this study. There is a complete examination of the analysis and outcomes of this chapter as they relate to theoretical, practical, and future implications. The chapter includes each theme and its interpretation in relation to the theoretical framework supporting this qualitative exploratory single case study. In addition, the themes in this study are discussed in relation to the literature findings. Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations as a result of conducting this qualitative exploratory single case study.

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred). Research in this qualitative exploratory single case study answered the questions: (a) how do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs?; (b) how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?; and (c) how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs? The intent was to seek an understanding of the preferences of this specific group and more effectively engage and instruct students in the online nursing classroom.

Eight main themes were identified through the data collection and thematic analysis process including: face-to-face preferred; obligations influence choice; instructor commitment; lectures; relevance to practice; research required; not challenging; uninvolved instructors. Further insight into the data collected was gleaned from review of program and classroom documents and direct classroom observation of three archived online courses.

Literature noted a widely voiced concern for the need for highly educated nurses and an understanding of how best to teach and prepare them for today's nursing practice. Nurses today are caring for acutely ill patients and coordinating and overseeing patient progress. The need for higher education and leadership in nursing is growing, leading

current associate degree RNs to pursue a bachelor's degree in nursing (Goodman, 2016). Research conducted by the AACN, found that nurses prepared at the baccalaureate or higher level reduced mortality rates and medication errors, as well as improving patient satisfaction and outcomes. Therefore, a well-educated nursing workforce with advanced nursing skills in leadership and community health is necessary to deliver high quality patient care (AACN, 2015a). Research into improved patient outcomes lead the IOM to recommend that the nursing workforce be comprised of 80% of nurses prepared at the bachelor's degree level by the year 2020 (Billings & Halstead, 2016; Robb, 2016). The IOM's recommendation increases the need to provide flexible online options for RNs to pursue a bachelor's degree while continuing to work (AACN, 2015c; Conner & Thielemann, 2013).

Suh and Hargis (2016) suggested millennials comprise most of our college enrollment and workforce today. Recent research focused on millennial needs and showed that the group had a different set of characteristics and experiences than any other generation (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; Dixon, Mercado, & Knowles, 2013; DeVaney, 2015; Montenery et al., 2013; Suh & Hargis, 2016). A significant characteristic that sets this generation apart from all other generations is their intimate relationship with technology and the ease in that they use it in their day-to-day lives (DeVaney, 2015). Studies have found an increasing need to understand what this generation of students needs to be successful in higher education, and how and why they prefer to learn in the online classroom (Kotz, 2016; Schell & Janicki, 2013). The phenomenon of the consistently growing online classroom to meet the needs of the millennial generation that

utilizing online education brings a need to understand the generations' preferences to improve learning and success (Boton & Gregory, 2015).

A gap was found in the literature that suggested it is not known how millennial nursing students prefer to learn in the online classroom (Montenery et al., 2013; Robb, 2013). The literature reviewed recommended further studying this group and exploring preferences for online learning (Huss & Eastep, 2013; Robinson & Stubberud, 2012; Simonds & Brock, 2013). The study intended to advance knowledge in millennial student preferences and identify how they prefer to learn through the use of the constructivist and social constructivist framework that posits new knowledge to be acquired from the context of previous knowledge (Hampton & Pearce, 2016). Utilizing the constructivist and social constructivist framework, the single case study design was used to develop a deeper understanding of the perceptions of millennial nursing students in the online classroom (Babbie, 2013).

This chapter of the study gives a synopsis of the study, followed by an overview of the results. Each research question and correlating theme will be presented and reviewed. The final sections render a presentation of the culminating conclusions and implications determined by the study. The chapter ends with a discussion of recommendations by the researcher.

Implications

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred). The intent of this study was to seek an understanding of the preferences of this

specific group and more effectively engage and instruct students in the online nursing classroom. Unexpectedly, the results of this qualitative exploratory single case study found that students' perceived preferences for learning activities and assignments in the online classroom did not consistently identify specific activities and assignments, but rather preferences for how to complete assignments and improve learning and understanding. However, this suggested that many learning activities and assignments have the potential for implementation in online classes and improving learning. Research found that experience with past face-to-face classes directly affected preferences, and the opinion of the millennial generation in online courses was that instructor involvement in the online classroom and providing challenging assignments that make the student explore new information was more important than the type of assignment utilized. The broader implication was that revising assignments and activities and faculty committing to collaborate with students on assignments in the online classroom could enhance learning and benefit the students. The following sections address theoretical, practical, and future implications of the results of the study.

Theoretical implications. The theoretical foundation of the study focused on the constructivist and social constructivist leaning theories. The constructivist learning theory described by Piaget in 1977 is based on the idea that new knowledge is constructed from old knowledge and experiences (Hunter & Krantz, 2010). The social constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) is rooted in the ideas that learning that social interaction has a significant influence on cognitive and learning and dependent on social interaction. The results of this study supported these two theories to be true and advanced knowledge in the area.

Regarding the constructivist theory, it was found that students interviewed had experienced most of their formal education in a traditional face-to-face setting where the teacher disseminates the information and the students had the opportunity to receive the same information as the entire class. In this setting, the students could also collaborate with others, ask questions, and receive the information garnered from others' questions. Learning in nursing education has traditionally occurred in the face-to-face classroom (Horsfall, Cleary, & Hunt, 2012).

The data collected through the semi-structured interviews found that participants preferred face-to-face courses; however, due to other obligations, they chose online learning. Participants noted that they found lectures to be a facilitator of their learning and most of the participants identified the lecture as a preferred activity. This contradicts Chang et al. (2015) who argued the need to provide active learning strategies to enhance learning and facilitate higher learning outcomes. This study did not address actual learning outcomes of the participants, but focused on the participants' perceptions of how they learn through activities and assignments.

This study reinforced the belief by Hampton and Pearce (2016) that utilizing constructivist learning methods had the potential to promote learning outcomes that resulted in higher quality nursing practice. Participants noted that they preferred learning activities and assignments that built on their previous knowledge gained from their associate degree nursing program. It was noted that students wanted assignments that were relevant to nursing practice and included new information that could be used in their jobs. One student noted that some review of old information could be beneficial; however, repeating old knowledge did not facilitate learning or improve outcomes of the

coursework. It was suggested by Caputi (2016) that post-licensure nurses, or RNs, who have experience and knowledge in nursing, require careful and meticulous planning of curriculum.

In addition, this study supported the social constructivist learning theory. Kantar (2014) posited that social collaboration could be beneficial to developing new learning constructs. Participants repeatedly discussed the need for instructors to be involved in the online classroom through discussion boards, guiding assignments, clarifying questions, and giving feedback. It was found that students felt that instructor involvement and collaboration facilitated their learning and receiving validation of correct understanding of concepts improved learning outcomes. The results of this qualitative exploratory single case study supported the basic assumptions of these two theoretical frameworks as the findings strengthen the importance of constructivist and social constructivist learning theories in the higher education online classroom, and particularly the online RN-BSN classroom. These theoretical implications should be considered by faculty teaching in the online classroom and considered in the implementation of activities and assignments in online courses.

Practical implications. Many higher education courses, as well as nursing courses, are continuing to move from the face-to-face setting to online course offerings (Adwan, 2016; Drouin et al., 2013; Kim-Godwin & Martinez, 2016). This research offered valuable insight into the needs of millennial nursing students in the online RN-BSN classroom to facilitate learning. The first implication is for instructors to deliberately be involved in the online classroom by actively communicating and collaborating with students. This can be accomplished through providing valuable

feedback, establishing clear guidelines, and being visible and present in the online classroom. Communication was very important to students; they indicated a preference for prompt and frequent communication (Huss & Eastep, 2013). This implication supported past findings that related millennials use of technology and nearly constant communication through technology and their preference for constant feedback from leaders (Alexander & Sysko, 2013; Ferri-Reed, 2014).

Another implication that could be applied to practice is revision of activities and assignments that are perceived as easy, such as copying answers from textbooks or Power Points, or requiring a certain number of responses on a discussion board. This research found that students preferred assignments and activities that require research and review of many materials to gain a deeper understanding of concepts. Faculty should consider revising assignments as well as including web links, articles, and videos to derive a broader perspective than what was presented in the textbook. This information was a new finding and not found in the literature reviewed.

The final implication is the consideration of adding lectures to content delivery for students to view on their own time. This was found to improve student understanding of the content, but also to feel a connection with the instructor and simulate more of a face-to-face classroom. Literature identified that students chose online learning for the flexibility of asynchronous delivery and did not want to be tied to a strict meeting schedule (Hill, 2016; Smith, 2013; Suell & Whitsett, 2013). This research found this to be true; however, students did value the lecture and the ability to view it at any time to improve understanding of the content. These implications referred to how the results of

the study can be applied in professional practice and should be considered by faculty teaching in the online classroom.

Future implications. Some general limitations were evident in the scope of this study influencing its future implications. The qualitative exploratory single case study design allowed the gathering of rich data to answer the three research questions; however, the sample population was small. The study included eleven millennial RN-BSN students. Hixon et al. (2016) posited that learners in the online classroom were not the same as the traditional classroom learners, and further research into characteristics, experience and preferences of online learners would be beneficial. This study focused on the millennial generation in the online RN-BSN classroom, further recommendations would be to examine other generations who are in the online classrooms today. These would be the generation just before generation Y and the future generation. In addition, future study replication could include other universities in different geographic locations to further support the study.

Additional further studies would need to focus more closely on the implementation of recorded lectures in the synchronous classroom and compare to actual learning outcomes. Although participants overwhelmingly agreed that this was a learning activity that facilitated learning, it was not clear if this had real value in relation to student grades. Further studies that addressed learning activities and assignments that contain a research component and relationship to student outcomes would be beneficial.

Strengths and weaknesses. There were strengths and weaknesses in this study. Although there were only eleven participants from one university interviewed, that was initially perceived to be a weakness, rich data was mined and saturation of data was

reached making this a strength. Participants articulated their preferences for activities and assignments in the online classroom. The researcher originally felt the participants would be specifically speak to the types of assignments that they preferred or did not prefer. This was not the outcome of the semi-structured interviews, participants had strong feelings about the way an assignment or activity was assigned, and the involvement and feedback received from the instructor during the process. It was noted that this information became a strength because the information garnered a deeper understanding of the preferences, and the how and why they determine the preferences. This was a testament to the strength of the interview questions used to collect the data. Another significant strength of this qualitative exploratory single case study was that it addressed a gap in the literature reviewed and was based on recommendations from previous researchers (Montenery et al., 2013; Robb, 2013; Simonds & Brock, 2013; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015).

A final limitation was the researcher was also an instructor at the unit of study and had many of the participants in previous classes, as well as, potentially some of the participants in future classes. There could have been researcher bias when the researcher or instructor is in a position to assign grades. The strength of this position is that the researcher had an intimate understanding of the program and understanding of the participants' thoughts and opinions shared in the interviews. A weakness could occur if the researcher had pre-conceived ideas about the thoughts and opinions that were shared and skewed data analysis based on those ideas. In addition, the inexperience of the researcher with thematic analysis was a weakness of the study. Although the researcher devoted time to learning and understanding the process, and utilizing other Doctors to

review and guide the process, the researcher was still a novice and more experience may have improved the dissemination of the data collected.

Summary of the Study

It is not known how millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs identify preferred learning activities and assignments. Also, it is not known how and why millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs perceive certain assignments and learning activities as facilitating or hindering learning in online RN-BSN programs at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred) at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois.

The need for more bachelor's prepared nurses has propelled the need for flexible online programs that seamlessly transition students from traditional face-to-face programs and accommodate different learning needs (AACN, 2015b, Goodman, 2016) Little research into the preferences of the millennial generation who are currently enrolling in higher education exists (Therrell & Dunneback, 2015).

To execute the purpose of the study, and to attempt to fill the gap in the literature, the study posed the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs?
- RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?

RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

The three research questions in this study focused on the need to more deeply understand the perceived preferences of millennial online RN-BSN students to improve learning outcomes by collecting data that pertained to the participant's perceptions, experiences, and beliefs (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2016). A qualitative exploratory single case study methodology was chosen to explore an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

The qualitative exploratory single case study design was chosen due to the appropriateness of exploring the phenomenon in-depth, using multiple data sources (Aller, 2017; Tumele, 2015). Methodological triangulation of the data was employed to add depth to the findings and to ensure reliability and validity of the study results (Fusch et al., 2017). Data from three sources were collected for this study: eleven semi-structured interviews, analysis of program and course documents, and direct observation of three course archives from the RN-BSN program offered in the spring of 2017.

The semi-structured interviews were employed to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives, experiences, and beliefs of the participants pertaining preferences of online assignments and activities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Document review and analysis were performed to identify typical activities and assignments used in the online RN-BSN program. The program website, handbook, and course syllabi were reviewed for activities and assignments that were used to meet learning objectives. Findings for document analysis were also compared to interview discussions to verify the use of activities and assignments being described by participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). In addition, direct classroom observations of three archived courses were viewed for

further alignment of activities and assignments being utilized in the RN-BSN classroom. This gave the researcher further understanding of the context of the online classroom situation and the activities and assignments being used (Yin, 2016).

Thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the data collected in this study. This approach allowed producing new meaning from the perspectives and explanations found in the data collected (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Thematic analysis is a way to gain meaningful insight from a data set and gain a deeper understanding of experiences (Fugard & Potts, 2015). An inductive hand-coding method was used to analyze the data collected. This method allowed codes and themes to emerge naturally from the data and answer the research questions (Guest et al., 2012). The thematic analysis approach allowed for methodical analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observations, and document reviews.

A step-by-step process was used in the thematic analysis: familiarity with the field notes and data collected, first level or open codes generated, second level or comprehensive codes assigned, then revisited data and codes and assigned to themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data collected for this study included semi-structured interviews, direct classroom observations, and document review and analysis. The data for this study was organized to correspond with the research questions. In addition to the step-by-step process, repeated readings and review of the data in relation to the research questions were conducted to identify patterns and meanings in the data collected. During the analysis process, ideas and musings were marked for coding that related to the three research questions and a codebook was developed, and is available upon request. An inductive coding process of hand coding was applied through the thematic analysis phase,

and codes and themes emerged naturally from the data (Yin, 2016). The process was repeated for the three sources of data and was reviewed separately, and then together to achieve methodological triangulation.

The significant qualitative data collected from the in-depth semi-structured interviews generated experiences, beliefs, and perspectives about preferences for activities and assignments in the online RN-BSN classroom, as well as, how and why they believed those preferences to be true. This data was supported by demographic information about each participant addressing their current and past experience with other programs and online and face-to-face courses. The direct classroom observations of archived courses generated an overall picture of what the students experienced in the online RN-BSN classroom including activities and assignments utilized to meet the objectives of the course and the program. This data also included information garnered from discussions with the professors who that taught the classes observed. Those discussions validated data collected from the semi-structured interviews. The document reviews and analysis included data collected from all course syllabi, course calendars, nursing program website, nursing program handbook, and other course materials noted that were relevant in each individual course. This data provided an overview of the program and course objectives and verified the use of specific assignments and activities used in the RN-BSN classroom. Once the data collection was completed and transcribed, the documents were printed and kept in a locked cabinet. Transcripts from the data were labeled with a numerical code both on print and in folders on a personal locked computer in a personal locked office.

The data collected in this study was reviewed separately and together to answer each research question. Repeated reading of the data was employed to search for patterns of meaning related to the three research questions. During this phase, memos were made in the margins of the data documents related to the research questions, and then reviewed to assign initial codes. Two levels of codes were generated from the data collected in the study. First Level 1 or open codes were noted. These are asserted by Yin (2016) to be broader conceptual ideas and understanding of the data collected. Next, Level 2 or category codes were assigned that further narrowed down the concepts presented through the combining of two or more Level 1 codes. Themes were then assigned after compiling the Level 2 codes (Yin, 2016). After analyzing four of the 11 interviews, it was noted that dominant codes began emerging. After eight of the 11 interviews, no new ideas or codes emerged; however, it was noted that throughout the analysis, words or phrases would be noted that did not have a clear connection to the research questions and therefore, it was determined to not include in the codebook.

As the study progressed in completing this level of coding, Level 1 codes were considered by their relationships and meanings. This involved determining relevance of information to the study and research questions, and eliminating irrelevant information (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). The analysis then moved incrementally to a higher level by recognizing the categories in which Level 1 codes may fall (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The coding of the data then proceeded to a second set of codes or Level 2 codes. Level 2 coding involved revisiting the codes and combining the codes into groups. Combining and categorizing codes into groups required merging the codes that had a

commonality of meaning relating to the three research questions of this study. This involved searching for patterns in the data, and frequency of references (Yin, 2016).

In analyzing the data, 60 level 1 initial codes that had meaning to the research questions were produced by going through each verbatim transcript and field notes line by line and noting key words and phrases that repeated throughout the data. Overlapping of codes were noted and after analyzing four of the 11 interviews, it was noted that dominant codes started emerging. After eight of the 11 interviews, no new ideas or codes emerged. Some words or phrases that did not have meaning to the research questions were noted, and these were eliminated. Guest et al. (2012) asserted that although some themes were noticeable, they were not noteworthy.

The coding of the data then moved to Level 2, where codes were re-read in relation to the research questions, and compared for phrases and ideas. A technique that was employed in coding the data was identifying repetition of ideas and codes. Guest et al. (2012) posited that if a code consistently occurs throughout or across transcripts, it is likely a theme. In addition, patterns were identified in the codes with the research questions of the study in mind. The codes were then combined and re-assembled into groups and themes that, which shared commonality of meaning to the three research questions and definitions, were assigned. After it was determined that all Level 2 codes were significant to the study, eight Level 2 category codes were grouped from Level 1 open codes (See Appendix I). The following section provides a summary of the findings identified through the thematic analysis process.

Summary of Findings and Conclusion

It is not known how millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs identify preferred learning activities and assignments. Also, it is not known how and why millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs perceive certain assignments and learning activities as facilitating or hindering learning in online RN-BSN programs at Eastern Illinois University RN-BSN program in Charleston, Illinois.

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments that may facilitate learning (preferred), as well as perceptions of those that may hinder learning (not preferred). The intent of this study was to seek an understanding of the preferences of this specific group and more effectively engage and instruct students in the online nursing classroom.

The phenomenon of consistent growth of online classrooms and the growing millennial population in higher education brought about a need to understand the specific population's preferences, as well as gain insight that may improve learning (Boton & Gregory, 2015; Therrell & Dunneback, 2015). The phenomenon requires the study to explore thoughts and opinions of millennials in higher education today. Understanding that students prefer to learn in different ways based on their experiences can provide insight into the new strategies needed to meet their needs.

This section includes an explanation of how this study answered the research questions and how it has advanced scientific knowledge. The findings from this study support previous research that millennial students have specific preferences for online learning (Boton & Gregory, 2015; Kotz, 2016; Tichavsky et al., 2015, Woods et al.,

2011). The following paragraphs will discuss the findings of each research question in relation to the literature reviewed and how the results advance scientific knowledge.

Face-to-face preferred and obligations influence choice. The first research question asked how do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs? In answering RQ1, the study found two emerging themes addressing how they develop preferences: Face-to-Face Preferred and Obligations Influence Choice. When asked how preferences were developed, participants reported that they preferred the delivery of coursework and activities and assignments in a traditional face-to-face setting, that, was found by Billings and Halstead (2016) and Schacter and Szpunar (2015) to be teacher-centered form of delivery and the most common pedagogy used in all higher education classrooms. This validates that most students have more experience with face-to-face pedagogies and supports this study's findings that students preferred this based on their experience. The findings supported Tichavsky et al. (2015) findings in the literature review that students prefer face-to-face delivery of content.

A gap in the research was noted in relation to students' past experience and how it relates to preferences for pedagogy delivery in the online classroom. Al-Huneidi and Schreurs (2012) indicated that when faculty approached online learners through a Constructivist framework, they acknowledge that students bring different perspectives and skills by identifying previous knowledge and experiences, and building on those skills. Therefore, it was important to identify how students prefer to learn in online courses. To understand the preferences, this study chose to identify how students choose the preferences. The study found that experience in face-to-face classes directly

influences their preferences. Engagement in a face-to-face class, as well as relationships and collaboration with teachers and other students were noted to be a theme. Findings of research question two identified more specific assignments and activities preferences that include involvement of the instructor and lectures that, are common in face-to-face classrooms.

Working nurses dealing with the demands of full-time work and family obligations often cannot attend face-to-face classes making online learning a desirable option (Goodman, 2016; Plante & Asselin, 2014). The choice of online RN-BSN programs is driven by the convenience of learning online, and the flexibility of doing school work anytime of the day. Not being tied to a certain class time and day or days each week is noted to also influence their choice. This finding supported Smith's (2013) findings that found flexibility and convenience of online classes to be beneficial to the student and the university, and determining best practices could improve outcomes.

New findings from this study were also noted. It was found that students preferred face-to-face coursework over online because they felt they were more focused in a face-to-face classroom. Further questioning identified that distractions at home such as family and household chores distracted students from completing online course work. The students described the student role as more accountable for getting work done in an online course as well, because the student does not meet with the instructor and class to receive directions and information. It was necessary for students to seek out the information through course navigation that they would receive in class as part of the course meeting.

Instructor commitment, lectures, relevance to practice, and research

required. Research question two asked how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs? In answering RQ2, four themes emerged pertaining to the activities and assignments that participants perceived to facilitate their learning: Instructor Commitment, Lectures, Relevance to Practice, and Research Required. Therrell and Dunneback (2015) explained that a gap in the research existed that there was little research into the preferences of undergraduate students in curriculum design and that millennial student voices should be heard. Zucca (2014) suggested the need to study different disciplines and student needs to guide course design and improve student learning. This study added to research regarding the specific group of millennials who are in online RN-BSN classes. Findings that students preferred learning activities that are relevant to nursing practice and want information learned to be of interest to them and transferrable to the real world supported Kotz (2016) findings that millennials preferred learning activities that relate to real world topics that interested them.

Lectures were discussed throughout the literature reviewed as a common pedagogy in face-to-face courses and the notion that often the Power Points from the lectures are posted into an online classroom to deliver information (Serdyukov, 2015; Smith, 2013). Olson and McCracken (2015) compared asynchronous and synchronous lectures and found synchronous lectures did not improve learning outcomes. This study supported that synchronous lectures improved outcomes and participants in this study noted that they rarely attended the live or synchronous lectures, but overwhelmingly found the lecture recordings to facilitate learning and improve understanding. This

supported Smith's (2013) findings and extended previous research that asynchronous delivery could produce the same learning outcomes as a face-to-face delivery of content.

Further, findings supported the recurring theme noted in the literature reviewed that a high level of communication within the online course is preferred (Cunningham, 2015; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Whiteside, 2015). This study advanced scientific knowledge in online classroom communication. The theme *Instructor Commitment* identified perceptions that learning was facilitated if the instructor was committed to the online classroom, and that instructors should be involved and be present in the online classroom constantly. It was found that instructor commitment could be accomplished through participating in discussion boards, communicating clear directions, answering questions in a timely manner, and being available to clarify directions.

New findings from this study questioned advanced scientific knowledge of preferred learning activities and assignments. Regarding Research Required, preference for activities and assignments that required searching for information beyond the textbook, Power Point presentations, or lectures to other materials to gain a deeper understanding of the material was perceived to improve learning. A specific assignment or activity was not identified as being the best, rather being about "look up the answers themselves," or "do more research," were short answer/essay, presentations, and papers. A dominant recurring theme was the ability for the students to research materials on their own to be preferred, as it improved learning outcomes.

Not challenging and uninvolved instructors. Research question three asked how and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs? In answering RQ3, four

themes emerged pertaining to the activities and assignments that participants perceived to facilitate their learning: Not Challenging and Uninvolved Instructors. Wen-Yu Lee (2013) recommended exploring the students' perceptions of activities in online courses to improve learning and in her online study found that perceptions of online discussion predicted online achievement. This study supported that finding through theme 8, Not Challenging. This theme related to the participants' perceptions that some assignments hinder learning because they are too easy and take time away from participating in more meaningful activities. The idea that discussion board assignments were not challenging and did not facilitate learning was discussed by several participants. It was felt that the discussion boards did not produce the discussion intended and therefore, they did not improve learning. In addition, discussion board assignments that required a certain number of responses to others was felt to be time consuming and hindered learning. Other activities and assignments that were deemed not challenging were copying answers out of the textbook or Power Point and a community health program, Sentinel City that, simulated a community. These assignments were described as busy work that did not garner new information or understanding. This was new information and not found in the literature reviewed.

Regarding theme 9, Uninvolved Instructors, was also not noted in the literature reviewed and new findings. Frustration with instructors that created the course but did not participate in the learning activities and assignments was noted in this theme. A main idea found that communication and participation by the instructor improved learning through the validation of the instructor that the student understood concepts presented. Students identified scenarios where little or no feedback was given after completing

activities and assignments. Learning was identified as hindered because it was unclear if assignments were completed correctly. Overall, research question three did not yield the amount or richness of data as the other research questions. Overlap was noted in research question one and two, as well as the finding that students interviewed did not have many negative perceptions of activities and assignments in the online classroom.

A review of literature suggested there was a gap regarding millennial nursing student preferences of activities and assignments in online RN-BSN nursing programs (Montenery et al., 2013; Robb, 2013). The significance of this qualitative exploratory single case study was that it extended previous research and identified the preferences of a specific cohort that was recommended by current researchers in the field. Using multiple data sources, this study added to the existing research literature by exploring and analyzing the preferences of millennial online RN-BSN students in online programs. The students' preferences and the value of learning were identified. By identifying millennial nursing students' preferences for learning activities and assignments, teaching and learning in online RN-BSN programs can be improved. These findings were not only intended to promote learning in the online RN-BSN classroom, but by extension increase the number of bachelor's prepared nurses available in the workforce. Increasing the number of bachelor's prepared nurses will help to fill much needed leadership positions, and potentially help to increase the number of advanced practice nurses such as nurse practitioners, nurse educators, and nurse administrators who are highly sought-after candidates in healthcare organizations.

Recommendations

The final section of this dissertation addresses the recommendations for future research and actions identified as pertinent to pursue from the study's findings and conclusions. Realistically, it is not possible to make changes to all courses and curriculums in the online RN-BSN classroom merely because of themes that emerged in this one qualitative exploratory single case study. However, it is realistic to recommend small and incremental changes be made to learning activities and assignments based on findings and diligently monitor the success and failures of those changes. Findings from this study supported utilizing challenging assignments that force the learner to explore different sources, recorded lectures, and high instructor involvement and feedback to gain a deeper understanding of the material and researcher recommends implementing these strategies in the online RN-BSN classroom. The following paragraphs address recommendations for future research and practice.

Recommendations for future research. This section discusses four recommendations for future research. Overall, there is more that researchers will learn if implementing this research with other less restrictive groups and comparing the findings. The first recommendation based on the findings of this study is for replication of this study with other sample populations in different universities and in different majors. Also, utilizing other generations in the study is recommended. This would further support and improve transferability of the study results. A significant gap in the literature was noted that preferences of millennials and how they preferred to be engaged was not addressed. This study further advanced that knowledge and the following are research recommendations to further fill that gap.

Next, there were three instruments designed specifically to be used in collecting data for this study. All semi-structured interview questions were reviewed by experts in the field prior to using them; however, the researcher was a novice at the development of interview questions. It is recommended to further examine and/or refine the questions to potentially more efficiently collect data for future replication of the study.

Third, the university utilized in the study has a synchronous lecture option available to the student who garnered much conversation and data related to lectures. It is questioned, and not addressed in recent literature, the comparison of students in online RN-BSN programs who have the option of a synchronous or recorded lecture. This study advanced scientific knowledge of the constructivist learning theory and found that students do use old knowledge and experiences to identify preferences for online learning activities and assignments. It is recommended that further research be focused on comparing preferences of students in programs that have this option and programs that do not offer this option, and determine if preferences would be different in different programs. Further, this study found recorded lectures preferred to live lectures and viewing a recorded lecture was valuable to increase learning. This could be a further aspect of research in online lectures.

Fourth, students in the study identified feedback, and more specifically timely feedback as a benefit. It was found that feedback promoted learning in the online classroom and solidified understanding for the student. Previous studies focused on preferences for feedback in relationship to satisfaction in a course, but studies were lacking that linked feedback to learning, leaving the value of feedback in improving

learning outcomes a potential subject of future research. It is recommended to design further studies that identify the connection between feedback and learning outcomes.

Next, the study revealed supplemental materials such as videos, weblinks, and articles as a means of increasing understanding of concepts and improving learning in the online classroom. Literature reviewed did not address this strategy as a common online pedagogy preferred by students. In addition, participants in this study identified a supplemental simulation program, Sentinel City, as a hindrance to learning. It is recommended that further research be done to explore the value of supplemental activities and assignments utilized in the online classroom and their benefit to learning outcomes.

Lastly, the significance of this study was that it extended previous research and identified the preferences of a specific cohort that was recommended by current researchers in the field. The findings helped to fill a gap noted in recent research that did not identify millennial nursing student preferences for activities and assignments in the online RN-BSN classroom. These findings were not only intended to promote learning in the online RN-BSN classroom, but by extension increase qualitative research in the area. Mixed methods approach to this research is recommended. Mixed methods would allow for qualitative understanding of thoughts and opinions, as well as, a quantitative approach that draw correlations between learning activities and assignments, and actual learning outcomes. The literature reviewed in this study found many quantitative studies conducted and those studies could be furthered by the addition of qualitative tools to better understand the preferences of students in online courses. A mixed methods study

could garner a broader analytic generalizability to the larger population of online students.

Recommendations for future practice. This qualitative exploratory single case study explored the perceived preferences of online RN-BSN students for learning activities and assignments in the online classroom. This research found that nursing students in online RN-BSN programs had distinct thoughts and opinions on what facilitates or hinders their learning. The significance of this study was that it addresses preferences for assignments and activities in the online RN-BSN classroom that were previously not addressed in recent research. The findings of this research are of particular interest to higher education faculty and curriculum specialists. The following discussion discusses three practice recommendations.

This study found that it is important for instructors to challenge students through activities and assignments and to be highly involved in the process of assigning and completing these learning activities to promote learning. It also found that students draw on their past experience when identifying how best they learn, findings in this study included the preference for face-to-face classes and the students continued preference for the traditional lecture in the online setting. The first practice recommendation would be to evaluate and implement how content is delivered. Specifically, evaluation regarding the feasibility of implementing recorded lectures into the delivery of content and explore mediums in which to record and disseminate the lectures to the students should be explored. Along with the addition of recorded lectures, faculty should re-evaluate assignments to contain a research component that allows students to seek and review materials aside from the textbook to better understand content. Finally, faculty need to be

very involved in discussions and presentation of directions to the students, one makes concerted efforts to be thorough in delivering direction and available for clarifying questions.

Secondly, moving forward, it would not only be beneficial to work with faculty teaching in these classes and include some of the suggestions, but to gain added value, the implementation of these strategies needs constant evaluation. It was found in the literature reviewed that there is constant change with technology and the higher education classroom. It is recommended that an added benefit might be to add pre-and post-implementation interviews or surveys for the students after the course to determine the benefit of the new strategies implemented.

Thirdly, based on the existing body of knowledge, it could be beneficial to focus research efforts on studies that compare RN-BSN programs that have different components, replicate and compare the findings, and consider adding quantitative methods. Further analyzing the needs of the millennial nursing student in online RN-BSN program and identifying needs can guide curriculum changes that may improve learning outcomes. More research is necessary to understand the potential of implementing these strategies into the online curriculum.

Finally, it is important to note that the higher education class room is continuously changing as well as the characteristics of the students in the classrooms. The significance of this study is that it advanced the body of knowledge in preferences of millennial online nursing students and found strategies to improve the learning outcomes of students in online RN-BSN programs. By extension, the significance of improving outcomes in these programs is that it can increase the number of bachelor prepared nurses. Bachelor's

prepared nurses can then fill leadership positions in nursing and seats in master's degree programs that can also increase nurse administrators, educators, and practitioners. For this reason, it is recommended that faculty in RN-BSN programs continuously re-assess current practices regarding learning activities and assignments. It is further recommended that research in the area of online learning is continuously advancing and preferences of students in the online classroom should be re-evaluated and addressed regularly.

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Appendix A.

IRB Approval Letter Study Site

IRB approval from study site is on file at Grand Canyon University.

Appendix B.

IRB Approval Letter



GRAND CANYON
UNIVERSITY™

3300 West Camelback Road, Phoenix Arizona 85017 602.639.7500 Toll Free 800.800.9776 www.gcu.edu

DATE: June 5, 2017

TO: Holly Farley, MSN, RN
FROM: Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [1033273-1] The Exploration of Perceived Learning Activities and Assignments Preferred by Millennial Nursing Students in Online RN-BSN Nursing Programs

IRB REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: June 5, 2017

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # [45CFR 46.101(b)(1)]

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations. You now have approval by the Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board to collect data.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office.

If you have any questions, please contact Cathrine Ames at [redacted] or [redacted].
Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

cc:

Appendix C.**Permission to Conduct Study**

Site authorization is on file at Grand Canyon University.

Appendix D.
Interview Protocol

Demographic Information

Interviewee: _____

Age of Interviewee:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

How long have you been a nurse:

What area of nursing do you work:

What are your goals following your bachelor's degree:

Associate or diploma program that student graduated from:

Was the previous program delivered face-to-face, online, or both:

Number of previous online courses:

Number of online courses that were not nursing:

Interviewer: ___Holly Farley _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place: _____

Consent and Introduction

- Hello, my name is Holly Farley and I am a doctoral student at Grand Canyon University in Arizona. I am doing this research as part of my Doctorate in Educational Leadership. I have been a nurse for 20 years and a nursing instructor for 12 years. Currently, I teach in the RN-BSN program at Eastern Illinois University.
- The purpose of my study is to explore the perceived perceptions of preferred activities and assignments in millennial online RN-BSN students.

- I expect this interview to take approximately 60 minutes or more, please know that you can share as much or as little as you like and there is no time limit.
- The plans for this study are to improve teaching and learning in online RN-BSN students and to better understand the millennial nursing student transitioning from face-to-face associate degree programs to online bachelor's completion programs.
- To facilitate note-taking, I would like to audio tape our conversations today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the tapes that will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.
- I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour, however, you may speak longer if needed.

Interview Questions and Follow-up Questions

Research Question 1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in the online RN-BSN programs?

Q1: Please tell me about your experiences with the online nursing program. Do you like it?

Q2: Tell me about the kinds of learning activities that you are assigned to understand or learn concepts. Are these activities conducive to learning? Are there ones that you like?

Q3: Please consider assignments in your courses, what kinds of assignments have you experienced? How does this facilitate your learning?

Research Question 2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Q1: Think about the assignments you just described, tell me how they facilitated your learning?

FQ: Tell me about the usefulness of face-to-face activities and assignments versus strictly online assignments.

Q2: Please describe to me the Instructor/Professor role in the assignments.

FQ: Please describe the Instructor/Professor role in communication during these activities and assignments. How did that influence the experience?

Q3: Tell me how they improved your understanding.

Research Question 3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Q1: Think about the assignments you just described, tell me which assignments were not useful.

FQ: Tell me about the usefulness of face-to-face activities and assignments versus strictly online assignments.

Q2: Please describe to me the Instructor/Professor role in the assignments

FQ: Please describe the Instructor/Professor role in communication during these activities and assignments. How did that influence the experience?

Q3: Tell me how they hindered your understanding.

Theme 4: Student suggestions

Q1: If you could give suggestions to better the online program, what would those be?

Q2: What feedback would you give to revise or change the program to improve student learning?

Probing Questions/Comments that were used

- Please tell me more
- Can you put this in the context of a scenario

- Share a time that you used that assignment and it helped you learn
- Can you expand on that?
- What else can you say?
- Can you say more about that?
- Can you repeat that?
- Can you describe that in more detail?

Wrap-up and Thanks

It has been a pleasure talking with you today. Thank you for taking the time to help me out with my research and the possibility of improving teaching and learning in online coursework.

Appendix E.**Classroom Observation Protocol****Classroom Observation Protocol****University:****Class Title:****Instructor:****Semester/Date of observation:****Number of students enrolled in the class:****Dates of observation:**

What activities are included in introduction to the course?

Student/Instructor Introduction

Syllabi

Calendar

Technology Information

Other

Is the course strictly asynchronous, or includes synchronous delivery?

What asynchronous activities are assigned?

Discussions (clear guidelines, required number of responses)

Paper writing

Group work

Quiz/Test

Presentations

Pre-recorded lectures

Weblinks/online materials

Powerpoints

Lecture notes

What is the instructor participation in these assignments? Comments in discussion boards and group work? Offers rough drafts of work to be graded?

Other:

If synchronous, what synchronous activities are utilized?

Lecture

Live discussions

Presentations

What forms of communication are utilized in the online classroom?

Email

Text

Newsfeed/Course Announcements

Video conferences

Telephone

Other:

Appendix F.

Artifacts Review

Participant:

Date:

Type of Artifact:

	Item	Present or not present	Comments/Assessment of Artifacts if present.
1	Is there evidence of different activities and assignments noted?		
2	Is there a specific objectives listed?		
3	Is there an alignment of activity and assignment to the objectives?		
4	Are the activities and assignments synchronous or asynchronous?		
5	Is there evidence of clear instruction for the use of technology?		
6	Is there evidence of clear instruction and guidelines present for activities and assignments?		
7	Are there options for alternative assignments and activities based on previous online experience?		

Appendix G.
Interview Invitation

Date

Dear Nursing Student,

My name is Holly Farley. I am an education doctoral candidate at Grand Canyon University. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to participate in a study designed to explore the preferred learning activities and assignments of millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs.

You are being chosen for the study because you are currently a nursing student in an online RN-BSN program, born between 1980-2000 and have taken at least one online course in the past. Participation in this study involves an audio recorded interview to discuss your personal experience in online learning. All data collected will be analyzed for patterns, themes, and links associated with the research questions. At this stage in the research, the findings will be examined to improve student learning in RN-BSN programs.

Each participant will be asked to read and sign a human subject's consent form with assurances of confidentiality. Letter designations will be used for the identity of participants in order to ensure confidentiality. Each participant has the right to (a) participate voluntarily, (b) withdraw at any time, (c) understand the nature of the research and any impact on them, (d) ask questions about the conclusions; (e) have privacy protected, (f) understand any benefits that may accrue from the study, and (g) be provided a verbal or written consent form.

Please consider participating in this study. You can reply to this email or contact me by email, [REDACTED] or by phone [REDACTED]. Again, you are not under any obligation to participate in the study.

Thank you,

Holly Farley

Appendix H.

Participants Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study “Exploring the Perceived Learning Activities and Assignments Preferred by Millennial Nursing Students in Online RN-BSN Nursing Programs. “You were chosen for the study because you are currently a nursing student in an online RN-BSN program, born between 1982-2000 and have taken at least one online course in the past. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part. Researcher, Holly Farley, who is a doctoral student at Grand Canyon University, is conducting this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived learning activities and assignments preferred by millennial nursing students in online RN-BSN programs in a nursing program in the State of Illinois. Ten students from the program will be selected for interviews. All data collected will be analyzed for patterns, themes, and links associated with the research questions. The importance of participating in this study and sharing your insight is to improve student learning in RN-BSN programs. The intent of the research is to use the findings to guide course and curriculum development that meet the needs of the student and improve learning outcomes.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are enrolled in the online RN-BSN program being studied and you have taken previous online courses prior to the time this research is conducted and were born between 1982-2000. It is felt that your experience can be beneficial to meeting the goals and objectives of this study.

Description of Research Study

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a confidential audio recorded interview
- Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the study. No one at your university will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during the study. If you feel stressed during the interview you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal or that you are not comfortable answering.
- If you commit to participate, the duration of the interview is approximately 60 minutes. Following the interview, the researcher will provide you with a copy of the transcripts of the interview conducted to ensure that the transcripts are correct and contain the meaning that you intended to convey.

Risks

If you choose to participate in the study, the following are considered minimal risks that you may encounter:

- Unintended disclosure of confidential information because identifiers will be used on interview and observation documents during the interview.
- Perceived coercion to participate due to any existing or expected relationship between the participant and the researcher.
- Student names will be removed from all artifacts collected and replaced with a corresponding code for identification purposes.
- The results of this research will be used to promote student learning in RN-BSN programs and shared with administration and instructors at your university. The results will in no way directly affect your personal assessment in current or future coursework.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether you want to be in the study. No one at your university will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during the study. If you feel stressed during the study you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Benefits

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, the possible benefits of your participation in the research are the improvement of course activities and assignments that improve learning outcomes for future courses.

New Information

If the researchers find new information during the study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will provide this information to you.

Confidentiality

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The results of this research study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications, but the researchers will not identify you. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, Holly Farley will not refer to you by name, but will use subject codes to maintain confidentiality of participants. All confidential information will be stored in a locked cabinet in a private, locked office for three years following the study and will then be destroyed.

Contacts and Questions

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher by email at [REDACTED] or by phone [REDACTED]. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board at 1-602-639-7804 or irb@gcu.edu.

Withdrawal Privilege

It is ok for you to say no. Even if you say yes now, you are free to say no later, and withdraw from the study at any time. Your participation is completely voluntary and the decision to participate or withdraw from the study will not affect your grade, treatment, or academic standing within the university. Participation in this study and ideas and opinions shared are completely independent of this study and are in no way connected to coursework or future coursework that you may be enrolled.

Cost/Payments/ Compensation for Illness and Injury

If you agree to participate in the study, then your consent does not waive any of your legal rights. However, no funds have been set aside to compensate you in the event of injury.

Statement of Voluntary Consent

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of Consent

Participant's Written or Electronic* Signature

Researcher's Written or Electronic* Signature

Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.

Investigator's Statement

"I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits and possible risks associated with participation in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above

signature. These elements of Informed Consent conform to the Assurance given by Grand Canyon University to the Office for Human Research Protections to protect the rights of human subjects. I have provided (offered) the subject/participant a copy of this signed consent document."

Signature of Investigator _____ Date _____

Appendix I.

Codes, Frequency and Themes

The researcher developed the following codes for evaluation of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with students. First level 1 or open codes were developed, then further reduced to groups that represented themes. The codebook is available upon request.

Level 1 Code List for semi-structured interviews with students by research question

RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs?

Prefer online-1
 Online is convenient-4
 Online is flexible-3
 Can't do F2F-5
 Small children-3
 Must be more accountable online/responsible for own learning-1
 Prefer F2F-6
 Lectures help to learn-1
 Forced to pay attention in the classroom -1
 Distractions at home with online-3
 Family obligations-1
 Work full-time/nights-9
 Interactive/engaging activities-2
 You choose when you do work-2
 Rewind or re-visit lectures and material-1
 Auditory learner-1
 Hands-on learner-1
 Clear Purpose-1
 Relevant to practice-1
 Tech Savvy/Tech Person-5
 Variety of formats and teaching styles-1
 Dynamic- 1
 Face-to-face cannot be replicated at home-1
 Includes jokes make for better experience-1

RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Clear purpose-1
 Practical role of nursing-1
 Relevant topics-1
 Build on existing knowledge-1
 Short answer/essay "show your knowledge"-3
 Look for answers/research-12

Write in your own words/give opinion-3
 Teaching someone else-1
 Live lectures-3
 Lecture recordings/ listen when convenient/ fast-forward/rewind/re-visit-10
 Instructor active in assignments-2
 Instructor challenge students-1
 Instructors available for questions/give phone number/willing to help-8
 Quiz after lectures/ help focus on details-1
 Other sources, weblinks/articles/videos-3
 Clear assignments/ outlines-9
 Prefer email-11
 Telephone secondary for emergency or clarification-8
 Real world application-6
 Volunteer work/clinical-2
 Feedback-4
 Timely communication-1
 Reminders in the newsfeed-1

RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Quick/simple assignments/Pulling answers from Power Point or text/
 Not challenging-6
 Uninvolved instructors-4
 Minimal Feedback/no feedback-6
 Giving good grade but no feedback-2
 Discussion board participation for points only/ assigned number of responses-4
 Not good with technology-1
 Assignments that you spend a lot of time on technology/Cenntinal City-3
 Citations and APA-1
 Computer navigation-2
 Vague instructions-1
 No relationship with other students-1
 Lose internet connection/headset issues-2

Level II codes and themes:

RQ1: How do millennial nursing students develop preferences for learning activities and assignments in online RN-BSN programs?

Preference for face-to-face learning activities

More focus in f2f
 Interactive/engaging
 Auditory learner
 Hands on learner
 Cannot be replicated online
 Must pay attention in a classroom
 Distractions at home
 Need more self-discipline in online

Need more motivation for online
 Responsible for own studying at home
 You have to be accountable online
 Online assignments easy to put off

Influences to choose online Learning Activities

Convenient
 Flexible
 Small children
 Work full-time
 Work nights
 Distance from school
 You choose when you work on activities
 Face-to-face not feasible
 Family obligations
 Technologically savvy
 Technological person

RQ2: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments facilitate learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Clear directions

Give outlines
 Clear assignments
 Communicating exactly what is expected

Relevant to practice

Clear purpose
 Practical role for nursing practice
 Real-world experience
 Video assessment
 Clinical/volunteer hours
 Case studies/scenarios
 Relevant nursing topics in discussion boards

Instructor engagement

Need feedback
 Timely feedback
 Active in discussions
 Quick response to emails
 Call me anytime
 Available
 Challenges students
 Shares stories
 Rough drafts

Research required

Explore web links, articles, and videos
 Look for answers
 Research
 Short answer/essay
 Papers

Presentations

Thought provoking

Write in own words

Give opinions

Show your knowledge

Case studies

Scenarios

Practical to nursing practice

Lectures

Feel like you are in a classroom

Engage with others

Ask instructor questions

Prefer recordings

Stop/rewind

Review later

Live lectures not necessary

RQ3: How and why do millennial nursing students believe certain learning activities and assignments hinder learning in online RN-BSN programs?

Uninvolved Instructors

Minimal feedback/No feedback

Good grade but no feedback given

Does not participate in discussions

Does not give timely feedback

Late response to emails/questions

Vague instructions

Technology Issues

Computer navigation overwhelming

Spending too much time with technology/virtual city

Not good with technology

Not challenging

Required number of discussion board posts just for points

Pulling answers directly from book or Power Point

Quick assignments

Easy assignments

Appendix J.

Semi-Structured Interview Responses RQ1

Semi-Structured Interview Responses for Research Question 1: How do Millennial Nursing Students Develop Preferences for Learning Activities and Assignments in the RN-BSN Classroom?

Participant	Interview Q1: Experience with online nursing program	Interview Q2: Kinds of learning activities you like	Interview Q3: Tell me how they facilitate learning
002	Like it Convenient Prefer f2f Easily distracted sitting at home	Short answer Essay Teaching someone else best in past	Finding information helps to learn
003	Like it Flexible Prefers f2f Best due to marriage and family	Questions in lecture Quizzes after lecture lecture	Helps to learn material Can see peers and ask questions
004	Like it Prefer f2f Convenient F2f more engaging More easily distracted at home Family/work obligations	Assignments that make you look up your own research Volunteer work in community class	Reading and understanding on own improves learning Real world experience improves learning
005	Prefer f2f Harder to focus online Distractions at home	Feedback and involvement from instructors Lecture recordings Discussion board posts	Helps to learn concepts Reading others' thoughts improves learning of the material
006	Like it Great experience Hands-on learner Auditory learner Prefer f2f lectures F2f forces you to pay attention	Recorded lectures/ listen and watch Emailing instructor with questions	Students that ask questions in the lectures help to learn Clarifying questions improves learning
007	Liked it Well-structured program Assignments have purpose	Research projects	Help to gain more information and see the philosophy of nursing
008	Like the program	Weekly worksheets Community clinicals	Increase knowledge by helping to remember what

Participant	Interview Q1: Experience with online nursing program	Interview Q2: Kinds of learning activities you like	Interview Q3: Tell me how they facilitate learning
	Needed completely online program/works nights Small staff, not a lot of different teaching styles		
009	Like it Good because work full-time Hands on learner	Video lecture Creating assessment video Presenting topic to the class	You can have interaction with the instructor Applying what you learned Researching a topic helps learning
010	Like online Prefer f2f/like lecture Learn better with discussion and engagement	Researching a topic and presenting it	Makes you dig deeper Reviewing sources other than textbook improves learning
011	Like it a lot F2f program would take too long to complete due to work Can do homework at midnight with online	Lectures Researching a topic and reading resources	Live communication improves learning Researching valuable to learning
012	Like program Online requires self- discipline Easier to stay focused in f2f courses	Assignments that apply theory Allow for personal interpretation Hands-on health assessment assignments	Volunteering in the community improved understanding of needs Free rein to interpret an assignment helps learning

Appendix K.

Semi-Structured Interview Responses RQ2

Semi-Structured Interview Responses for Research Question 2: How and Why Do Millennial Nursing Students Believe Certain Learning Activities and Assignments Facilitate Learning in Online RN-BSN Programs?

Participant	Interview Q1: Think about the assignments you just described, tell me how they facilitated your learning.	Interview Q2: Describe the instructor/professor role in assignments.	Interview Q3: Tell me how they improved your understanding.
002	Writing in your own words and looking up your own answers Re-listening to lectures Presenting to others solidifies information	Available and willing to help is important Uninvolved instructors that do not challenge the student decrease learning	Actively asking questions and challenging students Understanding of student needs
003	Quizzes and lecture provide focus on details and improve learning	Easy communication Prefer email feedback	Giving outlines of assignments and timely feedback improves learning
004	Review recorded lectures Looking up research and writing papers improve learning Volunteer work gives real-world experience	Emailing responses to questions in a timely manner Personal relationships with instructors improve communication and learning	Clarification of questions and giving good feedback improve understanding. Allowing rough drafts of papers provides clarity and improves learning
005	Recordings of lectures improve learning Case studies and scenarios that are practical to nursing practice are conducive to learning	Reminders about upcoming assignments Giving outlines Sufficient communication through email or occasionally telephone	Feedback and clear communication from instructors helps understanding
006	Recorded lectures allow to watch and listen to the content Researching content and utilizing sources outside of the textbook helps to solidify content	Good communication is important Instructors check in with students through telephone or email to ensure they are doing ok	Giving quizzes on information that was just covered improves understanding Giving clear assignments
007	Recordings of class lecture were beneficial to reinforce learning	Communication by email	Clear communication on what is due and when is helpful

Participant	Interview Q1: Think about the assignments you just described, tell me how they facilitated your learning.	Interview Q2: Describe the instructor/professor role in assignments.	Interview Q3: Tell me how they improved your understanding.
	<p>Discussion boards were helpful to learn content through discussion with colleagues</p> <p>Topics more relevant to nursing practice were more conducive to learning</p> <p>Internet links and other materials to explore are a benefit to understanding information</p>		<p>Timely communication in general is important</p> <p>Help to gain more information and see the philosophy of nursing</p>
008	<p>Hands-on learner, Community Health clinicals allowed to practice concepts</p> <p>Short answer that that included looking things up such as external links and videos good for learning</p> <p>Live lectures improved learning and allowed for instant feedback in the classroom</p> <p>Re-listen to the recordings beneficial</p>	<p>Communication</p> <p>Prefer email</p> <p>Live lectures</p> <p>Weekly worksheets</p> <p>Community clinicals</p>	<p>Timely response to emails</p> <p>Clear expectations by giving rubrics and option to turn in rough draft help to better understand</p> <p>Thorough orientation in the first class improves success and understanding</p>
009	<p>Hands on learner, liked creating video of health assessment to improve learning</p> <p>Learned more about a topic by researching it and presenting it</p> <p>Recorded lectures</p> <p>Videos and weblinks help inform on a topic</p>	<p>Prefer email to clarify questions</p> <p>Discussion in lecture</p>	<p>Detailed and clear instructions are preferred to promote learning</p> <p>Positive instructors make you feel good</p> <p>Timely feedback</p>
010	<p>Like presentations because you must research topic and teach others, improves learning</p> <p>Any assignment that you share opinions because it sparks</p>	<p>Communication through email to ask questions and seek clarification</p> <p>Rarely attended live lectures</p>	<p>Instructors that are engaged in discussion improves learning</p> <p>Clear guidelines and structure of assignments improves learning</p> <p>Feedback from instructor is important, verifies the foundation</p>

Participant	Interview Q1: Think about the assignments you just described, tell me how they facilitated your learning.	Interview Q2: Describe the instructor/professor role in assignments.	Interview Q3: Tell me how they improved your understanding.
	discussion and leads to learning		and accuracy of the work Providing videos and weblinks aside from the readings provides a different perspective and improves learning
011	Assignments that allow sharing thoughts and opinions improve learning Recorded lectures are valuable for learning concepts Short answer assignments make you explore important topics Videos and weblinks give you more information on a topic aside from the textbook, and are representative of real life and are relevant	Prefer email Did not attend live lectures often	Instructors that give specific direction, outlines and study guides is important Timely feedback when questions are asked, important for instructors to be available and prompt at answering emails
012	Papers or assignments that allow you to interpret the material Hands-on assignments like the volunteer work assigned in community health Recordings of the lectures help understanding	Asking questions in class, although rarely attended live lecture Prefer email for asking questions Will call instructor if needed	Clear expectations, outlines and rubrics improve learning Providing weblinks and extra materials enhance knowledge Feedback from the instructor promotes learning

Appendix L.

Semi-Structured Interview Responses RQ3

Semi-Structured Interview Responses for Research Question 3: How and Why Do Millennial Nursing Students Believe Certain Learning Activities and Assignments Hinder Learning

Participant	Interview Q1: Think about the assignments you just described, tell me which assignments were not useful	Interview Q2: Please describe to me the Instructor/Professor role in the assignments	Interview Q3: Tell me how they hindered your understanding
002	Dislikes "Multiple Multiple choice" or select all that apply questions, creates confusion and second guessing that does not help to learn the material	Available and willing to help is important	Uninvolved instructors that do not challenge the student decrease learning
003	Felt discussion boards were completed for points only and did not improve learning	Easy communication Prefer email feedback	Benefit of the discussion depends on the question posed by the instructor and may not produce new knowledge
004	Sentinel City, assignments were easy and did not learn from them	Emailing responses to questions in a timely manner Personal relationships with instructors improve communication and learning	Student did not share feedback or experience when Instructor/Professor role hindered learning
005	Did not prefer Sentinel City program, time consuming and did not contribute to learning Reading assignments with follow-up quizzes only and no interaction from the instructor, material isn't really learned and there is no focus	Reminders about upcoming assignments Giving outlines Sufficient communication through email or occasionally telephone	Uninvolved instructors that do not interact with the students
006	Felt discussion boards were "just going through the motions"	Recorded lectures/ listen and watch	Unorganized instructors that change due dates at

Participant	Interview Q1: Think about the assignments you just described, tell me which assignments were not useful	Interview Q2: Please describe to me the Instructor/Professor role in the assignments	Interview Q3: Tell me how they hindered your understanding
	not conducive to learning and did not reinforce content	Emailing instructor with questions	the last minute and are not consistent
007	Discussion boards that only require a certain number of posts to get points are not helpful to learning Group work is stressful and does not promote learning	Communication by email	Negative communication in an online class can hinder learning
008	Discussion boards hinder learning because you post just to meet a quota and do not improve learning	Communication Prefer email Live lectures Weekly worksheets Community clinicals	Student did not share feedback or experience when Instructor/Professor role hindered learning
009	Time spent working on APA format hinders the learning process Like it Good because work full-time Hands on learner	Prefer email to clarify questions Discussion in lecture	Feels that instructors that are not in discussion boards can be negative Not receiving feedback for work is negative to learning and receiving a good grade is not enough to promote learning
010	Assignments that are too easy or knowledge based do not promote learning	Communication through email to ask questions and seek clarification Rarely attended live lectures	Vague instructions can create a negative experience and hinder learning
011	Assignments that force you to regurgitate what you read or re-state the book is not valuable Forced interaction and posting just to post on discussion boards are not helpful Time spent formatting APA can take away from an assignment	Prefer email Did not attend live lectures often	Receiving a good grade from an instructor without feedback is not good enough, need validation that the work is correct and worth the time and energy Feedback is needed interaction in an online class
012	Do not like discussion boards, they are often	Assignments that apply theory	Not receiving feedback for an assignment even if it is a good grade is

Participant	Interview Q1: Think about the assignments you just described, tell me which assignments were not useful	Interview Q2: Please describe to me the Instructor/Professor role in the assignments	Interview Q3: Tell me how they hindered your understanding
	“a requirement to fulfil” Like program Online requires self-discipline Easier to stay focused in f2f courses	Allow for personal interpretation Hands-on health assessment assignments	not sufficient, need feedback to reflect on an assignment